125 NEWBURY

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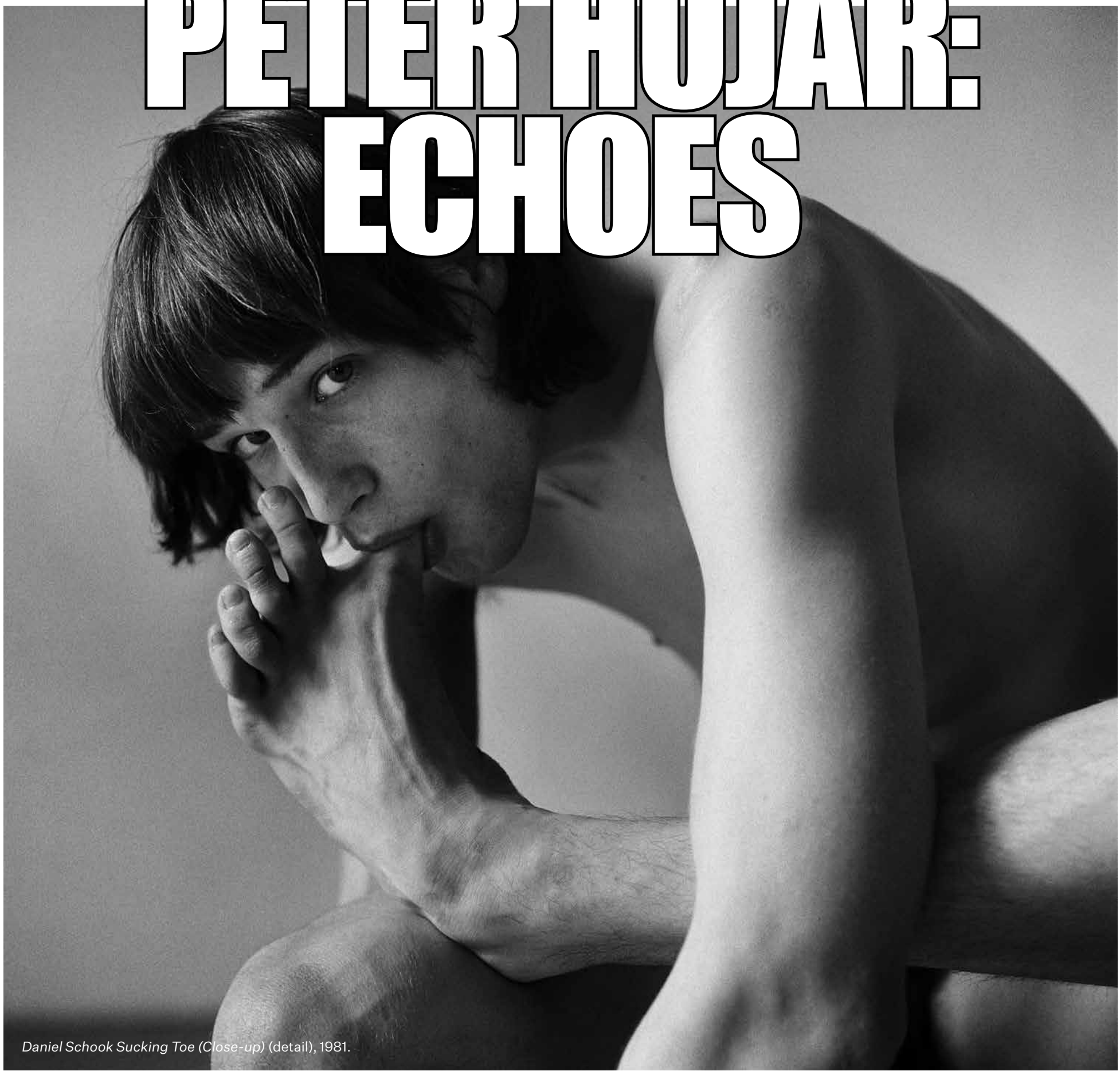
PETER HUJAR: ECHOES



Daniel Schook Sucking Toe (Close-up) (detail), 1981.

FREE PRESS

REMEMBERING PETER HUJAR

Arne Glimcher

In the mid-sixties, I was Paul Thek's dealer at the Pace Gallery and Paul's boyfriend was Peter Hujar. That is how we met, though I never got to know Peter very well. Thek was a formidable larger-than-life character, and Peter seemed very much in his shadow when we were together. Fortunately, he always carried his camera.

I remember a party at my then business partner Fred Mueller's penthouse apartment. As the hour grew late and the party thinned out, a small group of us retired to the black room—a room totally encased in Nevelson sculptures and lit with dim blue-white light. Nevelson herself, who Peter would later go on to photograph, was there with us. Dennis Hopper, Larry Bell, Claes Oldenburg, Ivan and Marilyn Karp, Paul Thek and Peter Hujar were also in attendance. Huddled on floor cushions, the conversation became lively in a discussion of what was the future of art or did it have a future. I noticed Peter separated from the group in a corner, camera in hand. I don't think Peter Hujar ever considered himself an artist of equal merit, which of course, he was. Regrettably, most of us didn't recognize the depth and importance of his art at the time.

Peter Hujar, *Paul Thek on Fire Island*, 1965.

Hujar's talent was multifaceted. In his images of nude men in the most extraordinary contortions or at the most private moments, his lens could turn their skin to satin as elegantly as Irving Penn's fashion images. His photographs of the Hudson River piers, a place where gay men cruised, have the candor and immediacy of a street photographer like Weegee. His photographs of the empty, scrofulitic interiors of the dilapidated buildings that once covered the piers captured the graffiti that filled the walls with such sensitivity that one can feel the echoes of their authors saying, "I was here, don't forget me." These images were premonitory of the style of art that would come to be associated with the seventies and eighties.

The time has come to celebrate the unique talent of Peter Hujar and affirm his position as one of the great photographers of the twentieth century. His pictures show us not so much how the world has changed—of course, the piers are gone—but how much it hasn't. For all the changes in patterns of behavior, for all the progress that has been made in acceptance of LGBTQ lives, the specter of separation still hovers over the landscape and is clearly visible in the camera of Peter Hujar.

I can still conjure him in a corner of Fred's apartment.

Peter Hujar, *Vince Aletti*, 1975.

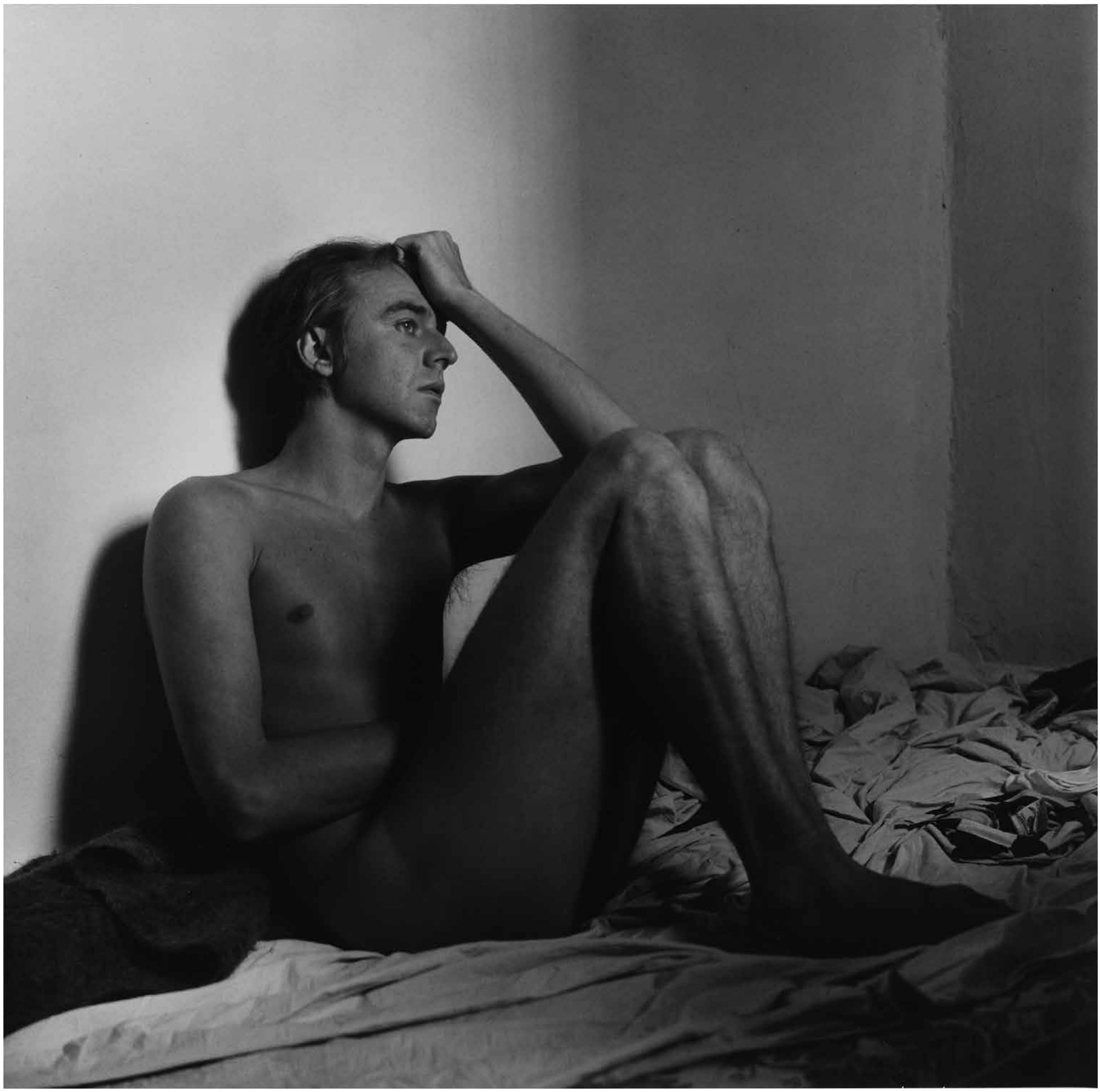
HOW PETER HUJAR DEFINED DOWNTOWN

Vince Aletti

I was already living in the East Village when I met him, in 1969, but in many ways Peter Hujar defined downtown for me. I'd been in the neighborhood, off and on, for several years, working dumb jobs until I graduated Antioch and moved into a fifth-floor walkup on Twelfth Street, just off Avenue A. I landed a job at Ed Sanders's Peace Eye Bookstore, a few blocks away, and started writing about music for the *Rat*, the city's most radical underground paper, with offices on Fourteenth Street. So downtown wasn't exactly foreign territory for me, but Peter knew it more intimately, more intuitively than I did; he understood its rhythms, nuances, pleasures, and pitfalls. He went places I never dared to, and hung out with people I'd only read about. He was charismatic and complicated and, it turned out, deeply insecure, with a damaging family history he kept mostly to himself. During the time I knew him, Peter struggled to make ends meet, doing advertising, editorial, and publicity work in between exhibitions that rarely generated enough income to keep him fed. But if he was discouraged—and he often was—he didn't let it keep him from that evening's screening, concert, dance performance, press party, night-club opening, or tour of the baths. His hunger helped whet my appetite for new experiences: Charles Ludlam's Theatre of the Ridiculous, the Cockettes, "Pink Flamingos," the Fillmore East, the Fun Gallery, the back room at Max's, the Tenth Floor, Fire Island, disco, cruising. It was an exciting time; we took liberation for granted and pushed it to the limits. Downtown felt wide open, full of possibilities. You didn't have to be rich or pretty, but it helped if you could dance.

