



Jimmy Wright,
Anvil #1, 1975,
 color ink on paper,
 10 1/4 × 10 1/4". From
 the series "New
 York Underground,"
 1973–90.

Jimmy Wright

FIERMAN

Though freshly painted and well lit, David Fierman's new Lower East Side gallery is something of a hole-in-the-wall—a very tiny, these days rare, unrenovated storefront space that lends itself to intimate and focused shows. Painter Jimmy Wright's "New York Underground," a collection of voluptuous, ebullient, and funny works on paper from between 1974 and 1976, felt especially appropriate to the charming, bare-bones venue, as his casually explicit depictions of gay nightlife—cruising, public sex, and socializing in clubs, bathrooms, and bathhouses, speak to a bygone era of downtown subculture. "This is the world of the Weimar Republic," the artist has said of the post-Stonewall, pre-AIDS moment he represents here. "Too rich visually not to record."

Nude or shirtless male figures emerge from dark corners in the artist's Boschian renderings of action at the Anvil, a long-defunct Meatpacking District bar by the West Side Highway. In the washy, saturated violet-and-crimson color-ink painting *Anvil #1*, 1975, muscled voyeurs in the shadows watch a fisting performance on a small stage. Bathed in red light, a young man on his back, gripping his raised thighs, gazes at a mustached top. A can of Crisco seems to wink at us, illuminated by a fortuitous ray of light, near the edge of the stage. *The Anvil No. 2*, from the same year, seems to offer a different view of the same spot, and features similar goings-on, perhaps in the early-morning hours (by now the crowd has thinned). Slender forms, drawn in smudgy graphite, look a little sepulchral and Goyaesque. The suggestion of a red bandana in the back-left pocket of a blow-job recipient provides the only splash of color.

Wright deploys various strains of punk-inflected, cartoony, or wry juvenile figuration—his characters are sketchy, simplified, even clumsy sometimes—and in his *Anvil* works, these styles perfectly offset his deft references to the mood lighting of history painting's dense tableaux. In other works, his pre-New York education and formative time in a Pop-aligned and culturally porous Chicago Imagist milieu are more detectable. *Leopard Woman: Club 82*, 1974, is a portrait of a campy superhero with a buttless, off-the-shoulder leotard and spiky black caterpillars for eyelids. Is it too much of a stretch to say her playfully manic patterning, though messy, is indebted to the meticulous rhythms of Ray Yoshida's mummy shapes? Or maybe the formal interests of teacher and student dovetailed coincidentally; figures akin to the surreal, mystical images of Yoshida's art occur naturally in the wilds of strip bars and queer clubland.

This vibrant selection of work from the artist's first years in New York marks a new chapter in his life. In leaving Chicago, he had fled both the stultifying effects and the lethal consequences of homophobia: A close gay friend of Wright's was murdered in a hate crime during his art-school years. Through the powerful lens of this tragic biographical detail, the urgency underlying Wright's celebratory practice becomes clearer. From his lovely bird's-eye view of an undressed couple on slatted lounge chairs sharing an illicit moment in *Lighting a Joint: Club Baths*, to his suspenseful fly-on-the-wall snapshot of a pending hookup in *Tea Room*, both 1975, Wright's rich visual record of his world, of his own sexual freedom, really, is invaluable. There's a profound political dimension in being—as Wright's friend, the writer and curator Bruce Kurtz, who died of AIDS-related complications in 2003, half-jokingly called him—the "gay Toulouse-Lautrec."

—Johanna Fateman