

ARTFORUM

December 2015

REVIEWS

PaJaMa

Vacation *is* boring, but does it have to be? I found myself reconsidering after seeing vintage photographs at Gitterman Gallery by the artists' group PaJaMa, a loosely defined collaboration formed by American painters Paul Cadmus, Jared French, and Margaret French during the 1930s, '40s, and '50s. PaJaMa is an acronym made out of the first two letters of each member's name. Jared and Margaret were husband and wife; Paul was Jared's lover. All three shared affinities as painters, like tastes for the male nude and egg tempera.

Gitterman gathered about forty pictures made in Fire Island, Nantucket, and Provincetown, as well as a few the three artists made in New York. All are black-and-white vintage gelatin silver prints, and each scene features variously dressed or undressed figures interacting with one another in isolate, dune-filled landscapes, or arranged together in front of local seaside architecture. When in New York, PaJaMa are seen lounging around lustily in filthy interiors. The best pictures compose stark shadows falling across theatrical, even balletic choreography to create angular, psychologically capacious tableaux reminiscent of German Expressionist film and the three artists' own paintings.

Paul Cadmus and Margaret French, Provincetown, ca. 1947, is a work I had never seen before, one that places the group's skill with artifice and location scouting front and center. Cadmus wears a white-hooded windbreaker and white pants while standing directly behind French, who wears an identical outfit in all black. Both have their backs turned to the camera and their right arms outstretched. Pale dunes, half-covered with grass and pitch-dark shrubbery, roll out in front of them. In all black, French is mistaken for Cadmus's shadow, which, in turn, makes the landscape in front of them look like an enormous photomural. That is, until you notice her fist is clenched and he is incongruously openhanded. As if from out of nowhere, they appear to interrupt this modern vista, lonesome, spectral, chilly, and windswept.



Paul Cadmus and Margaret French, Provincetown, ca. 1947

In addition to Paul, Jared, and Margaret, many of PaJaMa's well-known friends make cameo appearances alongside the three mains in several pictures, including the likes of George Tooker, Fidelma Cadmus Kirstein, George Platt Lynes, and Monroe Wheeler. They all look great naked, as poised and muscular as modern dancers, and so it goes in art as in life: Having attractive friends is amazing.

But perhaps the most thrilling aspect of the show is that it's been mounted in a commercial space. Originally, the photos circulated as minor token artworks given away to lovers and friends, to travel their world via hand-to-hand delivery and accumulate in photo albums. At present and as if by some fortuitous magic, each snapshot reveals itself as an entry point into a bygone network of artistic bisexual leisure, composed and performed with relational pleasure, in the buff or fully clothes, on a sunny beach or in the privacy of one's own decrepit flat. For viewers who enjoy this kind of history, the opportunity to savor a piece of someone's former happiness seems rare, and in this case still feels generous. The photos also retain their subversion, and not just for promoting what was at the time considered sexually "deviant." Many of the pictures were made during wartime, a period of near total global distress, yet no one here looks like they cared.

PaJaMa hatched their collaboration as a clever diversion while on vacation, as a way to enjoy the members of their circle as well as one another even more than they quiet obviously already did. All of the photos are postcard size. It's as if they've signed each one on verso, "Wish you were here, everyone's queer, let's get used to it."

—Sam McKinniss