

Jimmy DeSana

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Mary Simpson

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When you love something, you pay attention to it. Loving an artist after they've died, and attending to their estate—the art they've left behind—means physically caring for their archive, building context for their work, and placing it in exhibitions and collections. While Jimmy DeSana was on his deathbed in 1990, he asked Laurie Simmons to oversee his estate. Since 2013, Danielle Bartholomew and I have helped her care for Jimmy's work. For us, as artists, this labor is just as important as the time we spend on our own practices.

Loving someone while they are dying of a debilitating illness demands a care that most of us will never know. Jimmy's husband, Darrell Bagley, became his caregiver for half a decade, physically tending to Jimmy's body at the expense of his own health while sharing Jimmy's grief as many of their close friends and colleagues fell ill during the AIDS crisis.

Laurie and Jimmy first met on the subway to Coney Island in 1973. Jimmy wore a white suit, a white Panama hat, a diamond necklace and a 35 mm Yashica camera spray-painted white. They instantly became friends and decided to share a live/work loft in Soho.

Jimmy built a darkroom in his half of the space and then guided Laurie as she built hers. Since then she has often said that everything she knows about photography came from Jimmy. From their shared sensibility, you can see that their connection was powerful. I've often thought about both of them as having the eyes of sculptors more than photographers. There is no documentary impulse in either practice, as they each staged scenes with bodies, props, and architectural elements. Both treated the camera as essential but not precious — more utility, less romance.

Laurie assisted Jimmy on his photoshoots as often as she could, gleaning knowledge and, frequently, jumping in to pose for him. Many pictures from Jimmy's "Suburban" series feature Laurie, though you can barely tell, as his staged scenes always obscure their subjects' faces —just one of the ways he would give equal weight to objects, furniture, backgrounds, and bodies.

After Jimmy moved out, he and Laurie remained best friends. Carroll Dunham moved into the loft with Laurie, and they started a family. In the early 1980s Jimmy found a loft in midtown, a large space on 6th Avenue near the New York Public Library. He shared it briefly

with Keith Haring and Kenny Scharf before taking it over alone. Aside from the shelving for his photo equipment and props, there was almost no furniture.

It was there, in 1983, that Darrell Bagley found himself quietly making eye contact with Jimmy over the threshold. Darrell had just moved back home to Mount Vernon, north of the Bronx, and taken a job at a jewelry store in midtown. One day his coworker suggested they go for a haircut on their lunch break, and on the way they climbed the stairs above the barber shop to say “hi” to the coworker’s friend. “Jimmy answered the door, and he was on the phone,” Darrell told me. “It must have been an important call because he couldn’t get off. So we left, and I didn’t think any more about it.” But the next day Jimmy tracked Darrell down and invited him over for dinner.

That night Jimmy cooked pasta for Darrell. They shared a bottle of wine, and they talked. All night. “We just talked into the morning, about everything, so many things we had in common. The following day I said, ‘Well, I need to get back.’ And he said, ‘Where are you going?’ I told him I was going home, and he said, ‘Can’t you stay?’ So I stayed another night. And then I never left.”

Darrell kept his job at the jewelry store, and he and Jimmy built out the loft, turning it into a home. They adopted a Dalmatian puppy and named him Jimmy. Every morning, Darrell would take Jimmy the dog for a walk while Jimmy the photographer made coffee and English muffins for their breakfast. In the evening Darrell would return home from the jewelry store to find Jimmy still working in his photo studio. Sometimes Jimmy would ask Darrell to model for a picture or press the shutter release for one of Jimmy’s self-portraits.

Within a year, Darrell and Jimmy were married. Photographs from the day show a traditional wedding: flowers decorating their loft, tiny baskets for the flower girls, a tiered cake topped with two miniature grooms, one Black and one White. In every photo, their expressions are joyful. Speaking about those years, Darrell has a way of repeating sentences for emphasis, softly turning them inside out. “He was a really, really loving person,” he says of Jimmy. “He had so much love in him. He was loving, really.”

