

GAYLETTER

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JACK EARLY IS RIGHT ON TIME

AFTER A SELF-IMPOSED EXILE FROM THE ART WORLD,
THE ARTIST MAKES A BOLD RETURN.

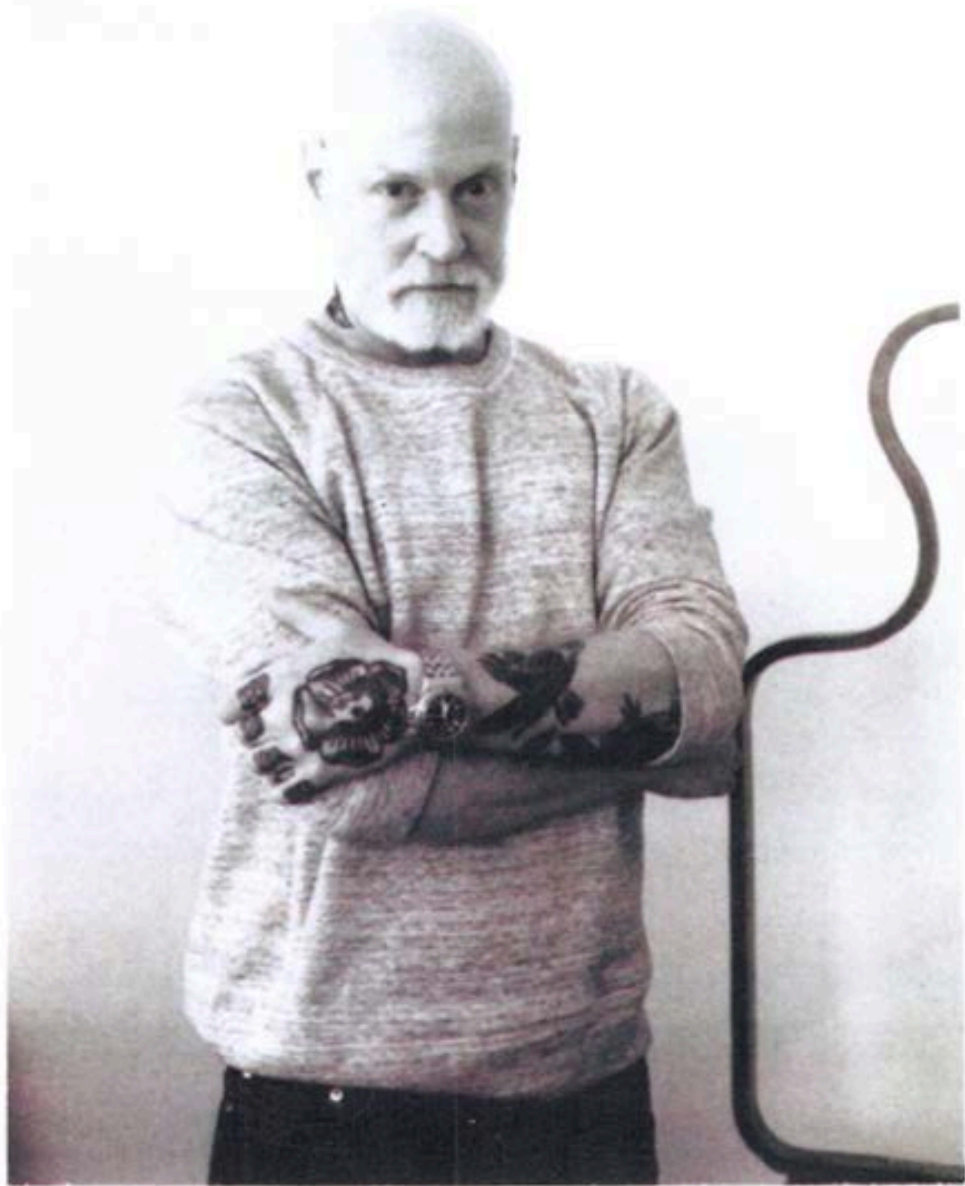
TEXT BY CAMERON KEADY



A young Jack Early in his bedroom.

