

CLAMP

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

THE LAVENDER FLAIR

Photographs by Steven Arnold, James Bidgood, David LaChapelle, Aaron Cobbett, Lori Nix/Kathleen Gerber, Pierre et Gilles, and Lissa Rivera

September 15–October 29, 2022

Opening reception:

Thursday, September 15, 2022

6:00–8:00 pm

CLAMP is pleased to present “The Lavender Flair,” an exhibition of artworks by artists influenced by or associated with James Bidgood (1933-2022).

James Bidgood came of age during the height of the “red scare,” an epidemic of paranoia regarding communism spearheaded by Republican Senator Joseph McCarthy, who represented Bidgood’s home state of Wisconsin. During this period, Bidgood was settling into his new life in New York City, and the anti-communist movement shifted to include any individual who was viewed as a threat against the nation. This secondary movement has been referred to as the “lavender scare”—a mass purging of gay government workers and a wave of explicitly homophobic policies.

Originating in the State Department, before spreading to all federal agencies, policies were enacted to protect national security by allowing and encouraging the persecution of gay government workers.

McCarthy believed that homosexuals posed an equal risk to national security as communists and that gays were susceptible to manipulation. Therefore, he used homosexuality as a smear tactic in his mission to rid the government of “traitors.”

Against this national backdrop of institutionalized hate and fear mongering, Bidgood started his artistic practice—creating costumes, sets, and eventually photographs that reveled and celebrated in their gayness—always with a distinct *lavender flair*. Employing pulp imagery and other visual tropes



CLAMP

present during his youth in wider, straight society, Bidgood built a body of work that would inspire and influence artists of later generations.

The artists included in “The Lavender Flair” all produce imagery unmistakably linked to Bidgood. Pierre et Gilles have cited Bidgood as the major influence for their distinct style of colorful kitsch portraits, while David LaChapelle’s extravagantly staged fashion photographs share in Bidgood’s love of the fantastical and absurd. Steven Arnold’s intricate black-and-white constructions and Aaron Cobbett’s fairytale portraits all emit the same queer ethos as many of Bidgood’s works.

There are also contemporary artists who produce photographs with a dedication to hand-built fabrication like Bidgood. Lori Nix and Kathleen Gerber sculpt sprawling miniatures explicitly for the camera lens, just as Bidgood did when building the sets and scenery for his pictures. Lissa Rivera works similarly in her “Dioramas” series which documents painstakingly designed miniature sets.

But James Bidgood’s legacy as a photographer goes beyond influencing just aesthetic and practical choices by artists. The way that Bidgood honored gay fantasies and produced media that could communicate a sense of acceptance to the masses, despite state-sanctioned homophobia, touched many generations of queer people.

In the era Bidgood’s pictures were being made, when homosexuality was utilized as a weapon by those seeking to divide and oppress, creating the work he did was an act of courage. The fearlessness that Bidgood displayed no doubt made it possible for photographers and artists after him to continue to spread his radically lavender flair.

For more information and images please contact Brian Paul Clamp, Director, or see www.clampart.com. Gallery hours are Tuesday through Saturday, 10:00 am to 6:00 pm.

Image: © Estate of James Bidgood; “Triple Exposure of Jack Frost with Orchid Filter,” early 1960s/printed later; Digital C-print, Courtesy of CLAMP, New York.