Jimmy’s oeuvre spans only twenty years, beginning with the seminal “101 Nudes” project from his undergraduate thesis in Atlanta: a halftone edition of fifty-six images showing his friends posing nude in playful indoor and outdoor scenes. After moving to New York, he staged individuals in sexually explicit, sometimes violent poses for the photographs that became his book *Submission*, published in 1978. Before *Submission* was released, he began “Suburban,” his best-known series, which continued his practice of arranging nude friends in domestic landscapes, now charged with layers of color through staged lighting, darkroom tricks and overlaid gels. And near the end of his life he deployed his signature use of color in semi-abstract photocollages combining household objects and male nudes.

Most of Jimmy's friends learned he had HIV in 1984, when his spleen ruptured. But Darrell and Jimmy found out a few months earlier. "One day the puppy had peed on the floor. Jimmy went and spanked him on his butt, gave him a little slap, and the next day Jimmy's whole hand was blue. His whole hand, bruised blue. We were like, 'What the fuck is that? What the hell?' That was one year into our relationship. One year."

As Darrell tells me this story, I think of the colored gels Jimmy layered over his images of human bodies. But I also picture the privacy of that moment. I can see them looking at Jimmy's blue hand, letting the implications sink in, and then keeping the incident—and their fears—to themselves.

One effect of Jimmy's diagnosis was a new sense of urgency in his work. Shortly after his spleen operation, he made the self-portrait *Stitches* (1984). The photograph, lit with hot red gels, focuses on a sutured wound arcing along his torso, his face turned up and away from the camera. As he worked longer and longer days in the studio, Darrell took on even more of the household duties, which included caring for Jimmy as his illness worsened. Eventually he took a break from his job to look after Jimmy full time: bathing him, giving him his shots, making sure he was eating enough despite the sores that inflamed his mouth. Darrell turned down an acting role in a production of *La Cage aux Folles* that included a European tour. Jimmy encouraged him to go, but there was no way Darrell could leave him on his own.

Seeking a respite from the city, but with very little money, they planned a trip to Atlanta to visit Jimmy's mother. There, at least they could swim, relax, and enjoy the sunshine. Finalizing plans over the phone, Jimmy's mother asked him, "What about Darrell?"

"What about Darrell?" Jimmy replied.

"Will he be going in the pool?"

Furious, Jimmy hung up. They canceled the trip.

"It was okay," Darrell says after telling me this story. "There's always racism, whether it was from his mother, or just random people on the street. But it was okay. I found a place for it. I found a place for it."

Jimmy worked feverishly in the few years before he died. At the end, in his hospital room, he handed Laurie a maquette for a book of fifty collages. It was to become *Salvation*, Jimmy's final work. When Danielle and I first unearthed the maquette in the archive, many images were missing, and a series of cryptic notes in Laurie's handwriting were scrawled over each page.

Laurie has very little memory of taking those notes at Jimmy's bedside. She does remember him wondering what an afterlife might hold. (She asked him not to haunt her. He laughed.) "I don't know why he asked me to take his estate," Laurie told me. "I had a little kid and my own

career to manage. But I guess if you want someone who'll organize and get things done, ask a busy mother."

At least seven of the collages in *Salvation* feature Darrell. One of the most striking, near the end of the book, is a silhouette curved into fetal position and overlaid with amniotic, nearly weightless texture: soft flower shapes, dark dustings of powder, and curling marks that Jimmy drew or scratched onto the body. The image is layered in a vibrant, hot orange, like a chemical fire or a flaming sunset. The distinct details of Darrell's body can be seen in the circle of his head and the soft curve of his toes meeting his outstretched hand. The photograph is called *Intensive Care*.

As the years passed, Darrell's long hours spent caring for Jimmy began to affect his own health. "I got pale and gray and I thought, shit, am I infected as well? But I said, I'm not going to test myself now, because if I do, then I'll be no use. Who would take care of him? He needed me full time."

