

# The queer artist who transformed contemporary photography

: 7/31/2024

---

New book 'Jimmy DeSana: Salvation' sees the artist's final series finally published, offering an intimate look at the life of the DeSana's inner life as he confronted the shadow of death.

As American artist [Jimmy DeSana](#) (1949-1990) lay dying from AIDS, he knew there was still work to be done that could only be entrusted to his closest friend, artist [Laurie Simmons](#). The two first met in 1973, a year after DeSana moved to New York at age 23, and soon enough they shared a Soho loft.

Over the next two decades, DeSana would carve his own path as an artist, transforming the nude body into landscapes of the mind, simmering with tensions and distorted by an undertow of desire. He exhibited in the landmark 1978 "[Punk Art](#)" exhibition, collaborated with William S. Burroughs on a BDSM book titled *Submission*, and chronicled the downtown scene just as New York's No Wave took the city by storm.

After DeSana was diagnosed with HIV in 1985, he devoted the remainder of his life to making art. His final major project, *Salvation*, brought together photomontages of flowers and male nudes. He had completed the black and white prints and sequenced them into a book maquette. But the color had yet to be done, and DeSana needed Simmons's help to complete the project after his death. Simmons held the maquette in her hand, taking notes as he gave her verbal instructions for the images.

After DeSana passed on July 27, it would be quite some time before Simmons, then a young mother, was able to fully step into her mantle as executor of the Jimmy DeSana Estate. All that began to change in 2013 when she brought on artists Mary Simpson and Danielle Bartholomew to work both for her studio and the estate.

"Frankly the notes after a certain period of time became kind of gibberish to me so Mary, Danielle, and I did a lot of forensic work trying to figure out what the notes really meant," Simmons says.

Recognizing the ethical considerations of producing posthumous work, they worked tirelessly to center DeSana's vision in their decision-making process. "We're always coming at it from a place of an artist studio rather than like the board of an estate," says Simpson.

The results speak for themselves. With [Jimmy DeSana: Salvation](#) (Primary Information), the artist's final series is published for the first time, offering an intimate look at the inner life of the artist as he confronts the shadow of death claiming the lives of more than 100,000 people in the 1980s alone.

That *Salvation* would be resurrected during a new pandemic defies the laws of probability and yet it's almost as though DeSana understood the future was limitless. "If everything seems impossible, then nothing is,"

DeSana wrote in a 1988 poem titled “What’s Worse?” which appears in the new book, *Quotations from Jimmy DeSana* (Primary Information).

Taken together, both books offer a poignant meditation on grief, despair, disgust, rage, faith, hope, love, and prayers for deliverance from a man facing down death. Ultimately DeSana understood the work would continue in his stead, writing: “I have done (the best) is yet to come.”