Looking at Peter's pictures, I realize that much of my experience was vicarious. Although I exchanged a few words with Susan Sontag on the dance floor at the Loft one night, I knew her only through her writing, and through Peter's picture of her lying down, high-strung and self-contained. I met William Burroughs and Brion Gysin at a leisurely lunch hosted by one of Peter's more eccentric lady friends, but if we exchanged more than a few words I don't remember them, perhaps because controlled substances were involved. Our circles overlapped but spun at different velocities, sometimes in different directions. Peter had an interest in gender blur—men in beards and lipstick—and sex as performance that I appreciated but never shared. He saw disco mostly from the sidelines, as a spectacle; I was swooning in the middle of the crowd, lost in music. Peter's downtown intersected with mine mainly in our apartments, directly across the street from each other, over dinner (he cooked, I didn't), fashion magazines, photo books, and vinyl records. And in his darkroom, over trays of pungent chemicals and taps of running water, watching these photographs appear. If Peter was rarely satisfied with the results, I was often astonished, especially when I knew the subject. Because Peter *saw* them, got them, with an understanding that was beyond words. Peter loved a fabulous façade, but he was only happy when he could get past it, dig deeper, and connect.

This essay was originally published in *Peter Hujar: Lost Downtown* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2016) and also appeared in *The New Yorker*, October 9, 2016.



René Ricard, 1978. Vintage gelatin silver print. 15 in. × 15⅛ in.

PETER HUJAR: WHISPERS

Oliver Shultz

"I wanted to be discussed in hushed tones.
When people talk about me, I want them to be whispering."
—Peter Hujar [1]

Peter Hujar is a downtown legend. During his lifetime, he somehow managed to be simultaneously infamous and obscure. Although he was widely regarded as a fixture of New York's artistic avant-garde, his work remained chronically underknown. This is especially true in comparison to more famous contemporaries such as Diane Arbus and Robert Mapplethorpe, with whom he is often compared. By all accounts, this had much to do with Hujar's ambivalence toward success, as well as a certain distaste for commerce and, perhaps, for the art world at large. His rejectionist sensibility often led him to shun the limelight and he developed a reputation of being as difficult as he was brilliant. The same might be said about his art.

Hujar was born in Trenton, NJ in 1934 and died in New York City from AIDS-related complications in 1987. He was 53 years old. Since his death, there has been a gradual process of re-emergence, culminating in an explosion of interest in his work in recent years. The whispers have grown increasingly louder. In the wake of several major exhibitions—including a full-scale retrospective at The Morgan Library in 2018—his remarkable body of photographs has received ever more widespread acclaim. Hujar's penetrating images, which cut to the quick of his subjects with a depth and verve unlike any photographer before or after, have become celebrated by subsequent generations of artists. More and more, his life and work are the subject of enormous fascination.

In today's art world, Hujar is increasingly embraced as a lodestar. He is widely seen as one of the most influential image-makers of the 20th century, but also one of the key artists who has shaped the sensibility of our contemporary moment. His uncompromisingly rigorous approach to the practice of photography, razor-sharp critical sensibility, and unique ability to capture intimacy, vivacity, and corporeality are all hallmarks of a singular body of work spanning three decades—from the early 1960s to his untimely death in 1987.

Hujar remains best known for his portraits, which capture a who's who of New York icons: drag performers, artists, musicians, poets, dancers, and various other notable figures on the cultural scene—including writers and critics such as William S. Burroughs, Fran Lebowitz, Allen Ginsberg, and Susan Sontag, as well as filmmakers and artists such as John Waters, James Waring, Louise Nevelson, and Paul Thek. These were the people who made up his eclectic and expansive milieu. They were also the people who stood at the intersection of New York's artistic, bohemian, and queer communities in the post-1960s era.

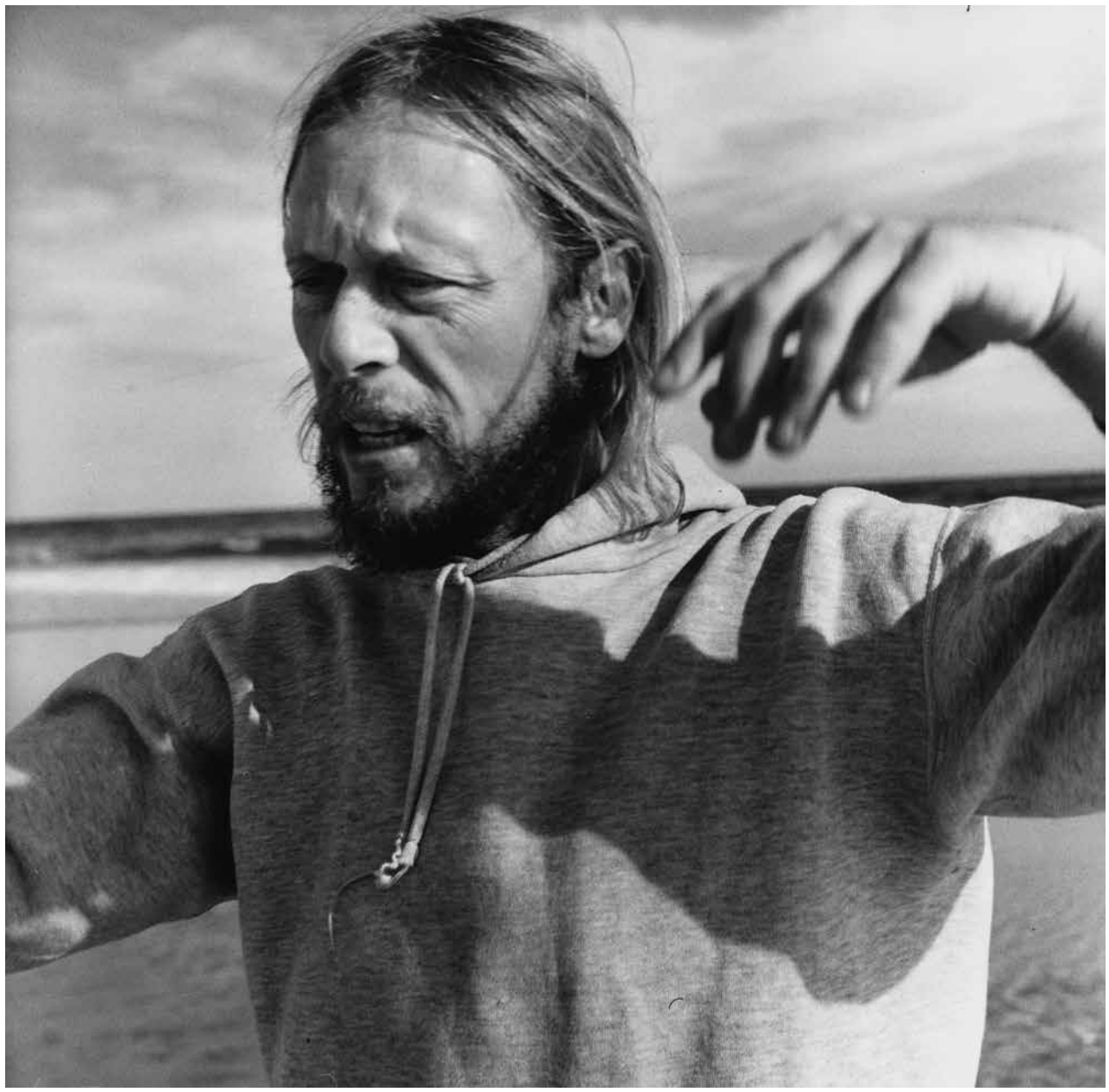
Hujar produced some of the most recognizable images of New York's underground elite. But he also photographed the uptown crowd, making striking images of tastemakers like Vogue editor-in-chief Diana Vreeland, and music stars like Stevie Wonder and Rod Stewart. In some of his lesser-known bodies of work, he made remarkable photographs of animals—which stage an almost post-human rapport between photographer and subject—as well as arresting still lives and haunting nocturnal cityscapes. He supported himself, meanwhile, through commercial photography, an activity for which he felt no love. As his friends and contemporaries have often recalled, he remained chronically poor throughout his life.

This exhibition focuses on two distinct if lesser-known threads in Hujar's practice: images of the bodies of friends, lovers, and acquaintances who posed for him inside his loft on 12th Street in New York's East Village in the 1970s and 80s; and photographs that he took while cruising the dilapidated Christopher St. piers on Manhattan's far West Side during the 1970s. In this latter group of images, the semi-public ruins of the West Side piers are sometimes populated by strangers and at other times absent of anyone at all, save the traces of previous habitation. One might say that this oscillation between presence and absence haunts all of Hujar's photographs.

The exhibition also includes several images that Hujar shot in the Capuchin catacombs of Palermo in 1963 during a trip taken with Paul Thek, his boyfriend at the time. These photographs were included alongside portraits of downtown personalities in the only book that Hujar ever published during his lifetime, *Portraits in Life and Death*, which included a brief but insightful introduction by Susan Sontag. Death and intimacy were often inextricable in Hujar's photographs, a fact that Sontag identifies in her short but insightful text. "Photographers, connoisseurs of beauty, are also—wittings or unwittingly—the recording-angels of death," she writes, "The photograph-as-photograph shows death. More than that, it shows the sex-appeal of death…"

The studio photography in this exhibition reveals a different side of Hujar's vision than his iconic portraits (or, indeed, his images of the Palermo catacombs): the way in which he approached the body—and in particular the male nude—with a strangely formalist and almost classical sensibility. These photographs of models posing in his studio simultaneously celebrate and denature the classical ideals of the body. They lay bare the fact that, for Hujar, form itself bore an erotic charge. Eros, moreover, was never merely free-flowing affect; it was a site of political possibility—the body not just a locus of desire but also of resistance. In these photographs, embodiment is revealed as a technique through which to reorchestrate the senses, challenge normative ways of being, and inhabit the world differently.

Peter Hujar, *Palermo Catacombs #2*, 1963.



Peter Hujar, *Paul Thek (In Hooded Sweatshirt)*, 1975.

Edward Weston, *Pepper*, 1930. Gelatin silver print.

The smooth contours of the bodies that feature in Hujar's studio images stand in contrast to the peeling paint and dilapidated surfaces of Manhattan's piers. The piers were, of course, a legendary space where gay men often sought each other out—a "cruising utopia," to use the words of theorist Juan Esteban Muñoz—where non-normative intimacy flourished. Hujar's photographs of these spaces date to the heyday of the gay liberation movement, a period following the Stonewall rebellion of 1968 and preceding the emergence of the AIDS epidemic in the early-1980s.