What has not been written about enough is how angry Jimmy was at the end—at the loss around him and at the unfair death he was slowly submitting to. In July 1990 he moved into a room at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Hospital. In the preceding two and a half years, his close friends Peter Hujar and Keith Haring had died, as had Robert Mapplethorpe, Jack Smith, and Mark Morrisroe. One of those deaths—Laurie can't remember which—caused Jimmy to hurl a transistor radio across the room in rage, in grief.

For his final exhibition at Pat Hearn Gallery—which showed several large, framed images from the *Salvation* book—Jimmy said, "If I could do a show that people would walk into and at one moment be laughing and at the next moment they would be nauseous and have to run out of the gallery, that would satisfy me because that is the way my life feels now. There are moments of happiness but there is nausea behind it. If I could do a show that confused people so much, that was so ambiguous that they didn't know what to think but they felt sort of sickened by it and also entertained, then for me that would capture the moment that we're going through right now."

Put aside for a moment what many have called shocking about Jimmy's oeuvre: the nudity, and the photographs in *Submission*, and see that for the short time that he worked he repeatedly brought together bodies, objects, and spaces to show us that elevating and reducing a subject are the same thing. Every photograph insists that the ordinary and the sublime are one. The human body is a miracle. Everyday objects are staggering. Heavenly light is prosaic. Religious iconography is hilarious. Parody is serious.

One quiet afternoon at the hospital, Jimmy's mother sat by his side while Darrell filled a plastic jug at the sink. "Isn't he beautiful?" Jimmy asked.

"Who?" she replied.

"Darrell. Isn't Darrell beautiful?"

During my conversation with Darrell, I remark on how few love stories we have from the AIDS epidemic. “It was a really sad time,” he says, “So many people were breaking up. So many relationships ended when people got sick.” He pauses. “But also, no one has ever asked me about it. About loving Jimmy.”

Jimmy’s obituary, published in the *New York Times* a week after he died, makes no mention of Darrell. “He is survived by his parents, James and Josephine DeSana, of Atlanta,” reads the final line. Five days later, a small correction was printed: “An obituary on Tuesday about Jimmy DeSana, a photographer, omitted the name of his companion. He is Darryl [sic] Bagley of New York.”

Today the word *companion* reads as comical, inadequate. We have better words now: *husband*, *partner*, *lover*. The obituary does not even mention AIDS. Of Jimmy’s work, it says he was “known for his witty and occasionally gently erotic color images.”

It’s difficult to describe to my younger friends the severity of homophobia and anti-AIDS bias in the 1990s, when I was a teenager. Most of my classmates at the time believed you could catch HIV from a toilet seat or shaking hands. Left-leaning media preached “tolerance” of homosexuality, as if queer people were reduced to a thing to be tolerated. What is familiar to my younger friends, however, is the way that fear was weaponized to isolate, traumatize, and promote violence against a group whose bodies existed outside the status quo.

Laurie remembers Jimmy specifying which color should be laid over each black and white print in *Salvation*, but when we combed through her notes, no colors were mentioned. Maybe he wasn’t so precise, or perhaps she was too full of grief to properly record them. For the missing images, Danielle and I scoured Jimmy’s original slides and found his characteristic trickster practice of giving dozens of different pictures the same title. We selected the options that best fit *Salvation*’s sequence. For the overlays, we chose colors Jimmy routinely used in those final years. If the three of us were registrars, the art historical impulse for accuracy would have rendered this project impossible. But we are artists. We hope our choices reflect his vision.

After Jimmy’s death, Darrell followed Jimmy’s wish to visit Europe, and settled in Amsterdam, where he now shares a tiny garden apartment with his husband and two cats. He works as a home-care nurse at an apartment complex for the elderly, ill and disabled. “I think of him every day,” Darrell says. “Every single day, I think of him.”
