

Jerome Caja
Ugly Pageant
1 Nov – 19 Dec 2024
The Upstairs

Bortolami is pleased to present *Ugly Pageant*, an exhibition of miniature paintings by the late San Francisco-based drag performer and visual artist Jerome Caja (1958-1995), and the first solo presentation of the artist's work outside of California.

You may never be as glamorous as me but darlin' you no longer have to be drab. So begins the artist's playful decree in a 1989 letter to a dear friend. This disarming proclamation illustrates who Caja's friends and acquaintances knew as the bold, outstanding figure in both the transgressive queer nightlife and the local visual art milieus of the Bay Area during the harrowing peak years of the AIDS epidemic.

Born in Cleveland in the late fifties, Caja was raised in a Catholic family among eleven brothers. While Catholic school may not have provided him access to the practical tools of artmaking, it cultivated Caja's interest in the forms, aesthetics, and narratives of Christian art and iconography, which would in turn prove foundational to both the physical and representational aspects of his artwork.

After earning his BA in studio art from Cleveland State University in 1984, Caja relocated to San Francisco to pursue his MFA, eventually adopting unconventional painting materials in his postgraduate practice. Calling upon nail polish, glitter, "the most sacrid [*sic*] lipstick, the blissed [*sic*] eye shadow, and the most high liner"¹—all the exalted tools that equally served his parallel passion of drag performance—Caja began rendering his "little lovelies," intimate-scale portraits and figurative scenes on crude surfaces from plastic tip trays to scraps of wood and paper. These precarious compositions are often delicately mounted on layers of lace and other colorful textiles, set in kitschy found frames.

The resulting artwork typically resembles a Catholic miniature, icon, or reliquary, at times depicting its anointed subjects in bawdy, grotesque tableaux, and at others, in more subdued, morose genre scenes of isolation. No matter the setting, Caja's pantheon of saints and martyrs includes: Death and other skeletal *danseurs macabres*, the Virgin Mary, Bozo the Clown, Gumby, Satan, Smiley Face, drag queens, anthropomorphized eggs, and the goddess Venus (usually conveyed as a self-portrait of the artist), among other weirdos and outcasts.

In several such works—so-called "icons for the girlies of today"—a baroque narrative unfolds. A wan Virgin is visited by a winged fried egg while folding laundry. A bemused Bathsheba bathes herself in a toilet. Jerome-as-Venus is born out of a bird bath in a backyard in Cleveland. Aptly described by David Levi-Strauss in the first review of Caja's work printed in *ArtForum* in 1989, "These mythic/mundane visions come from a place where sacred and profane have not yet split."

¹ Jerome Caja, letter to Anna van der Meulen, 1989. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

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In truly queer fashion, diametric oppositions remain unresolved. Life and death, comedy and tragedy, zenith and bathos, beauty and ugliness, strength and fragility—each underscoring the contrasts and contradictions dearest to Jerome. In the Archives of American Art oral history interview recorded in August 1995, the artist, with his sharp tongue, interrupts his interviewer: *I've always been thin and delicate and weak, so I've always had a sense that life was fragile*. In his artwork as in his life and his performance antics, Jerome Caja is a figure as transgressive at a gay pride parade as in a gallery.

Jerome Caja (b. 1958, Cleveland, OH; d. 1995, San Francisco, CA) rose to local prominence as a visual artist in the Bay Area through a string of exhibitions at art spaces like Art Lick, Force Nordstrom, Paule Anglim, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, and SFMoMA. Most recently, Caja's work has been shown in institutional exhibitions including *For Dear Life: Art, Medicine, and Disability*, Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, CA; *The Body, the Host: HIV/AIDS and Christianity*, Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College, Oberlin, OH; and *Art After Stonewall*, Grey Art Gallery, New York University, and Leslie-Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art, New York, NY; Patricia & Philip Frost Art Museum, Miami, FL; and Columbus Museum of Art, Columbus, OH.

Caja's artwork is represented in the collections of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.