Hujar's renditions of these urban ruins, their surfaces encrusted with traces of life, are never detached documents. Like his portraits, they involve themselves in the lives of those who gathered there. As Joel Smith has observed, Hujar's sensibility was not unlike that of Arbus or Mapplethorpe—neither of whom was ever close with Hujar, despite their affinities—in the sense that all three operated at "the crossroads of brutality of beauty." And yet Hujar's images have an uncanny intimacy that distinguishes his work from that of any other photographer: his images are always part and parcel of the world of their subjects, never at a remove from them. Hujar's camera never reduces his subjects to mere objects of its gaze, but fully enfleshes them with all the richness of subjectivity and subjecthood.

In many of the photographs featured in the exhibition, Hujar achieves this by torquing the classicism of the male nude in weird and wonderful ways. One way he does this is by literally photographing his sitters in various states of contortion. This is particularly evident in Hujar's images of his friend, the artist Gary Schneider, who was proficient in gymnastics. "Peter waited until my defenses dropped and I became comfortable," explained Schneider of his sessions in the studio, "there was a very strong communication between us."[2] Schneider recalls how he and Hujar considered his twisted pose a parodic restaging of Edward Weston's famous 1930s photograph of a pepper.

The clean corporeal contours that Hujar conjured in gelatin silver may seem in opposition to the grunginess captured in his images of the piers—or the decaying bodies of dead friars encased in glass boxes in the Palermo crypt—yet both belong to the same quest for beauty as a mode of truth. For Hujar, photography was more than an aesthetic medium; it was a tool for philosophical inquiry, an amplifier of erotic cathexis, a technique of liberation.

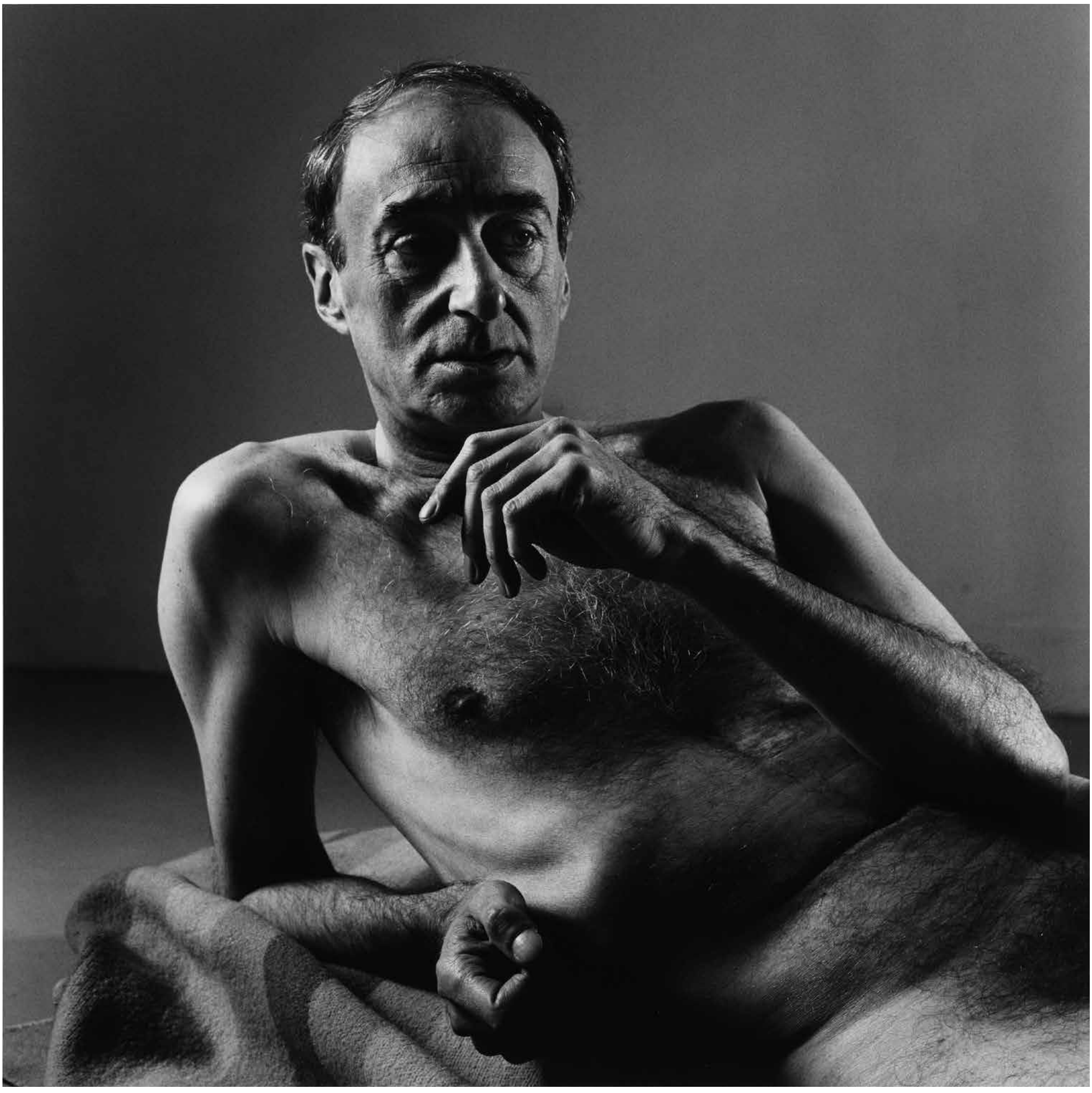
In Hujar's project, expression becomes resistance. His photographs reconfigure corporeality in ways that disturb our sense of what bodies are for and what they can do. Ultimately, as with the greatest works of art, they present more questions than they do answers. Hujar's photographs ask us: What is a body? What is it to inhabit a moment of intimacy with the body of another? When do we ourselves become our bodies? And when do these bodies become us?

NOTES

1. As recounted by Steve Turtell
2. Quoted in Philip Gefter, "Peter Hujar: Érois, c'est la vie," in *Peter Hujar: Speed of Life*, ed. Joel Smith (New York: Apertuire/The Morgan Library, 2017), 39.

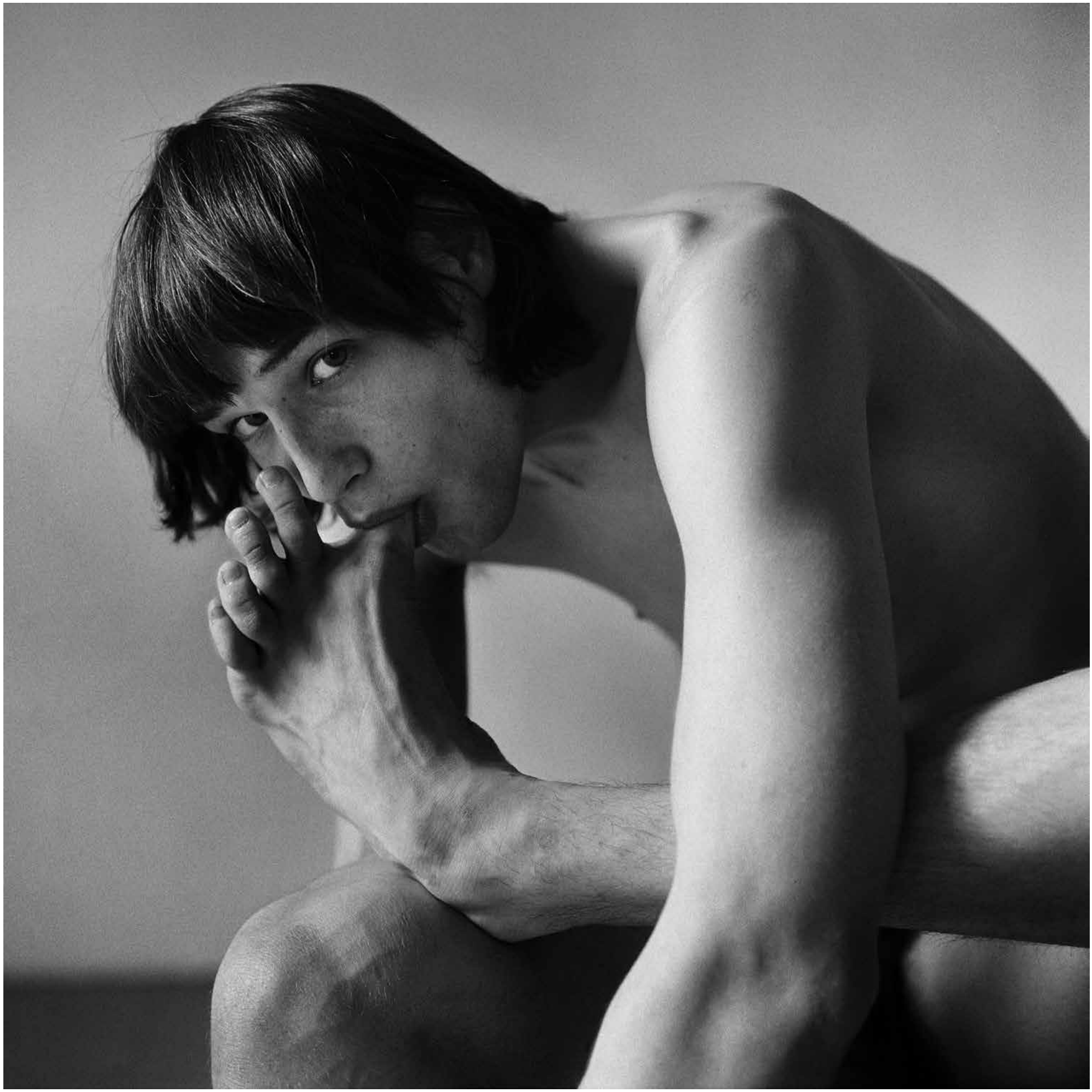
Bill Elliot, 1975. Vintage gelatin silver print. 14¾ in. × 14¾ in.

Dean Savard Reclining, 1984. Vintage gelatin silver print. 14¾ in. × 14¾ in.

