

TIBOR DE NAGY

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HYPERALLERGIC

Art Reviews

Jimmy Gordon's Homegrown Surrealism

The artist, a pioneering member of Lexington's LGBTQ+ art world, used circus and sideshow imagery to create poignant meditations on isolation

By John Yau



Jimmy Gordon, "DYNAMITE Still Life" (2008), oil on board, 18 3/4 x 33 1/2 inches (47.6 x 85.1 cm)

After I visited [Surrealist](#) at Tibor de Nagy, Jimmy Gordon's debut New York exhibition, I did some research to learn more about who the artist was. The press release told me: "Gordon (1947–2022) was born in Lexington, Kentucky," his "paintings [were] created between the 1990s to the mid-2000s," and he had an "alter ego, whom he named La Jemberly" and sometimes lived in that persona for "weeks and months at a time. During these times, he always signed his artwork Jemberly rather than Gordon."

I associate Lexington with a generation of artists who first gained attention in the 1960s and '70s, including the Catholic monk and writer Thomas Merton, who lived at the Abbey of Gethsemani (near Lexington) and was a friend of Ad Reinhardt; polymath writer and translator Guy Davenport, who taught at the University of Kentucky; autodidact photographer Ralph Eugene Meatyard; photographer Guy Mendes, who, along with poets Roger Manley and Jonathan Williams, chronicled his road trips across the Southern United States, introducing readers to a wide range of self-taught artists, vernacular architecture, and local sights; and environmental activist and farmer Wendell Berry.

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Jimmy Gordon, "BEARDED WOMAN: ALIVE" (2002), oil on board, 38 7/16 x 26 5/8 inches (97.6 x 67.6 cm)

I've wondered if the aura of this nexus of iconoclasts vanished when many of its prominent figures died. Were others associated with this group, however tangentially, who never gained recognition? Did equally interesting groups exist that got overshadowed? Gordon seemed to be both connected to this older generation, because of his interest in surrealism combined with his fluid identity, and separate from them because his work wasn't as visually sophisticated as theirs. This doesn't make his paintings less compelling, particularly those inspired by his time working for a circus in Sarasota, Florida. They should just be understood differently.

After doing two tours of duty during the Vietnam War, Gordon received his BFA from the University of Kentucky, where he studied with artist Henry Faulkner. Faulkner was known for his brightly colored, fanciful paintings of subjects such as a unicorn looking in a mirror and applying makeup. Tennessee Williams was his close friend and was rumored to be his lover. According to his Wikipedia page, he was a pioneer of Kentucky's LGBTQ+ scene in the mid 20th century and sometimes dressed in drag for weeks. He became a local legend in Lexington, and in the late 1940s, he lived in New York with Thomas Painter and Kentucky native Edward Melcarth, an openly gay artist who incorporated Renaissance techniques in paintings that celebrate masculinity. The connection between Melcarth, Faulkner, and Gordon suggests the porousness of Lexington's society and the different, overlapping social circles they moved in, as they came from vastly different financial and educational strata. At the same time, the radical differences in the groups' style, subject matter, and techniques are revelatory.



Jimmy Gordon, "LOBSTER BOY: ALIVE" (c. 1999–2002), oil on board, 38 1/2 x 24 inches (97.8 x 61 cm)

Six of the show's 15 paintings (all but one in frames made by the artist) reference the circus and traveling sideshow acts. In "HERMAPHRODITE: ALIVE" (c. 1999–2002) and "BEARDED WOMAN: ALIVE" (2002), Gordon's fascination with fluid identity and sexuality is evident. He based his compositions on circus posters, which incorporate the frame. The curtains have been pulled back to reveal the figure or figures in an isolated state. Stylistically, the artist focuses on the body's pose, rather than the face. By including the title in the painting, he emphasizes the characters' public identities as what isolates them from mainstream society and, as the curtains imply, defines them as a voyeuristic curiosity. With his claw-like hands and feet, the young boy in "LOBSTER BOY," sitting in front of his jacks game, is gut wrenching to see because his isolation feels complete and inescapable. In these paintings, which are very distinct from Faulkner's whimsical works, Gordon found his most enduring subject.

The nine remaining paintings, for which the exhibition is presumably titled, convey the influence of Max Ernst and Giorgio de Chirico. What saves them from becoming derivative is Gordon's addition of quirky or unexpected details — for instance, the bust on the table in "THE LAPWING KNOWS" (undated) has pointed ears and green haired styled to mimic a mohawk or the decoration on an Athenian war helmet, while flying saucers are visible through what looks like a window above a table holding bizarre items in "DYNAMITE Still Life" (2008). In these and a few other works, Gordon's vision of social reality as populated by those estranged from it comes shining through.



Jimmy Gordon, "THE LAPWING KNOWS" (n.d.), oil on board, 27 9/16 x 33 inches (70 x 83.8 cm)

[Jimmy Gordon: Surrealist](#) continues at Tibor de Nagy (11 Rivington Street, Lower East Side, Manhattan) through October 12. The exhibition was organized by the gallery.