

ARTHUR TRESS

b. November 24, 1940

FINE-ART PHOTOGRAPHER

“Photography is my method for defining the confusing world that rushes constantly toward me.”

He is a trailblazing photographer, best known for his staged surrealistic images.

Arthur Tress is a gay American photographer renowned for his diverse body of work, which encompasses surrealism and homoerotic fantasy. He was one of the first artists of the 1970s to diverge from documentary street photography to create staged, dreamlike images.

Born in Brooklyn, New York, and raised in a poor Jewish neighborhood, Tress was a lonely child, confused about his sexuality and often bullied. He took up photography in his teens, shooting the deteriorating nearby amusement parks of Coney Island.

After high school, Tress enrolled in Bard College, earning a B.F.A. in Fine Arts in 1962. He attended film school in Paris but dropped out to travel the world, spending much of his time in Africa and Asia. He developed an interest in ethnographic photography, which led to an assignment with the U.S. government, shooting documentary photos of Appalachian culture.

In 1968, the Smithsonian Institution and the Sierra Gallery in New York City presented Tress's first solo exhibition, “Appalachia -- People and Places.” He worked for a year as a documentary photographer for AmeriCorps VISTA before the Sierra Gallery exhibited his series “Open Space in the Inner City” in 1970. The series, which reflected his concern for the environment, earned him a grant from the New York State Council on the Arts.

Tress subsequently pivoted toward staged photography. In 1972, he created his seminal series, “The Dream Collector,” steeped in Jungian archetypes, ritual, and allegory. Reminiscent of children's nightmares, it earned him a National Endowment for the Arts grant and gave rise to an expanding portfolio of staged images. These works included “Theater of the Mind”—a series representing the hidden anguish of relationships, which earned him a second New York Council of the Arts grant—and “Arthur Tress: Facing Up, A 12-Year Survey” (alternately titled “Phallic Phantasy”), his 1980 homoerotic book of male nudes.

During the '80s, Tress began shooting in color and expanded his staging techniques, photographing sculptures he created from found medical equipment and exploring narrative still lifes. From 1986 to 1988, his first major retrospective, “Talisman,” toured through Europe. By the 2000s, he had returned to black-and-white format and was experimenting with mid-century modern themes and abstraction.

Tress's work is on display in many of the world's premier institutions, including the Museum of Modern Art and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, The Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, and the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris. He has published more than two dozen books.

Tress left New York in 1993 and settled in California. He resides in San Francisco.

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