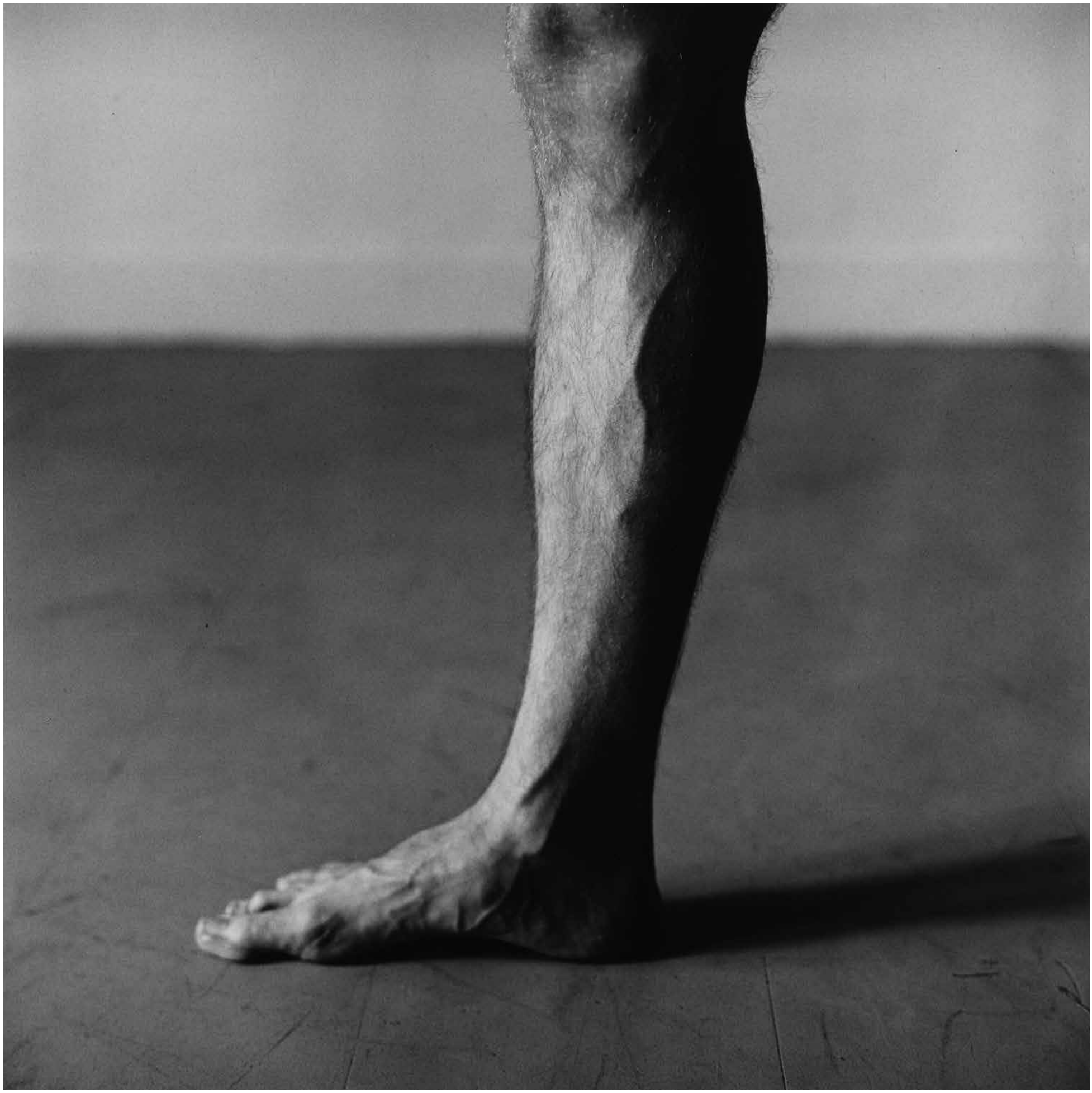


David Warrilow (I), 1985. Vintage gelatin silver print. 14¾ in. × 14¾ in.

Greer Lankton's Legs, 1983. Pigmented ink print. 14¾ in. × 14¾ in.



Daniel Schook Sucking Toe (Close-up), 1981. Pigmented ink print. 14¾ in. × 14⅝ in.

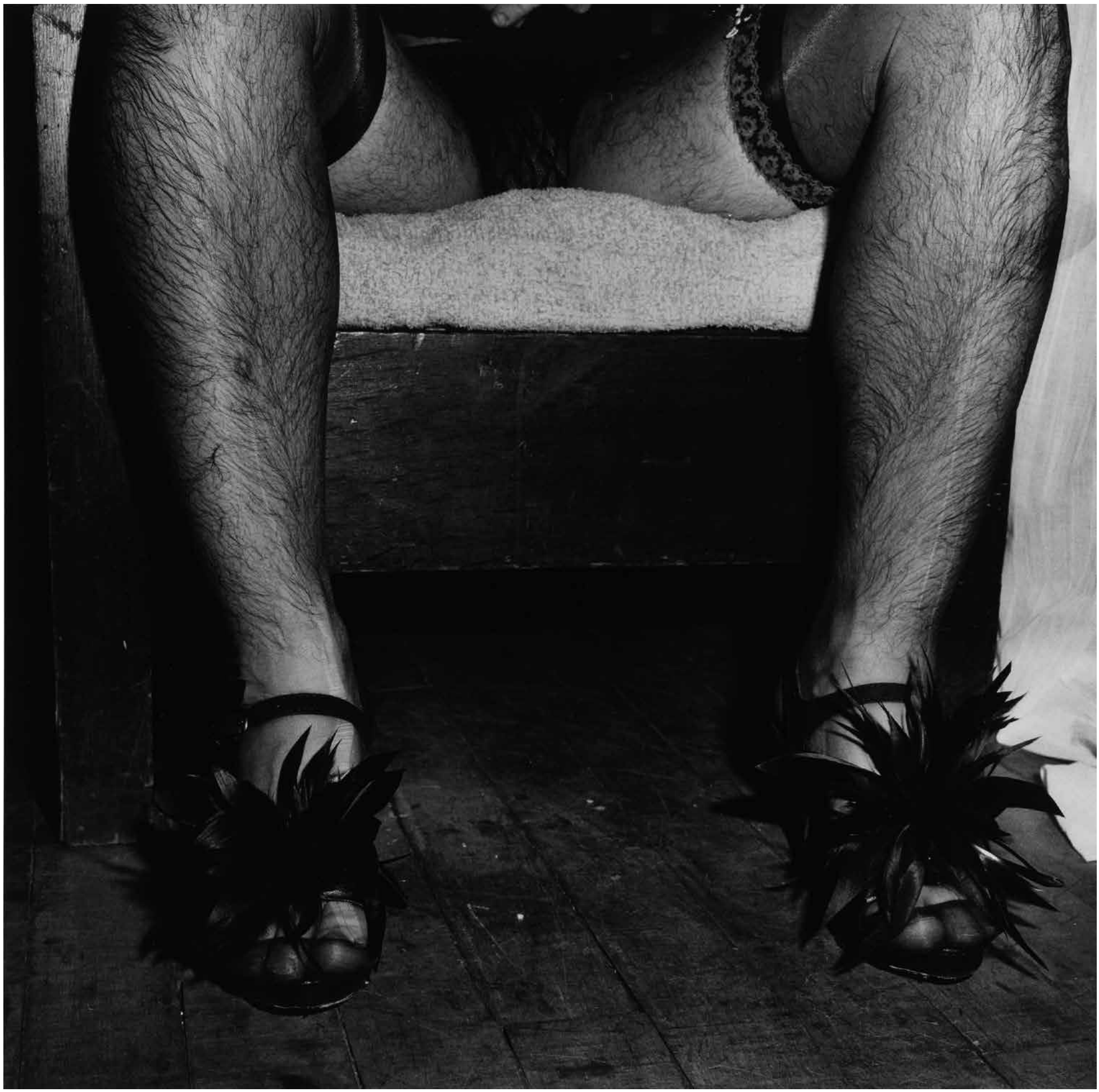


Paul Hudson's Leg, 1979. Pigmented ink print. 14¾ in. × 14¾ in.

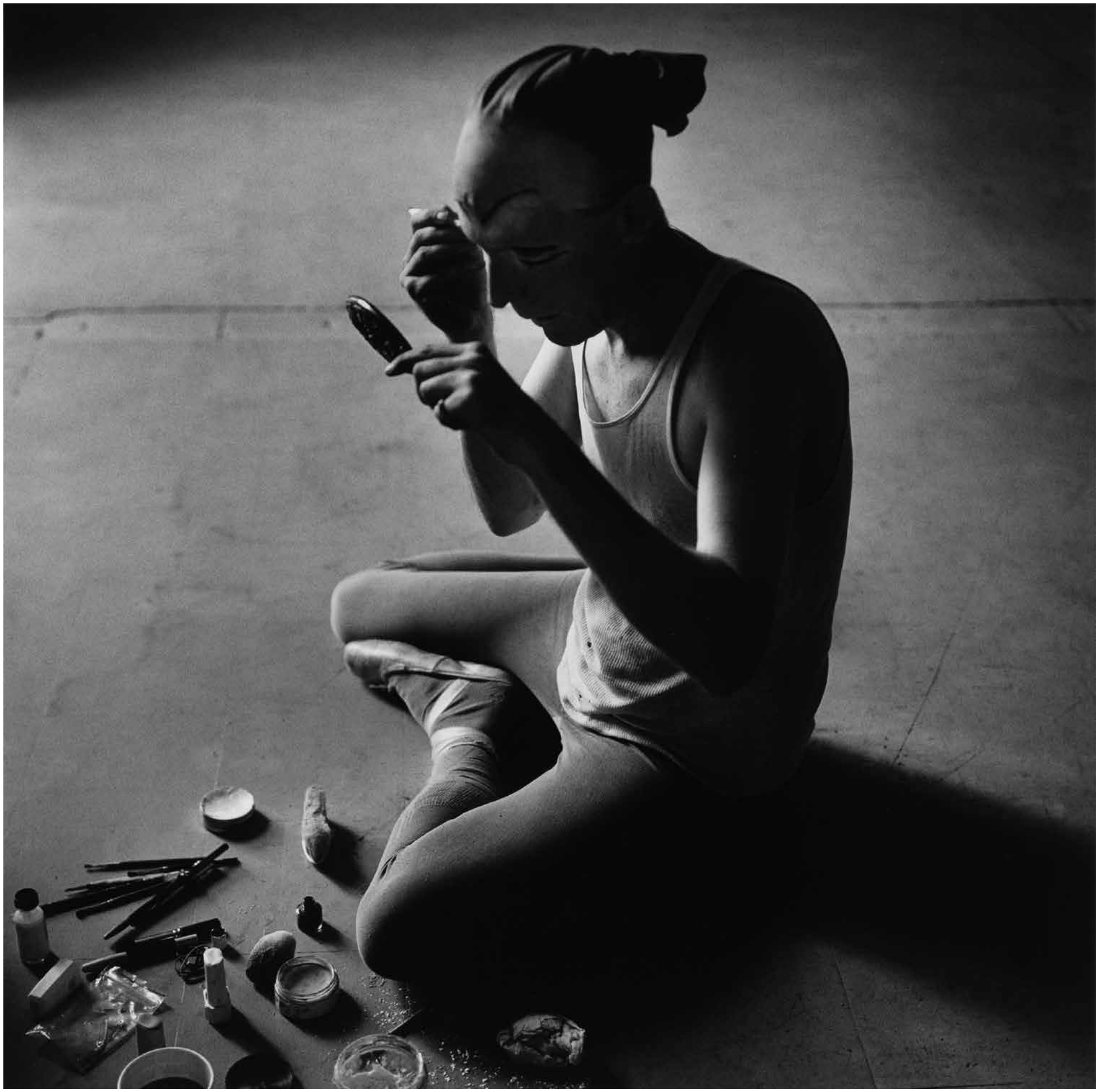
David Wojnarowicz Reclining (II), 1981. Pigmented ink print. 14¾ in. × 14¾ in.

Chuck Gretsch (with Cigar), 1981. Vintage gelatin silver print. 14¾ in. × 14¾ in.

Self-Portrait Jumping (I), 1974. Pigmented ink print. 15 in. × 14¾ in.



Randy: High Heels, Halloween, 1980. Pigmented ink print. 14⅝ in. × 14¾ in.



Ethyl Eichelberger Applying Makeup, 1982. Pigmented ink print. 14¾ in. × 14¾ in.

