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Margaret French, George Tooker and Jared French, Nantucket, c. 1946

PaJaMa, Whose Photographs Breathed Eroticism

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The history of American art in New York in the 1930s and '40s entails much more than the rise of Abstract Expressionism. One fascinating group of outliers was PaJaMa — the Magic Realist painters Paul Cadmus, Jared French and Margaret Hoening French, his wife — who fashioned their moniker from their first names. They made simple but stagy photographs of themselves and their friends, most of whom were young, beautiful and gay and moved in New York's art, dance or literary circles. Vintage prints of 44 of their collaborations form this exhilarating exhibition.

The three artists formed a close, even incestuous group, since Cadmus and Jared French were lovers. They worked together primarily in the summer, on beaches along the Eastern Seaboard and in New York apartments. In addition to themselves, their sitters included the painter George Tooker; the photographer George Platt Lynes; Monroe Wheeler, a Museum of Modern Art curator; and Fidelma Cadmus, sister of Paul Cadmus and wife of Lincoln Kirstein, a founder of the New York City Ballet. Their images are notable for their modern simplicity and erotic undercurrents. They seem derived from Dalí's early landscapes and point toward the work of Robert Mapplethorpe. Yet nature plays a big role, along with improvisational stylishness that makes the most of almost anything at hand: expanses of sand, rock formations, scraps of wood, and light and shadow. Towels occasionally become togas; isolation is a recurring theme, and the body beautiful, often nude, dominates.

Whatever your familiarity with PaJaMa, this show will hold surprises, including several striking images of Fidelma Cadmus and numerous appearances by Margaret French, a handsome big-boned woman 15 years her husband's senior. She's in 16 images, including a haunting series of scenes posing (clothed) with Cadmus in what appears to be a lumberyard in Provincetown, Mass.

—Roberta Smith