

james herbert's erotic photographs of 80s hippie youth

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SEP 6 2017, 2:45PM

"I'm interested in a sort of tenderness, and even sadness," says the artist of his evocative black-and-white images.

James Herbert is not a photographer as such. His sensuous images of nudes remain tied to his films: in 1989, he projected several shorts onto a wall and systematically examined each, frame by frame. He re-photographed and enlarged certain moments into 16x20 prints, a selection of which was eventually [published in 1992](#). Herbert has made some forty short films and four independent features that all showcase nudity and feature non-professional models. It's a free-spirited approach Herbert has pursued for decades, ever since he took figure drawing classes as a teenager at RISD (today, he's a startlingly spry 79 years old).

Herbert also participated in the Athens, Georgia creative scene. While he taught painting and filmmaking, he directed multiple music videos for R.E.M and The B-52s — "made with the same attitude of openness and accident and intuition" as his eroticized films, he says. For The B-52s video "[Revolution Earth](#)," he worked with a cast of live zebras and elephants alongside Kate Pierson. He recalls how, for "[It's the End of the World](#)," he and Michael Stipe filmed in an abandoned house with caving-in walls because cows had been leaning on them.

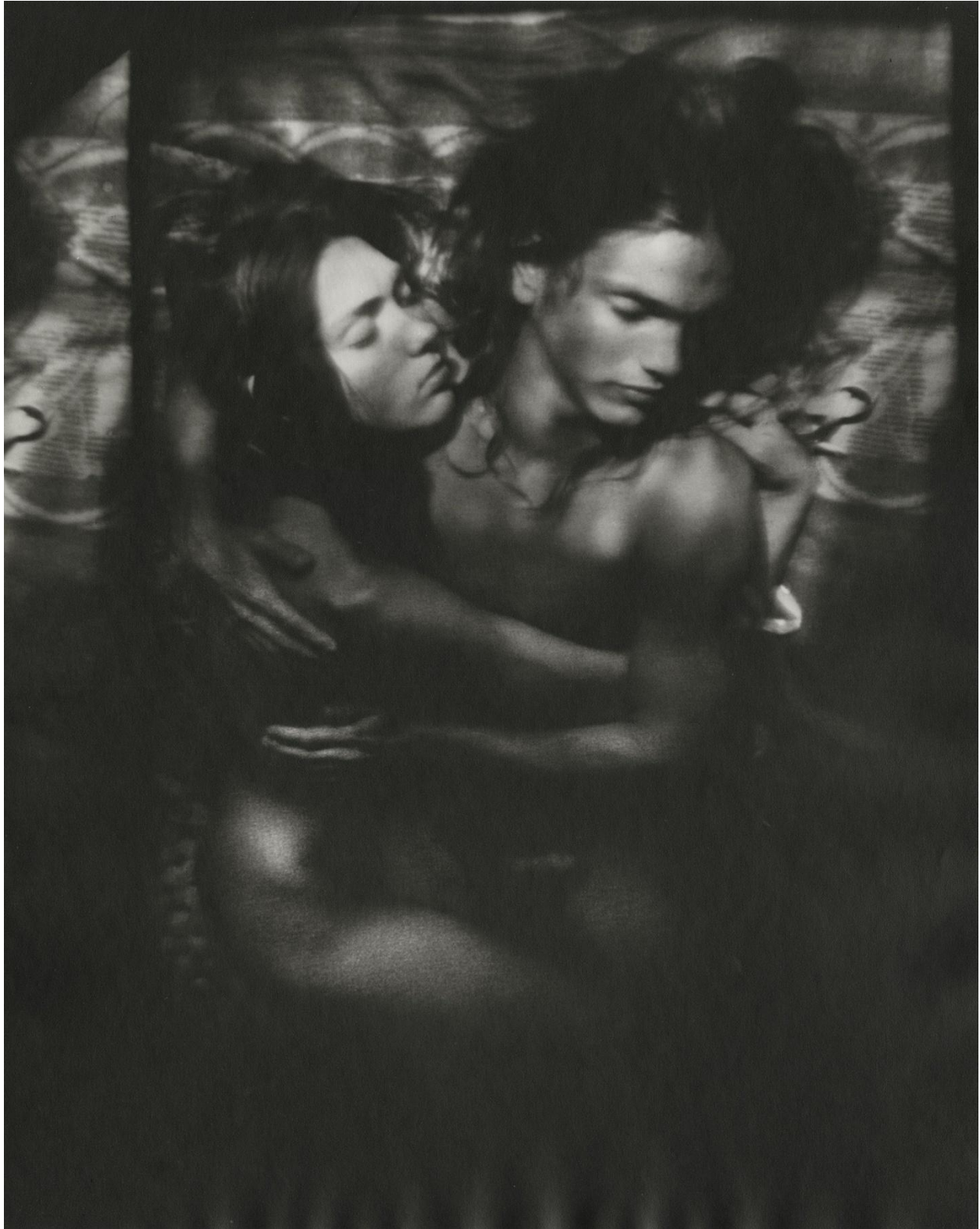
Today, in his fluorescent-lit Bushwick studio, Herbert paints [outsized canvases](#) based on images of nude couples he finds online. Seated under their carnal activity, we discuss nudity, experimentation, and youth culture.



