

# ArtReview

Truth, Justice and the New American Way



Jeder Mensch ein Cowboy

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03 >

Jimmy Wright *New York Underground*  
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For those looking to assuage the woes of shuttering gay bars and queer assimilation, Jimmy Wright's 11 glowing drawings at Fierman are something of a salve. Made between 1974 and 1976, they capture the then-thirty-year-old artist's firsthand experiences of pre-AIDS New York nightlife at Club 82, the Anvil, Club Baths and Max's Kansas City, among others. A swirling chimera of leather-clad cruisers, glam rockers, encounters in the dark and one spectacular ass leaping out of a leopard-print leotard, the works put us directly into a frenzied moment of gay liberation.

Across these storied spaces, there is a glittering collision of gender expressions and sexualities, each as multifarious and shifting as the next. Crucially, Wright's drawings point to the great multivalence of his experience and his community, and in that way they resist being flattened into nostalgia 40 years later.

Although they are diaristic, the drawings look as though they might have had many

authors. Wright drew with a melange of materials (graphite, ink, gouache, watercolour, coloured pencil) and in a wide range of styles. *Tea Room* (1975), a scene of two men in a bathroom – one wearing a trenchcoat and fedora – employs smudged graphite to invoke a noirish intrigue, while in *Anvil #1* (1975), violet and magenta ink spreads across the paper in pools that almost obscure the bare butts and gymnastic sex acts of eight or so figures. In four ink drawings on paper napkins from Max's Kansas City, all dated 1974, Wright uses clear black lines and exaggerated postures to caricature the people sitting at the bar.

It seems that Wright, a Kentuckian via Tennessee, was trying out styles and materials as much as he may have been trying out his own identity and sexuality. His sampling, on paper and in his actual lived experiences, results in a quality of fluidity. While one might easily look back at this period and pin it down with a series of binaries (gay/straight, sub/dom, top/bottom,

etc), Wright's work resists this kind of limited historicising by participating in a tradition of queerness that is born out of elasticity. This emphasis on queerness-as-flux is commonplace now, but, looking at these drawings, we can trace its occurrence in queer artmaking to Wright, and even back further: Frank O'Hara wrote, 'Grace/to be born and live as variously as possible' in his 1956 poem 'In Memory of My Feelings', a work in which the poet (who was also thirty at the time) describes his own self-formation as utterly mutable and slippery.

'Variously' describes this body of Wright's work quite well. His promiscuous use of genre and medium is a gesture of queer mess-making. In trying everything, the artist refuses stricture or fixed coding. Things don't need to fully resolve: his figures are unbound and his use of materials is mercurial. In a time where the mainstream queer political agenda tides us into homonormativity, this is just the kind of liberated mess we need. *Ashton Cooper*



*Anvil #1*, 1975, colour ink on paper, 26 x 26 cm.  
Courtesy the artist and Fierman, New York