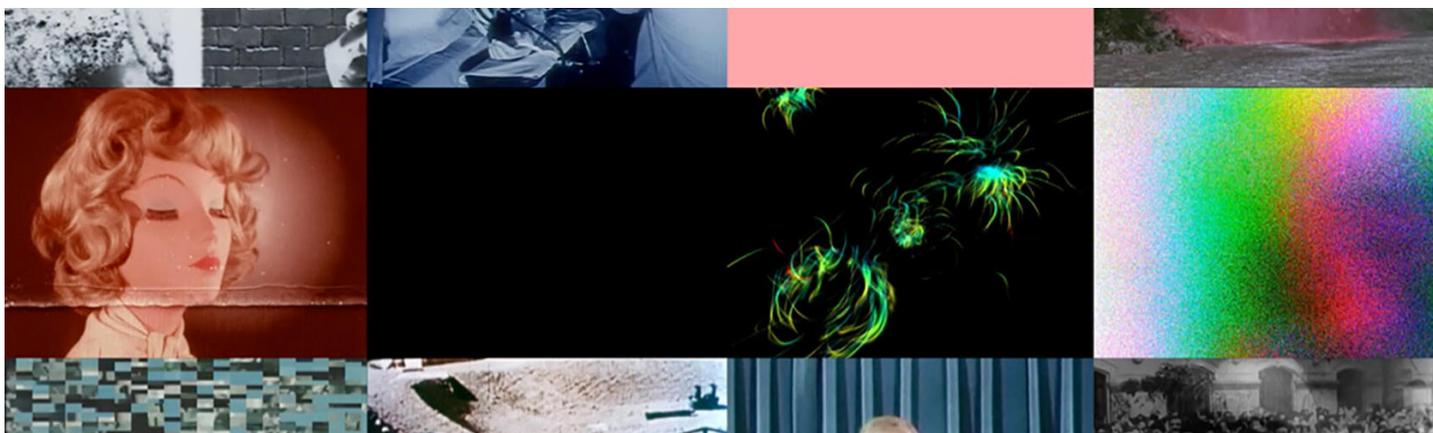


FRIEZE

William E. Jones on Why Visual Art is a Vacation for the Mind

Tausif Noor speaks to the artist, filmmaker and writer about his work mining the archives of the political fringes

BY TAUSIF NOOR IN INTERVIEWS | 28 JUN 22



Tausif Noor: Your essay films, and more recently your fiction, are notable for how they take stock of major world historical events through the lens of culture, often a very personal or direct experience of culture. The subject and title of one of your essay films, for instance, is *The Fall of Communism as Seen in Gay Pornography* (1998). Can you speak a little more about this perspective?

William E. Jones: In the case of *The Fall of Communism as Seen in Gay Pornography*, I had access to adult videos distributed in the US, but I had no money to travel to Eastern Europe to make a more conventional documentary. The work was the product of severe material constraints. Acknowledging this kind of problem is universal among filmmakers, who must always think of budgets, but some art people were taken aback that I'd even mention my poverty. I finished *The Fall of Communism* in 1998, and at the time, no one wanted to know about it. Then, about five years later, it started to be shown a lot. It's probably my most widely shown work and is important to the current exhibition.

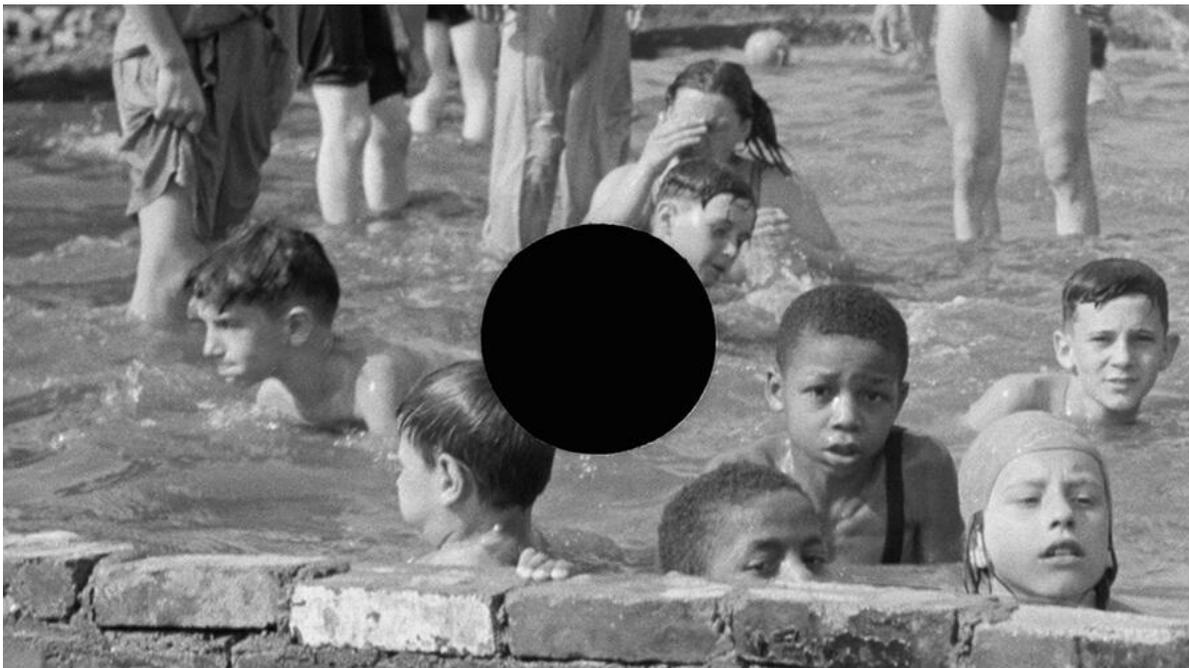
TN: Certainly, much of the work on view at David Kordansky Gallery concerns the geopolitical anxiety of the Cold War and ongoing militarism, as refracted through cultural archives. It's a very careful selection. In your opinion, what relationship does our present cultural landscape propose to the political – foreign relations or otherwise?