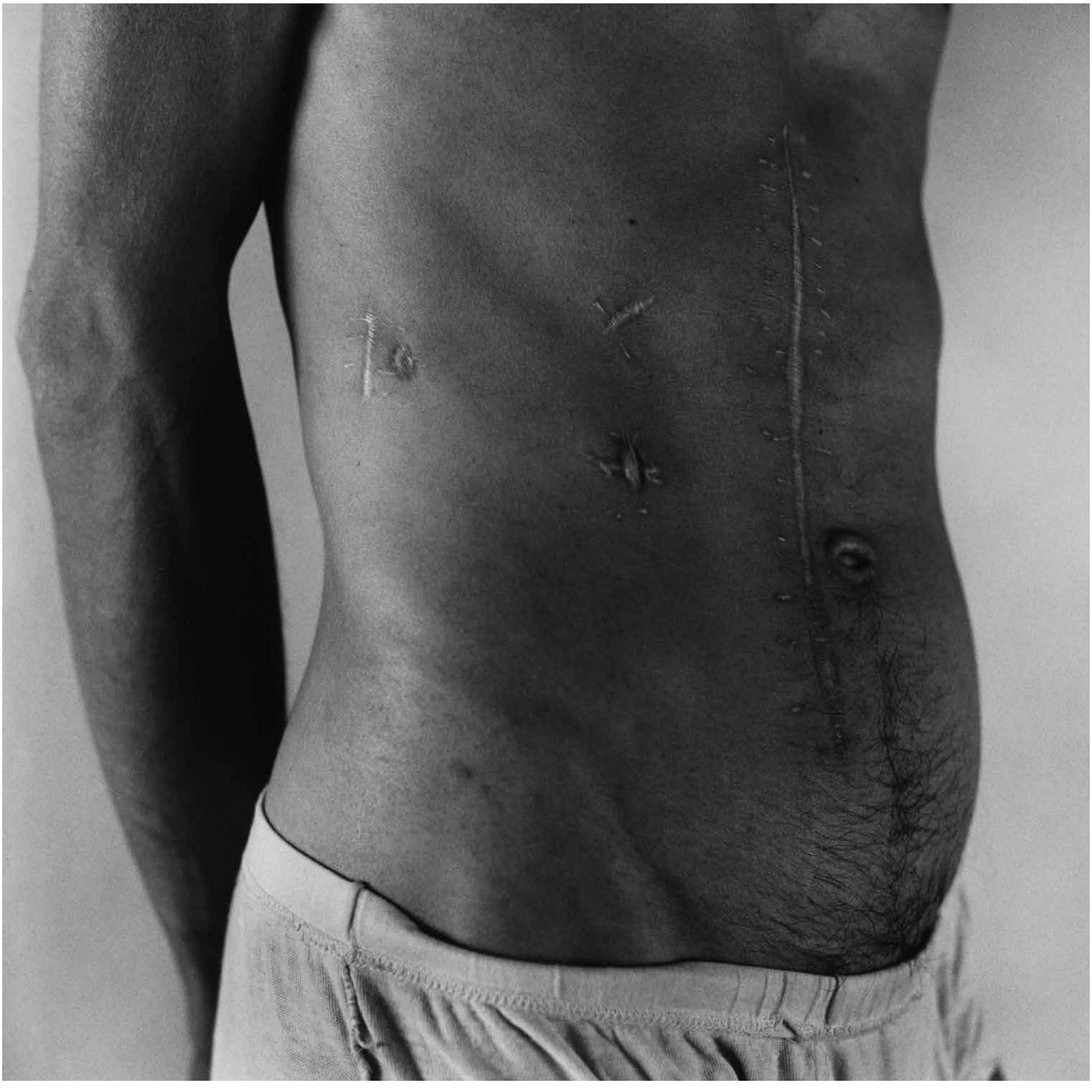
Hallway, Canal Street Pier, 1983. Pigmented ink print. 14⅝ in. × 14¾ in.

Ruined Armchair (with Record), Newark, 1985. Vintage gelatin silver print. 14⅝ in. × 14¾ in.

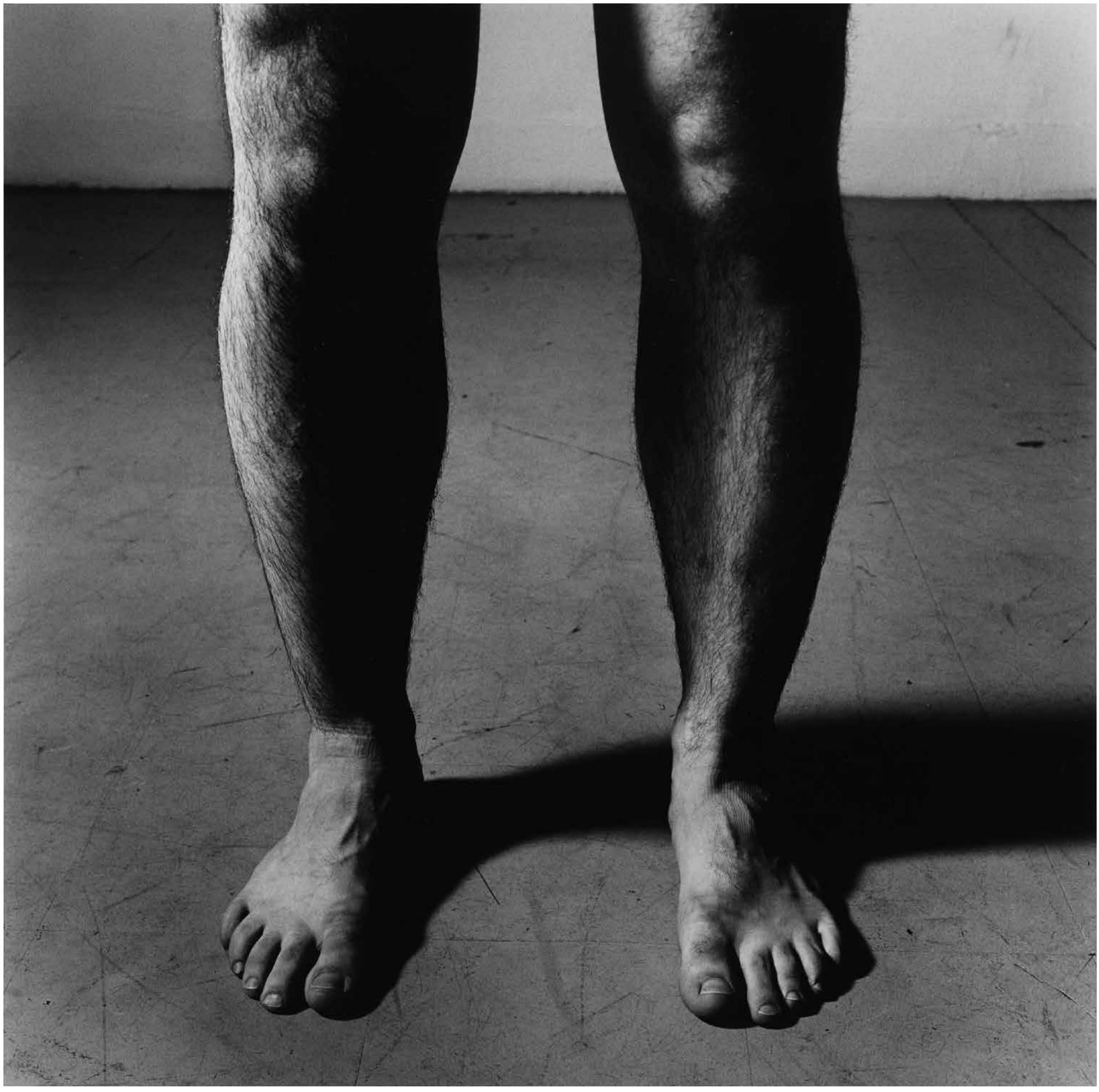
Ruined Staircase, Pier, 1983. Pigmented ink print. 14⅝ in. × 14¾ in.

Clown's Trunk, 1973. Vintage gelatin silver print. 14¾ in. × 14⅝ in.

Cow Slaughter I, Germantown, New York [Variant], 1981. Vintage gelatin silver print. 14¾ in. × 14⅞ in.

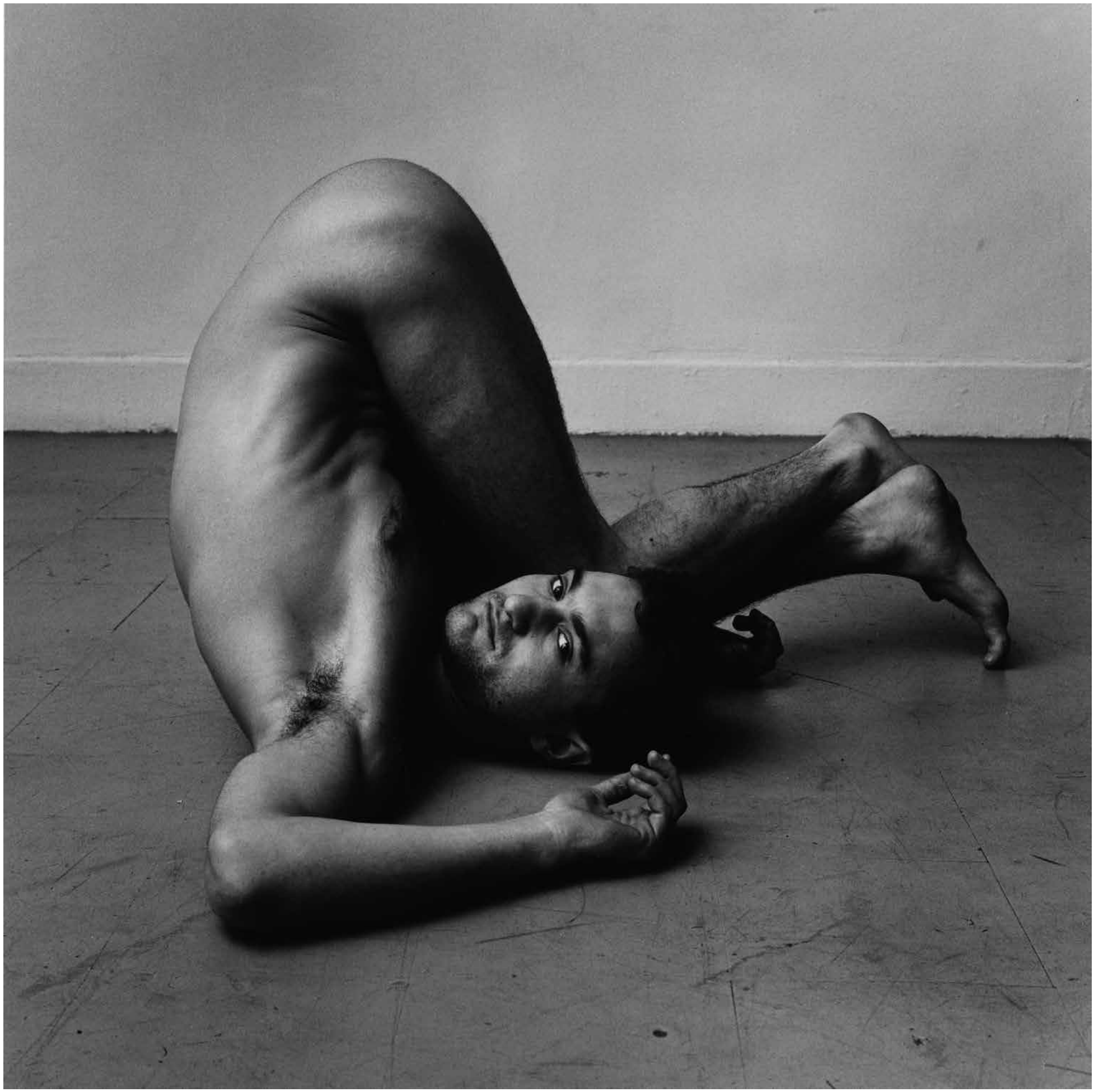


Pascal Imbert, Scarred Abdomen, 1980. Pigmented ink print. 14¾ in. × 14¾ in.



