



QUEER ART

David Wojnarowicz: From Downtown to Our Town

The late art provocateur makes his Cape debut

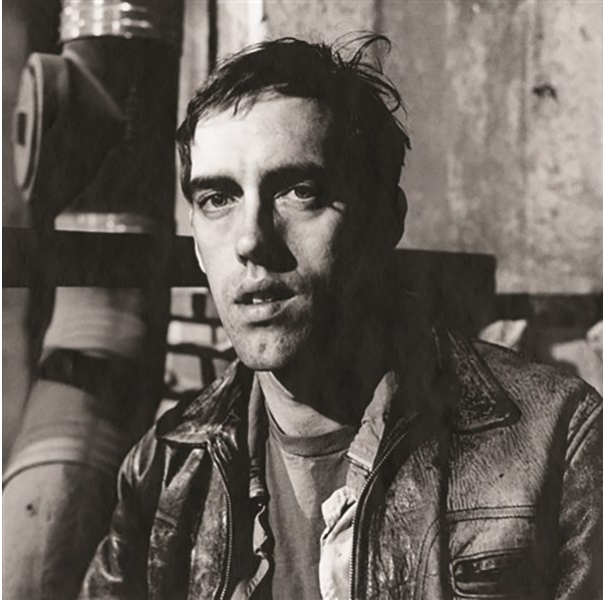
BY HOWARD KARREN · JUL 28, 2021

Walking by 445 Commercial St. in Provincetown when the shades are pulled down, you'd hardly know there's a priceless link to queer history inside. Once home to the Kiley Court Gallery (which has moved to 398 Commercial), the space is at the center of the East End gallery district. Now, though, it's functioning less as a gallery than as a "project space," says Joe Sheftel, an art dealer and consultant from New York and Los Angeles who has been living year-round in Provincetown.



The Boys Go O to War, a 1983 collage painting by David Wojnarowicz on matching 4-foot-square Masonite panels, is a central feature of the "Tidal Motion" exhibit. (Photo courtesy Estate of David Wojnarowicz, Joe Sheftel Gallery, and P·P·O·W, New York)

activist David Wojnarowicz (pronounced voy-nuh-ROE-vitch), has launched a summer-long exhibit of Wojnarowicz's groundbreaking work, shown "in conversation" with a rotating roster of emerging contemporary artists, including former Fine Arts Work Center fellow Cheyenne Julien and, last week, Devin N. Morris. It's open Fridays from 6 to 8 p.m., during the gallery stroll, through Aug. 31.



David Wojnarowicz *Manhattan Night (II)* is a 1985 photographic portrait of the artist by Peter Hujar. (Photo copyright Peter Hujar Archive LLC)

The exhibit is called "Tidal Motion," which comes from a line in Wojnarowicz's indelible 1991 book, *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration*, published a year before his death from AIDS at age 40. "If I were to leave this country and never come back or see it again in films or sleep I would still remember a number of different things that sift back in some kind of tidal motion."

Wojnarowicz had never been to Provincetown, but that quotation places him in context here, the place where so many city dwellers came to die during the AIDS epidemic of the '80s and '90s.

Sheftel says he's been coming to Provincetown himself since he was 25 years old, for a time staying in an apartment in Pat de Groot's old house, on a floor right below John Waters's attic hideaway. "She was the best," he says. "The work that she had! That was my introduction to the legacy of Provincetown."

He put together the queer art exhibit "Intimate Companions" last summer at the Mary Heaton Vorse house. That led Sheftel to the idea of doing the Wojnarowicz exhibit. "He's never shown in P'town before," says Sheftel. "He's very timely—the activism, the disease. I knew it would resonate with the demographic in town."

Wojnarowicz grew up in Red Bank, N.J. in a family with an abusive, alcoholic father. He left with his mom at age 16 to live in Manhattan, going to the



This 1978 photo, *On the Prowl Series (#2)*, is by Wojnarowicz. (Photo courtesy Estate of David Wojnarowicz, Joe S Gallery, and P·P·O·W, New

High School of Music and Art and working as a street hustler in Times Square. He was a gay activist in the '70s, and he did a lot of writing and prowling the Hudson River piers. He focused more intently on his art after meeting Peter Hujar, his lover for a time, then companion and mentor, who was a formidable photographer of the era.

Wojnarowicz would stencil burning houses and other images onto buildings — a precursor of street artists such as Banksy. His photographs and collages, often sexually explicit, were a fixture of the East Village gallery scene in the '80s, along with the likes of Jean-Michel Basquiat, Kenny Scharf, and Keith Haring. But activism — primarily against queer oppression — was always at the heart of his endeavor. Shortly after Hujar died of AIDS, in 1987, Wojnarowicz was diagnosed with the disease.



Untitled (Falling Man and Map of USA) is a 1982 stencil by Wojnarowicz. (Photo courtesy of the Estate of David Wojnarowicz, Joe Sheftel Gallery, and P·P·O·W, New York)

“David’s work represents a lot of issues,” says Wendy Olsoff, co-founder of P·P·O·W Gallery. “He was always battling homophobia, which extends to the trans community. His work on the AIDS crisis is a direct connection to Covid. No one could think of a better place for David’s work.”

It's a fateful alignment of history and events that brings Wojnarowicz — who had a major retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 2018 — to Provincetown. The space 445 Commercial housed a gallery led in the '80s by Sam Hardison, who showed Robert Mapplethorpe and other pioneers of homoerotic photography. Hujar's work was on view in July at Albert Merola Gallery in Provincetown. Chris McKim's powerful new full-length documentary, *Wojnarowicz: F**k You F*ggot F**ker*, was offered virtually by Waters Edge Cinema last March, and a fundraising screening is planned for this summer.

Despite its limited hours, the exhibit is meant for the public and the art is for sale. "Some people might collect or learn from it," Olsoff says. "It was David's dream not to be in museums only."