You're about to open an exhibition of photographs, but we're amongst paintings here. What's the connection between these two practices for you?

All my life I've been painting, but I've had this secondary thing with film and photography. Film sort of took over: I did many 16mm short films around the Athens, Georgia area, so they reflect a kind of Southern air and light — humid. Then, I got into going to Italy and made longer films in 35mm. I was alternately doing nine months for painting and three months for film. Then it turned into nine months for film and three months for painting. I'm a pretty scheduled person, and I keep them separate.

One thing that has been consistent, from teenage years on, is that the people are nude. Even in the feature-lengths shown in Toronto and at Sundance, all the people are nude. Except for one very beautiful girl in a blue dress [in the 1999 film *Speedy Boys*]. I was a painter who made films, then I became a filmmaker who did paintings. And now I just paint, the last ten years or so.



When you made the films, was your intention to extract stills afterwards?

No, I didn't intend to look for still images that were their own beginning and end, that had their own meanings. That was later, on a whim. I love to work with accident and arbitrariness. I have a discipline about "we're gonna start now, and we're gonna work," but when it comes to the

actual process of gathering images, I'm seat-of-the-pants intuitive. In the original form, these films would not be very interesting, other than voyeuristically looking at beautiful young people. I went through rolls of film on a hand-crank projector, and I would look at frame one, roll one: I make a decision about whether I wanted that.

Why did you decide to focus on youth culture as your subject?

In my 20s, I was in the hippie era. With a lot of nudity, and a lot of tribal actions — which we all know now are less smart than we thought then — but people looked very beautiful, and there were a lot of gatherings. It was easy, at that time, to ask people to be in films. Before that, as a teenager, I would photograph my friends skinny dipping. So essentially the interest in youth culture began *at* youth. And you could argue that there may be some kind of stunted growth in not getting past that [*laughs*]. On the other hand, the whole realm as a depiction of innocence — and coming of age, and change, and the physical appearance of people in a certain age group — was appealing. So I stayed with it. I could argue the artist is essentially approaching life as a "still life." Whatever's out there in the environment is possible for an image. What is subject matter, but an avenue to a final image?



Did you have an idea ahead of shooting?

No — not an idea, but an attitude. Because I want the visual idea to come about through the

process. The process begins with what might be called a base sort of thing, mere attraction: "this is pretty." Desire is when you see something you like; it looks good to you. That can be a peach, or it can be a person. When artists deny that they're interested in beauty, because they have a conceptual conceit that overrides it... I'm interested in a sort of tenderness, and even sadness, in eroticism. And I don't think that actually occurs in front of me; it occurs in the discovery of that still frame — seeing the register. Process is very meaningful to me because I don't see any other way to discover anything, except by going on the journey. I would never take a tour — I want to wander around with a backpack.

Is fascination with youth culture timeless or timely, in your eyes? Is the way you expressed your vision in the 1980s necessarily different from your take today?

I think the youth culture dictated the American sensibility. For example Larry Clark's *Teenage Lust*, which was explicit and essentially nudes... That book could not be published today, and maybe would come under some criticism, in terms of the legal issues. There was a time period — the hippie thing, the youth thing, the flowering and unburdening of that carefreeness — something was going on in the culture, in general. Now, things are more business-like and buttoned up and clothed, and nudity is perhaps a very different thing. Certainly in the art world, nudity is considered not terribly smart. I mean one of the perspectives on teenagers is that they're not very bright. There's a kind of prejudice about that — they haven't learned anything. And yet, on the other hand, that has its appeal, in the sense of being non-intellectual.



Something intuitive.

Right — which is connected with, in my case, the attitude and the process of making art. Part of the reason I use young people is curiosity. "The image must be of the image of its creator. It is the nature of its creator increased, heightened. It is he, anew, in a freshened youth." Wallace Stevens — whom I love. It's funny and kind of ironic: freshened youth.

Were you using professional performers in your films?

No. I could not use people who were dancers, who already had a line. And I could not use people who had too much of a theatrical presence — actors. It felt too studied, and they just came *on* with too much. I never wanted to direct anyone. There are people who naturally know how to sit in a chair, and naturally know how to get up, with wonderful grace.

"James Herbert" is on view at [Gitterman Gallery](#) , September 7 – November 4, 2017