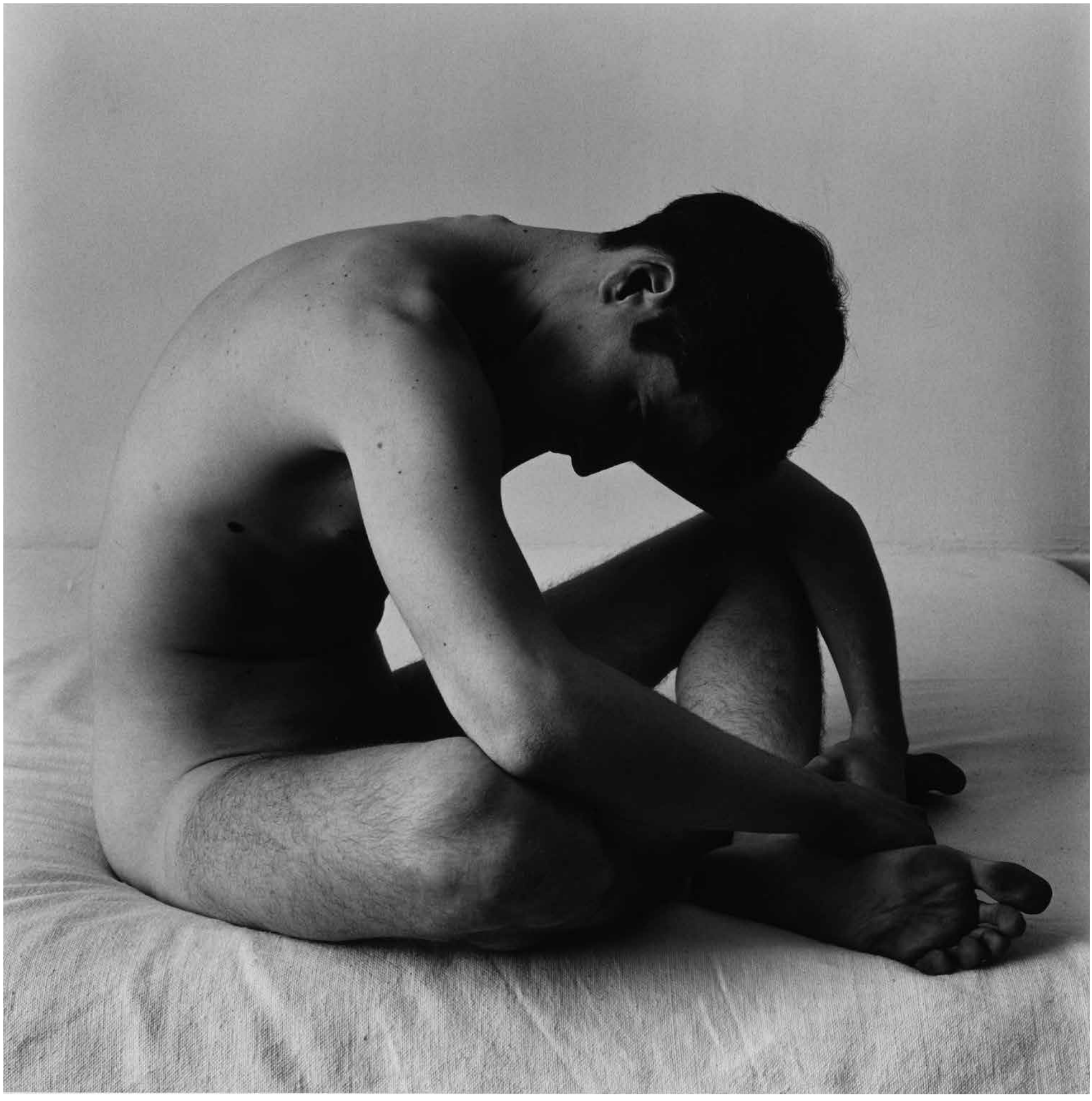
Andy Gilberti's Legs, 1981. Vintage gelatin silver print. 14¾ in. × 14¾ in.

Gary Schneider in Contortion (II), 1979. Pigmented ink print. 14¾ in. × 14¾ in.

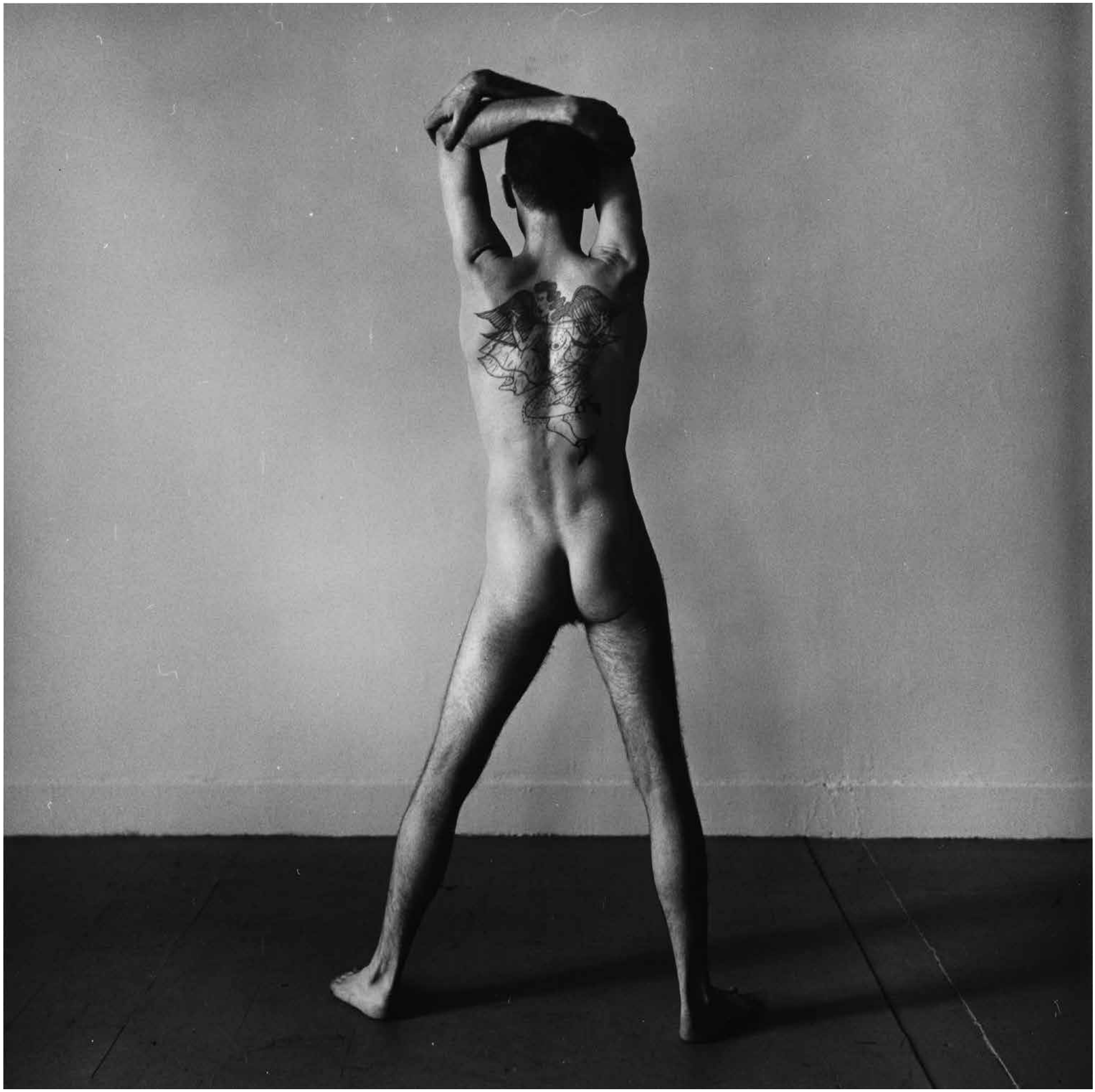


Gary Schneider in Contortion (I), 1979. Pigmented ink print. 14¾ in. × 14⅝ in.

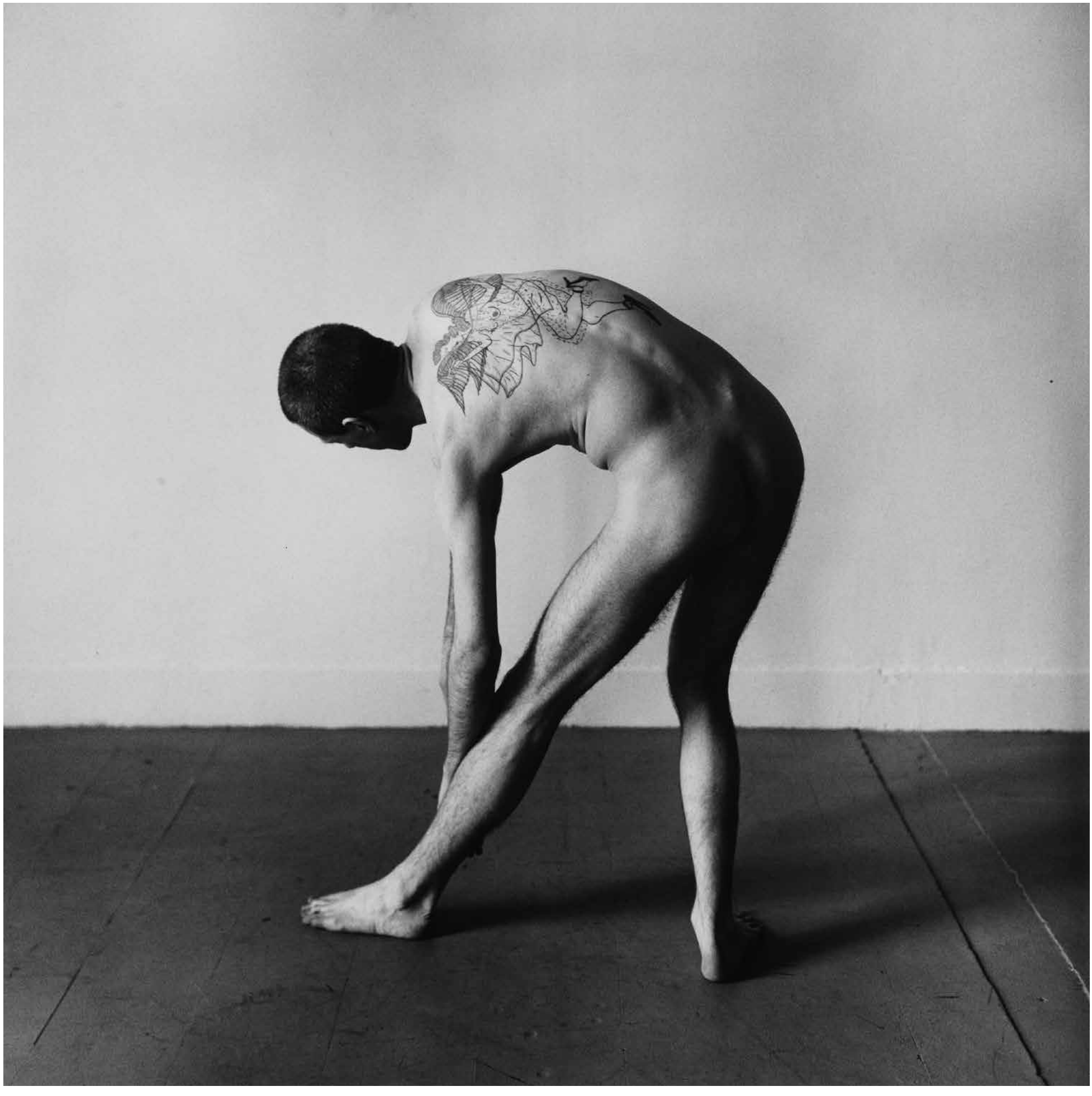
Robert Levithan on Bed, 1977. Vintage gelatin silver print. 18⅜ in. × 12¼ in.



