



James Bidgood

b. 1933

James Bidgood revolutionized gay male erotic imagery. He was the first to take the pulp and glamour aesthetic of the 40s and 50s and apply it to male erotic fantasies. Yet, his photographs, which range from camp to surreal, are still scarcely known to the wider public.

From a midtown tenement during the 1960s, James Bidgood completed the bulk of his creative output of photographs using vibrant colors and exaggerated props and costumes to celebrate homosexuality. His works were first published in underground magazines, and he was also the anonymous filmmaker of *Pink Narcissus* (1971), an explosion of colorful eroticism that has stood the test of time.

Pink Narcissus rocked the underground film world with its dreamlike homoerotic images. A Technicolor fantasia, it is the story of a beautiful, brooding hustler (the lovely Bobby Kendall), who creates a dream world inside his apartment where he acts out his fantasies, from harem boy to roman slave to matador. A major cult classic, *Pink Narcissus* has continued to screen to sold-out audiences around the world.

Pink Narcissus' writer and director were credited as "Anonymous," and rumors flew that the film had been made by a big name in Hollywood who feared exposure. It was later revealed that director James Bidgood, a physique photographer, had taken his name off the film because he did not like what the producer and distributor had done with his work.

Bidgood was born in Madison, Wisconsin in 1933. He came to New York at the age of 18—a time when sexual liberation was barely an idea, never mind a cause.

Now 85 years old, James Bidgood has lived through and been a seminal part of contemporary gay history. While much of Bidgood's early output had initially been sidelined and pigeonholed as obscenity, Supreme Court cases *Roth v. United States*, and later *Manual Enterprises v. Day* (1962) finally paved the way for Bidgood's work to be recognized for its aesthetic excellence. Today, both David LaChapelle and Pierre et Gilles have openly expressed their extreme debt to the work of James Bidgood. Without him, their careers may have never existed. Indeed, many gay artists may not even realize the debt they owe to Bidgood.

Despite the Supreme Court victories, the cultural climate of the 50s and early 60s was still chilly, and Bidgood's work, with its homoerotic content, was not exactly lauded by the art world cognoscenti. Indeed, critics and dealers did not know how to categorize his lavish set design, fantastic costuming, and brilliant color. The work was disregarded as "commercial," "lowbrow," and "pornography." Now, in retrospect, we realize that Bidgood's oeuvre was in fact a harbinger of gay aesthetics to come. Truly, Bidgood was making work well ahead of his time.

The bridge that Bidgood's work created between the straight art world and queer culture is what makes his career so remarkable. Bidgood was not merely a gay artist making art. Jim was a gay artist making GAY ART. Very gay art. While the subject matter itself was not political, the act of making such unabashedly homo art during such a hostile climate certainly was. This is not to say Bidgood's content is light. In truth, the work is full of hidden symbology and political statement.

Bidgood has been making challenging work that has not only affected gay art history, but gay history itself. To survey his career, it appears that Bidgood toiled in relative obscurity and it is only until recently that his work is being re-evaluated on aesthetic merit and historical impact.