

Press Release

Brooklyn Museum



Jimmy DeSana (American, 1949–1990).
Marker Cones, 1982. Chromogenic print, 21 3/4 x 26
in. (55.3 x 66 cm). Courtesy of the Jimmy DeSana
Trust and PPOW. © Estate of Jimmy DeSana

The Brooklyn Museum Presents *Jimmy DeSana: Submission*, the First Museum Survey of Work by the Pioneering Queer, Punk Photographer

The exhibition features more than two hundred works, which trace a career that bridged mail art networks, New York’s 1970s punk and No Wave subcultures, the illuminating image-play of the “Pictures Generation,” and the various artistic and affective responses to the beginning of the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

Jimmy DeSana: Submission is the first museum survey of work by a major yet overlooked figure in the histories of photography, LGBTQ artists, and New York City. Among his many significant contributions, Jimmy DeSana (American, 1949–1990) reintroduced the body and sexuality into the conceptual photographic practices of the late 1960s and early 1970s, helping to elevate the medium within the contemporary art world. The exhibition traces the artist’s brief but prolific career through more than two hundred works on display (some for the first time), created during a time of profound cultural and political transformation in the United States. From his early days photographing suburban landscapes in Atlanta, Georgia, to his time as a key figure in the New York art and music scenes of the 1970s and 1980s, DeSana conveyed the radical spirit of his era and a pointed, ironic critique of the American Dream and its images. *Jimmy DeSana: Submission* opens November 11, 2022, and is organized by

Drew Sawyer, Phillip Leonian and Edith Rosenbaum Leonian Curator of Photography, Brooklyn Museum.

“This retrospective, the first since DeSana’s death from AIDS-related complications in 1990, will enable so many to view for the first time the full breadth of his iconoclastic artistic output, positioning his more well-known series within his interdisciplinary and collaborative practice in mail art, zines, performance, and film,” says Sawyer. “DeSana drew upon punk, Camp, sadomasochism, dreamworlds, performance art, experimental film, club culture, and the legacy of twentieth-century avant-gardes in ways that make his work unique among his peers. *Jimmy DeSana: Submission* brings together these multiple themes to show why his work is so relevant to artistic practices today.”

Along with his friends and peers, Jimmy DeSana sought to forge arts communities outside of traditional institutions (and the concurrent gentrification that displaced artists from Lower Manhattan). Instead, he chose to display his work via collectives, artist-run spaces, and the informal groupings of the underground nightclub scene, as well as the more democratized dissemination systems of mail art networks. *Submission* prominently features examples of DeSana’s contributions to early queer zines throughout the 1970s—from General Idea’s *File* magazine to John Jack Baylin and John Dowd’s *Fanzini* to Gregory Battcock’s *Trylon & Perisphere*—as well as his first major series, *101 Nudes* (1972), which was circulated through mail art networks. DeSana published this portfolio of photolithographic prints, portraying his friends posing nude in the bland interiors of Atlanta’s postwar houses, at the height of the Gay Liberation Movement and the city’s reactive censorship. These formative images employ a distinctly queer approach to domesticity and invite viewers to look beneath the veneer of suburban propriety, a concept that would capture the artist’s creative attention for the rest of his career.

The exhibition also contains selections from *Submission* (1980), DeSana’s book of BDSM-related photographs that play with liberation and conformity, and ideological power alongside the myths of postwar capitalism. This section also includes related photographs from a collaboration with writer and sex worker Terence Sellers (American, 1952–2016) that were intended for her first book, *The Correct Sadist* (1983). Most of these photographs have not been previously displayed or published.

Continuing the survey is DeSana’s series *Suburban* (1979–84), perhaps the artist’s best-known photographs and his first in color. Building off of *101 Nudes*, DeSana used a cast of friends and collaborators to explore the queerness of postwar suburban culture by placing nude bodies, often abstracted and contorted, in suburban backyards, wood-paneled living rooms, and tiled bathrooms. Using vivid gel-lighting to produce its characteristic heavily saturated, candy-colored prints, *Suburban* mimics the seductive, materialist aesthetics of fashion photography and the set design of television advertisements—strategies that were similarly deployed by his friends and peers during this period, including model and artist Laurie Simmons. The images are often skewed and shot from oblique angles, further destabilizing the viewer’s perception of the subjects.

Accompanying the dreamlike color photographs of the *Suburban* series are some of DeSana’s subsequent, more abstract efforts from the late 1980s. Made after 1984, when DeSana underwent spleen removal surgery after contracting HIV, the works superimpose warped color images of everyday objects with collage elements, text, and fragments of figures in motion. DeSana turned away from directly representing the body during this period—in the early years of the ongoing HIV/AIDS epidemic, when gay

artists in particular were expected to make work about the epidemic in reaction to government inaction and neglect or misinformation by dominant media.

DeSana was seemingly omnipresent in New York's punk and No Wave scenes during the late 1970s and 1980s, joining other artists who engaged in symbolic forms of resistance through visual art, literature, music, and film. DeSana photographed a number of prominent figures in those subcultures; the survey will be the first to feature his portraits of art and music luminaries such as Kathy Acker, Laurie Anderson, Kenneth Anger, Patti Astor, David Byrne, John Giorno, Debbie Harry, and Richard Hell. Additionally, the exhibition will highlight DeSana's photographic contributions to collectives like Collaborative Projects (including their groundbreaking exhibitions and publication, *X Motion Picture Magazine*), periodicals such as the *New York Rocker* and *Semiotext(e)*, and No Wave Cinema, in which he was involved as both an actor and a director.

The exhibition will be accompanied by the first scholarly publication on DeSana's work, featuring essays by Sawyer and artist Laurie Simmons as well as more than two hundred images, copublished with DelMonico Books.

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We are grateful to the Jimmy DeSana Trust and its executor, Laurie Simmons, whose collaboration made this exhibition possible.

Special thanks to Bryan Barcena, former Assistant Curator and Manager of Publications, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (currently Director, Regen Projects).

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