Paul [Cross-Legged Nude], 1979. Vintage gelatin silver print. 14¾ in. × 14¾ in.



Ethyl Nude (III), 1978. Vintage gelatin silver print. 14¾ in. × 14¾ in.

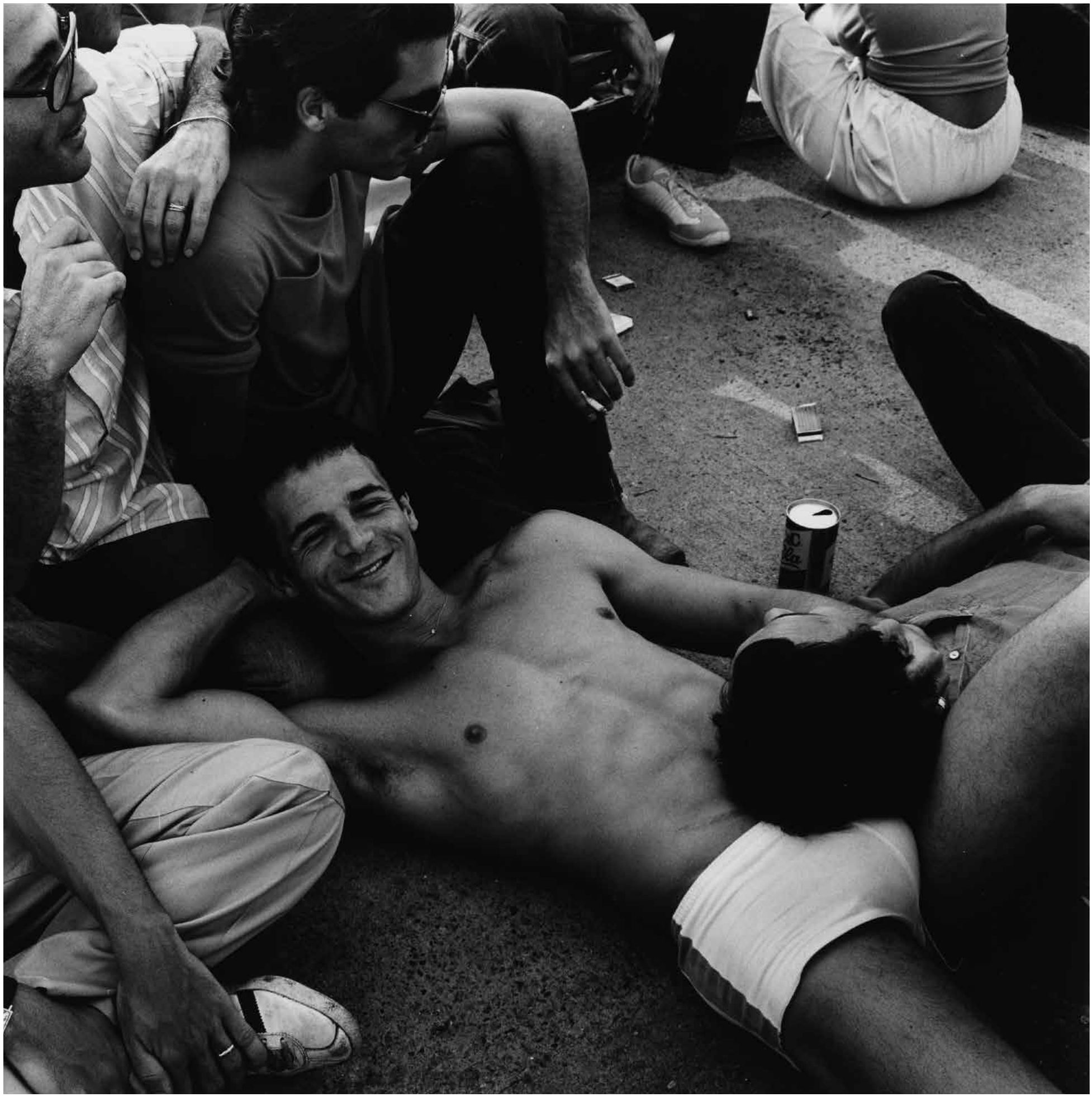


Ethyl Nude (I), 1978. Vintage gelatin silver print. 14¾ in. × 14¾ in.

Nude Self-Portrait Series #2, 1966. Vintage gelatin silver print. 16½ in. × 13¾ in.

Men on Christopher Street Pier, 1976. Vintage gelatin silver print. 14¾ in. × 14¾ in.

Christopher Street Pier #5, 1976. Pigmented ink print. 14¾ in. × 14⅝ in.



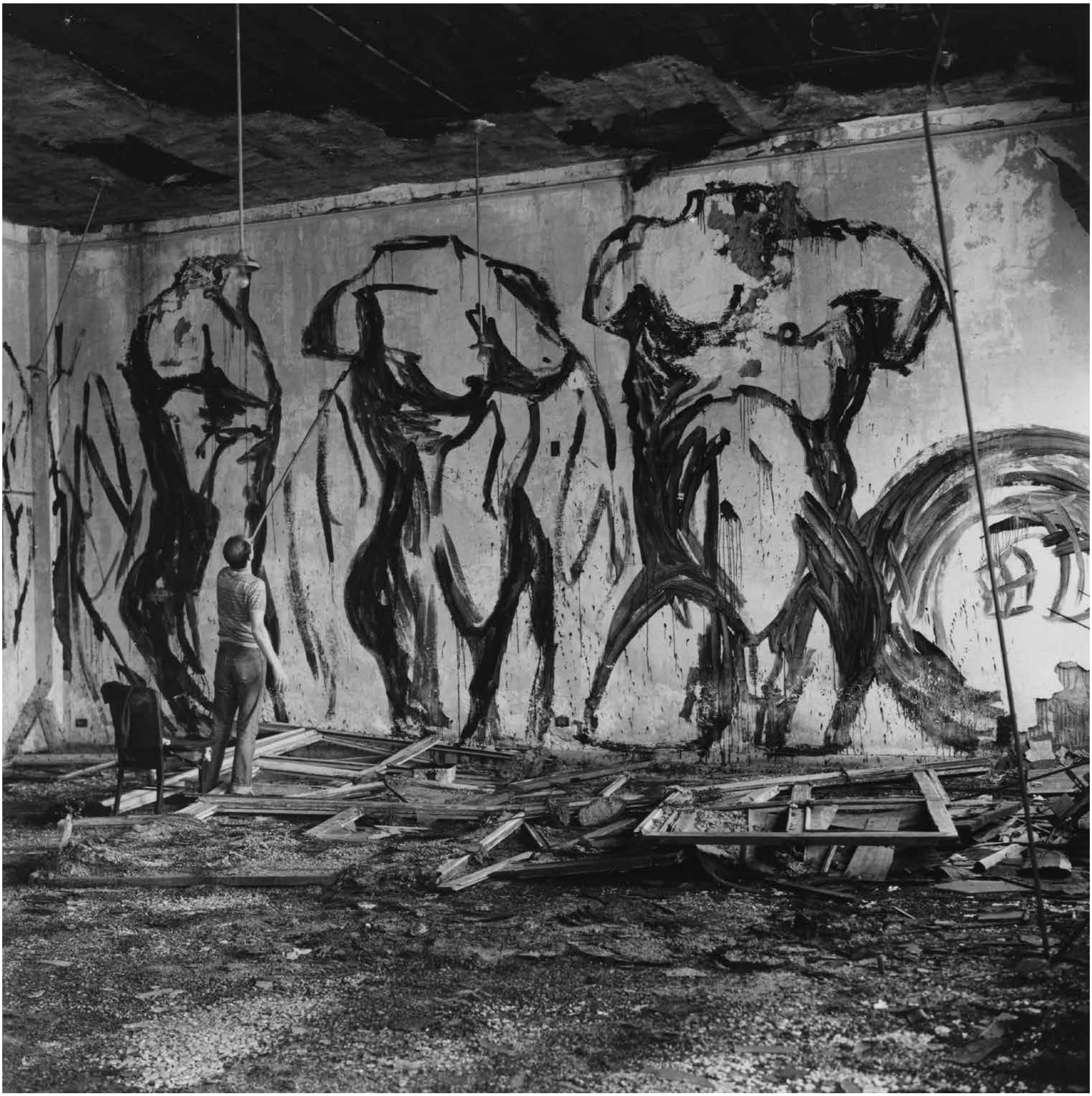
Christopher Street Pier #3, 1976. Vintage gelatin silver print. 14⅝ in. × 14⅝ in.

Christopher Street Pier #4, 1976. Vintage gelatin silver print. 14¾ in. × 14¾ in.

