

ARTFORUM

REVIEWS



William E. Jones.
*The Fall of Communism
as Seen in Gay
Pornography*, 1998,
video, color, sound,
20 minutes.

William E. Jones

DAVID KORDANSKY GALLERY

Where are they now? I wonder of the pimply young men in William E. Jones's seminal video, *The Fall of Communism as Seen in Gay Pornography*, 1998. Perhaps at a rally for Fidesz, the far-right Hungarian party, or guarding the dacha of Vladimir Putin. Recalling the making of that breakthrough work in his new novel-cum-memoir, *I Should Have Known Better* (2021), Jones notes the "atmosphere of coercion" that pervades the gay-for-pay tapes—at the time, freshly imported from Eastern Europe and rented from a Los Angeles video store where he worked—on which he found his subjects. "When poor white people suddenly found themselves treated the way people who are not white have always been treated, they took this to be an outrageous humiliation," he writes. "The result was a recrudescence of racist, nationalist politics." Staring directly at the camera while being fondled by an unseen interrogator, these boys look less "fuck me" than "fuck you." Jones saw in their gazes and the odd prop—a portrait of Vladimir Lenin or a book by Leonid Brezhnev—signs of the capitalist exploitation that would fill the void left behind by the Soviet Union.

That piece was the earliest in Jones's survey here, where it played on a loop with nine other films, made between 1998 and 2017, that engage variously with sex, labor, and cinematic history. Born in 1962 in the hard-up steel town of Canton, Ohio, Jones has long been fascinated by the ways members of his and the preceding generation were psychosocially conditioned by a Fordist economy in gradual decline. *Midcentury*, 2016, opens with an instructional video about curbing infantile aggression, recalling the strictly enforced heteronormative conventions of the postwar era. A cheerful blonde shampoo spokes-

woman appears demonic on film stock that has been scratched and stained bloodred. Jones has montaged this with footage of US labor leaders and images from the 1848 revolutions in Europe that inspired Karl Marx, as if to suggest that consumerism has long been the opiate of the masses.

At nearly eight hours, the exhibition's longest video, *Rejected*, 2017, comprises a silent montage of photographs commissioned by the US Farm Security Administration during the Great Depression. Each picture was rejected and punched through with a black hole to forbid its use; Jones zooms in and out of these voids as if to focus our attention on the distance between documentary and propaganda. Jones has written about his hole fixation, an extension of his interest in anal fisting. I can't help but imagine the clenched hand of the people, that symbol of solidarity in contravention of the power of an authoritarian state, sliding into these gaps in the historical record.

An aspect of fisting informs Jones's formalism, too. He pummels negatives acquired from various archives, including the CIA Film Library, so that they shudder in near abstraction. In *Discrepancy*, 2016, a robotic voice-over taken from Isadore Isou's 1951 manifesto, *Traité de Bave et d'éternité* (Venom and Eternity), invokes the Marquis de Sade to call for the perversion of cinematic form. The "discrepancy" between sound and image that Isou championed was on full display across twelve flickering screens, with footage of Mao's Red Army marching alongside glitchy rewinds of several gay porn classics, such as Peter Berlin's *That Boy* (1974) and Joe Gage's *Heatstroke* (1982). Jones's layered editing here has all the intimacy and violence of an erotic act.

If gay sex can be revolutionary, the aesthetics of revolution are always pervaded by a powerful eroticism whose flagrant homosociality is undeniably gay. Throughout Jones's found source material, men can be seen sweating together. The question is always what remains of their equity once governments have claimed the value of their labor. In *Model Workers*, 2014, the titular figures on various currencies give legitimacy to monetary systems in which their real-world referents have little purchase. Still, it's possible to flip the script the way Jones flips cinema on its back. At the end of *Midcentury*, a scene from a British gay-porn film shows a boy in white skivvies licking the boots of a Buckingham Palace guard while the voice of a Tory repeats, "Workers have come to expect too much." Suddenly, the boy restrains and tops his tormenter. Presumably released during the prime ministership of Margaret Thatcher, when organized labor got fucked, it's possible to read this role reversal as working-class revanchism. At the gaping end of history, power is still up for grabs.

—Evan Moffitt