



'Valentine (Tommy Coombs),' mid-1960s, digital C-print, courtesy of ClampArt.

Beaus and Eros

GLAM PHOTO PIONEER JAMES BIDGOOD REVISITED

By Rafael Riseberg

TRUE PIONEERS SOMETIMES have to bide their time for years, and maybe decades, before the rest of the world catches up to their vision. Such is the case with gay artist James Bidgood, the pulp glamour photographer who was so ahead of his time that his work from the 1960s has only recently been celebrated. At 73 years old, Bidgood is thankfully still around, and his latest exhibit consists of mostly never-shown homoerotic works at the recently refurbished ClampArt Gallery in Chelsea.

Bidgood is best known for directing the cult film "Pink Narcissus," which was released anonymously in 1971 after six years in production and periodically makes its way to gay film festivals worldwide (a DVD version is for sale at the gallery). A hallucinatory journey into male erotic fantasy, the film is often compared to such seminal queer cinema as Jack Smith's "Flaming Creatures" (1963) and Kenneth Anger's "Scorpio Rising" (1964). Bidgood finally revealed it to be his creation about 10 years ago, and since then interest in his career-long artistic output has grown.

Having been both a female impersonator and costume designer, Bidgood in the mid-1960s changed paths again, becoming a photographer for male physique magazines such as "Muscleboy." In those days it was illegal to sell or even distribute photos depicting male frontal nudity, so the models in the magazines wore G-strings. Such accessories are plentiful on the hunky men in the current exhibit's photos, though the works' lavish, dream-like settings evoke nothing as mundane as a gym. It is hard to imagine that in their time Bidgood's tableaux of nearly naked men were borderline criminal; today these images appear quaint and innocent.

This artist's genius in his day was in marrying the erotic with the flamboyant, and all of this on the cheap: every scene was shot in Bidgood's cramped Hell's Kitchen apartment, using painted backdrops, colored lights, and inexpensive props that included gold lamé, mesh netting and fake plants.

The glam effect is most striking in the series of photos showing model Jay Garvin appearing to be underwater. Wearing just a glitter-encrusted G-string, he

floats above a treasure chest, swims among sea plants, and juggles two lobsters. As in all the photographs, the scenes are drenched in color, with a predominance of reds and blues. His swimming body looks almost as artificial as the plastic lobsters, and yet he has a sexy appeal.

A number of photos emphasize romance. In one, Tommy Coombs as Cupid sits on a heart-shaped, flower-covered swing, his face beaming with the anticipated stirrings of love. He appears as wholesome as can be, though the trappings are decidedly frou-frou. In another piece, the same model sits dejected in front of a different heart-shaped background, but even with his downcast look, the photo's bubble-gum blues and pinks cushion the viewer from the real trauma of love lost.

Several other photographs showcase scenes from "Pink Narcissus" (also filmed completely in Bidgood's apartment, remarkably), including a sparkly bullfighter, a nude lad whose skin is a ghostly shade of powder blue, and a harem boy lying languorously before an enormous feather-played peacock. The effects

CONTINUED ON PAGE 18