

PAJAMA (PAUL CADMUS, JARED FRENCH,
MARGARET HOENING FRENCH)

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Our contemporary eyes have become overly trained to optimize images of bodies, to take away their difficulty, to sort and reconfirm hierarchies of vision and value that are useful to the status quo of whatever niche or bubble we happen to inhabit. And our bodies, in turn, in this ever-flowing stream of regulatory performance-enhancement, find validation in the re-performance of the same repeated gestures, looks and mutual feelings. Every once in a while, an image, or series of images, appears on our screens and in our minds that threatens to unravel these systems of value and identification—like when you get hung up on a stranger and an improvised fiction temporarily rewires your every move. The work of PaJaMa (c. 1937-1950) suspends that feeling of a crush on an infinite ocean horizon.

The photographs collectively authored by the painters Paul Cadmus, Jared French, and Margaret Hoening French as PaJaMa distinguish themselves from the casual avant-garde snapshots we know of early 20th century artists at the beach. Unlike those surprisingly playful, embarrassing, or silly moments that humanize now-iconic artistic figures while they were cavorting in the South of France and/or Spain, PaJaMa's images conjure the off-kilter gravitas of a New World passion play enacted by a cast of self-initiates without a coherent script. An article about the first public showing of a selection of PaJaMa photographs in 1978 captures the ad hoc point-of-view: "The three began with one good Leica and later added a second camera. They did their own developing and printing. PAJAMA seemed to visit all the interesting spots on earth, especially in summer: Provincetown, Nantucket, Fire Island, Vermont, Italy, England, Austria, and back again to New York studios. PAJAMA had fabulous friends who didn't mind in the least posing casually for the imaginative trio. Their close friends Alfonso Ossorio, Christopher Isherwood, Monroe Wheeler, George Tooker, and George Platt Lynes joined in the summer games..." That the writer seems to think the most interesting places in the world are "Provincetown, Nantucket, Fire Island, Vermont, Italy, England, Austria" also reveals a sense of the kind of American naiveté that gives the work a certain charm that continues to perplex.

The bodies that lie around among beach detritus are photographed as if processing failed pre-war ideas about the machinic body. The figures gaze out into corners and folds in the image as if the picture can find no real compositional fulcrum in which to find a stable dynamism. In one photograph, four men, who have clearly been tanning, display not the joie de vivre of the beach getaway, or the extroverted stance of the heroic man-machine, but are, instead, enme-

shed in a pile of car parts, shards of a wooden fence and beach grass, on a sand dune that may have become an eroticized memory of trench warfare. In another photograph, two arms hang out of the kind of arrangement beach goers make when they are feeling like finding a more feral way of blocking the sun. A white sheet wrapped in and through a construction cobbled together out of found wooden planks makes something like a shipwreck scene—although, as in PaJaMa's best images, it never resolves into a stable narrative or iconic overview. The twin arms that hang out of the structure also conjure a set of mental images as to the configurations and actions of the bodies suspended out of view by the slinging fabric—the mind lingers for awhile in the gap of this hidden reveal.

In another image—which, like so many of their photographs, even from different years and geographic places—one starts to imagine that these characters live a life of only making these images. Or that they were all made in one infinite session of foreplay. A lone, naked figure lies across a track of broken wood and wire fencing, and the sensation of the body on this set of materials flings the photograph into a frame of mind we often associate with the 1970's photographs of public sex on the West Side piers in NYC by Alvin Baltrop. The casualness of the overtly sexualized male body is amplified by the haptic sensation of construction materials in ruin against naked skin.

Finding the words to name the photographic performances of PaJaMa is as difficult as describing what it is like to look with the gaze of desire: the words easily destroy the sweet quickness of the feeling. But the biographical and historical framings that threaten to glom on to these images are perpetually deflected by their carefully undynamic strangeness. In an inter-war world where all of these artists were trained in and asked to produce images of overly full, hyper-masculine, idealized, mostly white "American" bodies that could stand in for any array of political propaganda, the most striking feature of these photographs is how they maintain the relaxed tension of intimacy in the age of anxiety.

Ken Okiishi and Nick Mauss, September 2020