WEJ: I was born during the Cuban Missile Crisis, when the world as we knew it could have come to an end. The current nuclear threat is potentially more dangerous, as there seems to be less willingness to compromise in international politics now. One point I'd like to make is that the Cold War, even af-



William E. Jones, *The Fall of Communism as Seen in Gay Pornography*, 1998, film still. All images courtesy: the artist and David Kordansky Gallery

ter the collapse of state socialism in Europe and decades of fatuous Western triumphalism, has never entirely gone away. I have no optimism about culture as a way of effecting change in this era of arrogant and arbitrary power. Perhaps the best art can do is remind the powerless (most of us, it seems) that there's a reason to live even during the most deprived and barbaric times.



William E. Jones, *Rejected*, 2017, film still

TN: This idea, that history's residua are not only indelible but have real impacts in the present, runs through the whole of your work and harkens back to an earlier, more polemical, more didactic and more urgent style of filmmaking and art in general. What relationship do you have to style?

WEJ: When I started out, I imposed a style upon my material with the wilfulness of youth. Later, I looked to the material itself for clues as to how to approach it. I would find details, often marginal or against the grain of the stated intent of a film or photograph, and I would emphasize them. A good example of this is the centrality of the holes in the films I've made based upon the 'killed' negatives of the Farm Security Administration. An institutional embarrassment becomes the key to a body of work, almost a century after the fact. From the time I started making films, I was sceptical of the notion of a visual style defining an artist. In the art market, there's the designation 'characteristic work', which is highly desirable for auction houses and their customers. I think it's a lot less desirable for an artist who wants to explore with unfettered curiosity. I wish to resist the imperative to make characteristic work. I risk confusing spectators: my solo shows look like group shows to those who aren't paying attention.



William E. Jones, *Model Workers*, 2014, film still

TN: What is your assessment of the current relationship mainstream culture has to pornography, given the popularity of OnlyFans and the like? Is it sufficiently critical, historical? Anything that you feel excited about?

WEJ: Living almost my entire life in the US, I approach the question from an American perspective. There's a direct connection between the failures of present-day capitalism – runaway inflation, an inaccessible housing market, stagnant wages, the refusal to cancel student debt – and the explosive growth of the sex industry among young people who are accustomed to the exhibitionism and narcissism of social media. To me, OnlyFans videos are a lot more compelling than Netflix programs, many of which do little more than promulgate desperate virtue signalling. Is there a difference between the two platforms, aside from the size of the paycheques of the participants? They're all media. I think asking historical consciousness of these artifacts is wildly inappropriate. They're chiefly interesting as symptoms. I recently saw a video of a guy on the phone offering tech support to a racist white lady while getting fucked by a machine-operated dildo, so I may be a bit hasty in my judgement. Perhaps hilarious new critiques of capitalism are forthcoming.



William E. Jones, *The Fall of Communism as Seen in Gay Pornography*, 1998, film still.

TN: What potential, if any, do you see for the medium of film outside of the mind-numbing machine that is Hollywood, and what would it take to achieve this potential?

WEJ: Compared to the narratives of the so-called classic period of Hollywood, contemporary commercial films are giant, lurid messes. This appears to be a return to the form of early cinema, which delivered crude shocks to proletarian audiences in the years before respectable narrative features became dominant. Perhaps these middle-class entertainments were an anomaly, and cinema is becoming what it has been all along, a montage of attractions. In a sense, cinema presented in art galleries, at its best, is delivering something similar, but for a different audience.

TN: What is your process for embarking on a new project, and what ideas or topics are you drawn to lately?

WEJ: The disruptions due to the COVID pandemic made a solitary practice, like writing, more feasible than a practice requiring a lot of assistance, like filmmaking. I have been at work on a trilogy of novels – *I'm Open to Anything* [2019], *I Should Have Known Better* [2021], and *I Didn't See It Coming* [forthcoming] – for the last five years, and I'm finishing the third novel these days. This work has made me want to take a vacation from my mind. The perfect destination is a return to visual art.