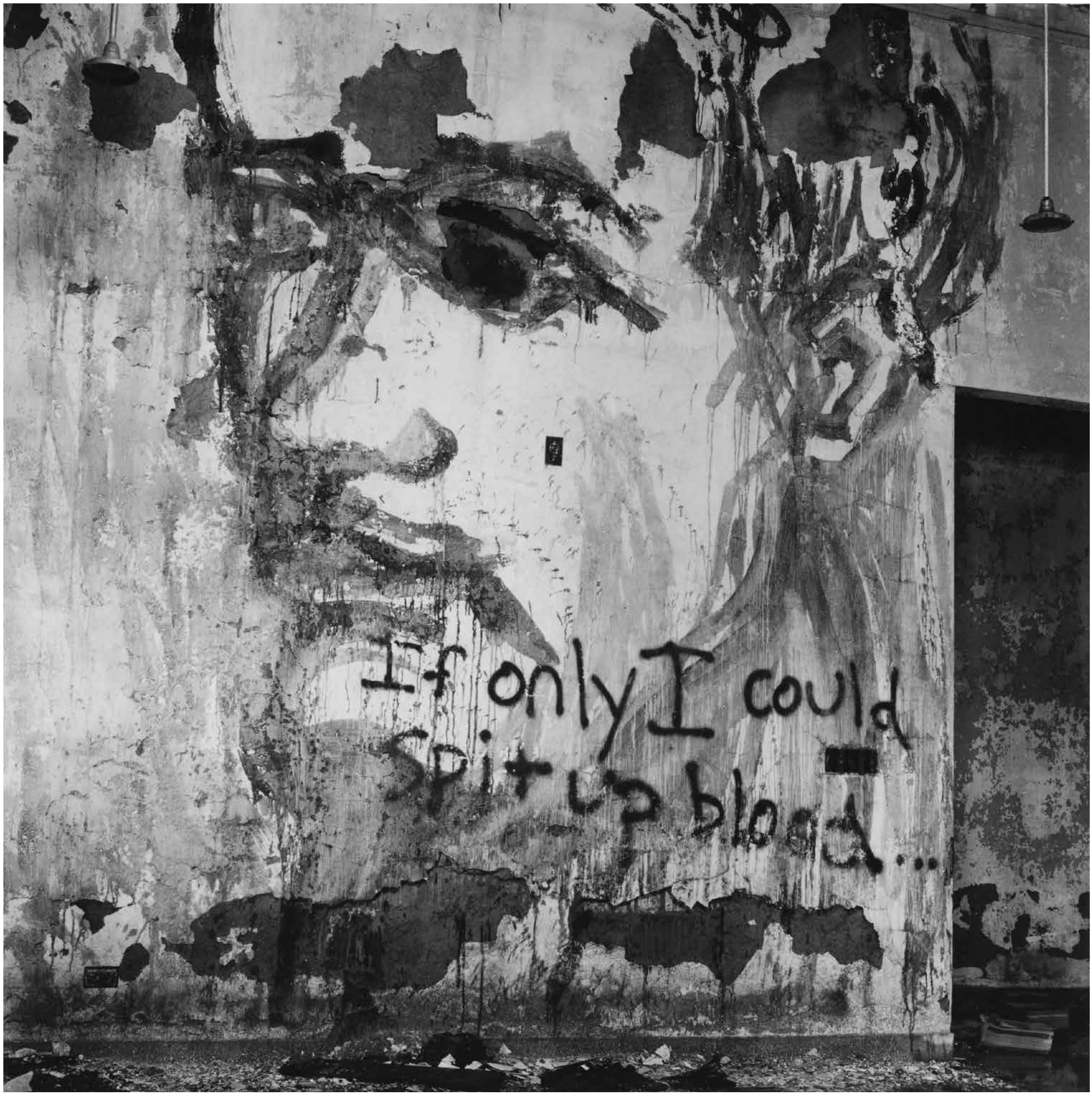
Christopher Street Pier #2 (Crossed Legs), 1976. Pigmented ink print. 14¾ in. × 14¾ in.

Canal Street Piers: Fake Men on the Stairs, 1983. Vintage gelatin silver print. 8 in. × 8 in.

C*anal Street Piers: Painting on Wall*, 1983. Vintage gelatin silver print. 8 in. × 8 in.



Canal Street Piers: Luis Frangella Painting, 1983. Vintage gelatin silver print. 8 in. × 8 in.



Canal Street Piers: "If Only I Could Spit Up Blood", 1983. Vintage gelatin silver print. 8 in. × 8 in.

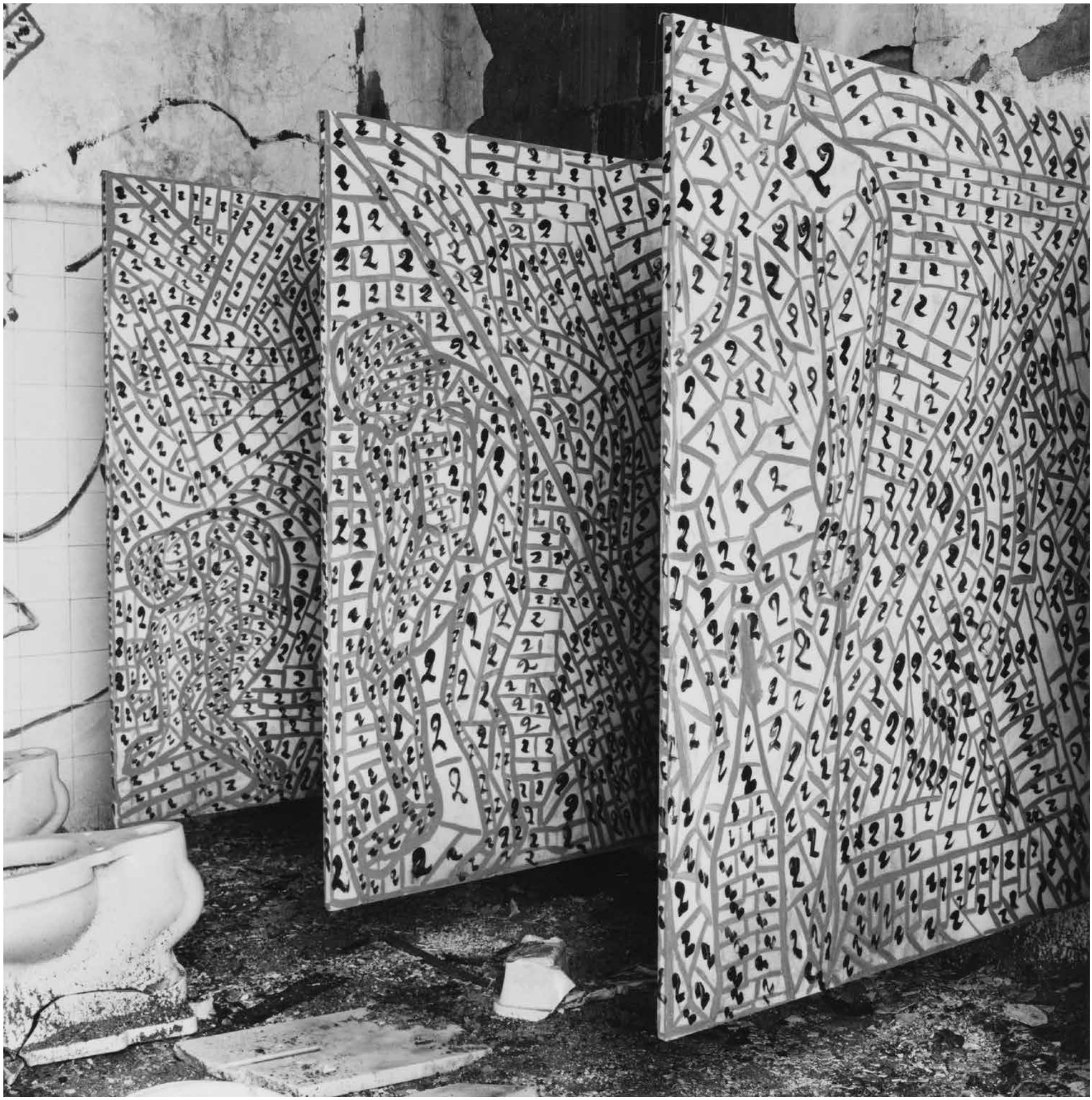
Canal Street Piers: Window Paintings, 1983. Vintage gelatin silver print. 8 in. × 8 in.

Canal Street Piers: Painting of Strong Man, 1983. Vintage gelatin silver print. 8 in. × 8 in.

Canal Street Piers: Krazy Kat Comic on Wall [by David Wojnarowicz], 1983. Pigmented ink print. 15 in. × 14¾ in.

Canal Street Piers: Wall Paintings, 1983. Vintage gelatin silver print. 8 in. × 8 in.

Canal Street Piers: Wall Paintings, 1983. Vintage gelatin silver print. 8 in. × 8 in.



Canal Street Piers: Painted Partitions, 1983. Vintage gelatin silver print. 8 in. × 8 in.

Photographs turn the present into the past, make contingency into destiny. Whatever their degree of "realism," all photographs embody a "romantic" relation to reality.

I am thinking of how the poet Novalis defined Romanticism: to make the familiar appear strange, the marvelous appear commonplace. The camera's uncanny mechanical replication of persons and events performs a kind of magic, both creating and de-creating what is photographed. To take pictures is, simultaneously, to confer value and to render banal.

Photographs instigate, confirm, seal legends. Seen through photographs, people become icons of themselves. Photography converts the world itself into a department store or museum-without-walls in which every subject is depreciated into an article of consumption, promoted into an item for esthetic appreciation.

Photography also converts the whole world into a cemetery. Photographers, connoisseurs of beauty, are also — wittingly or unwittingly — the recording-angels of death. The photograph-as-photograph shows death. More than that, it shows the sex-appeal of death — another instance of the Surrealist "bad taste" that is the most persistent motif of good taste in photography. The intrusion of still photographs in that remarkable sequence in Robert Siodmak's film *Menschen am Sonntag* (1928) is like the intrusion of death. One minute we see ordinary folk milling, laughing, grimacing, yearning. The next moment — as, one by one, they step before the street photographer's black box—we see them frozen, embalmed in a "still." The photographs shock, in the flow of the movie. It's as if these vivacious people were already dead, and their paper photographs were cupped behind glass and affixed to tombstones, as is common practice in the cemeteries of Mediterranean countries.

* * *

"When one has a picture taken, the photographer says 'Perfect' Just as you are! That is death."

"Life is a movie. Death is a photograph."

I am quoting from my first novel, *The Benefactor* — from the conclusion of Professor Bulgaraux's lecture. The novel was published in 1963, which is also the year I met Peter Hujar. And the premonitory link between my sensibility and his that is suggested by this passage was transmuted into something much more concrete around 1966, when he showed me the extraordinary photographs he had taken in the Catacombs at Palermo. Readers of *Death Kit* will recognize how intimately the oneiric landscape of the final scene of my second novel — which came out in 1967 — is related to those photographs, the last in the present book.

In the first part of this selection of Peter Hujar's work, fleshed and moist-eyed friends and acquaintances stand, sit, slouch, mostly lie — and are made to appear to meditate on their own mortality. Do meditate, whether they — I — he (for the photographer is among his subjects) acknowledge it or not. We no longer study the art of dying, a regular discipline and hygiene in older cultures; but all eyes, at rest, contain that knowledge. The body knows. And the camera shows, inexorably. The Palermo photographs — which precede these portraits in time — complete them, comment upon them. Peter Hujar knows that portraits in life are always, also, portraits in death. I am moved by the purity and delicacy of his intentions. If a free human being can afford to think of nothing less than death, then these *memento mori* can exorcise morbidity as effectively as they evoke its sweet poetry and its panic.

— Susan Sontag

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Peter Hujar, *Susan Sontag*, 1975.

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