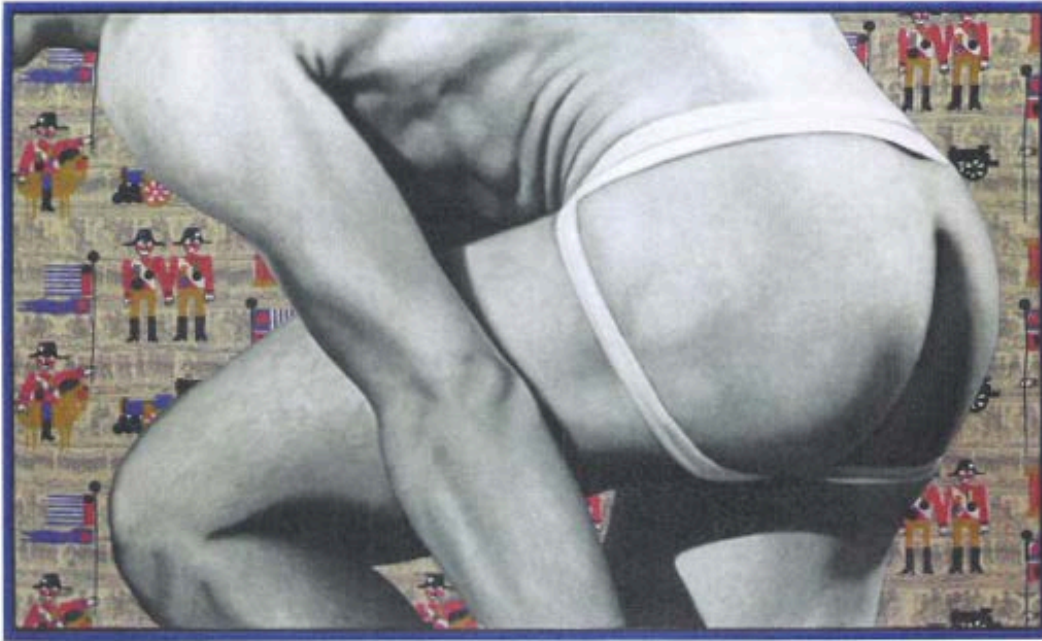
Comebacks are cool, but Jack Early is cooler. After a poorly received, critically panned show in 1992, Early dropped out of the art world. His disappearance wasn't for dramatics, vanity or revenge. "I just couldn't look at art anymore," Early told me. "So I got away from it."

He got away for over two decades. But in December 2014, after showcasing a bright and bold new body of work at Art Basel Miami Beach, he was honored as one of the festival's Top 10 shows. His comeback is right on time.



PORTRAIT BY BENJAMIN FREDRICKSON

SWEATER BY LINDER



BEGINNINGS

Though it may sound familiar, this artist's story has some unexpected chapters.

In the early 1990s, Early joined talents with Rob Pruitt to create the visual art collective Pruitt-Early. As both lovers and collaborators, Pruitt and Early quickly gained attention with their first solo show, *Artwork for Teenage Boys*, which exhibited in 1990 at 303 Gallery in Chelsea.

The installation was a whimsical look into the psyche of an adolescent boy. It laid out stacked beer cans decorated with decals of superheroes, pinup girls, American flags, peace signs and skulls. It was an edgy and fun perspective on pop culture and gender—a description that defined the duo. Critics discussing the show loosely referenced the work of Andy Warhol and Cady Noland, and Pruitt-Early quickly gained a reputation as the art world's latest bad boys.

In 1992, however, that reputation collapsed. Leo Castelli, the art dealer and owner of the eponymous Upper East Side gallery, approached Pruitt-Early about a show. Called *Red, Black, Green, Red, White and Blue*, the exhibition showcased posters of prominent African-Americans, including Martin Luther King Jr. and Janet Jackson. The exhibition was deemed deeply degrading and racially insensitive; critics unanimously despised it. "Black politics is stripped of its complexity and used as a pawn in Mr. Pruitt and Mr. Early's sensationalistic post-modern gamesmanship," Michael Kimmelman said in his *New York Times* review. Shortly after, Pruitt-Early disbanded for good.

"That show tore us apart," Early said. "There was no coming back from that, for us."

Early spent the next 20 years wandering and working a series of different jobs. He painted houses. He worked on songs, animations and films. When the fashionable Wythe Hotel opened in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, Early served as gatekeeper to the hotel's rooftop bar.

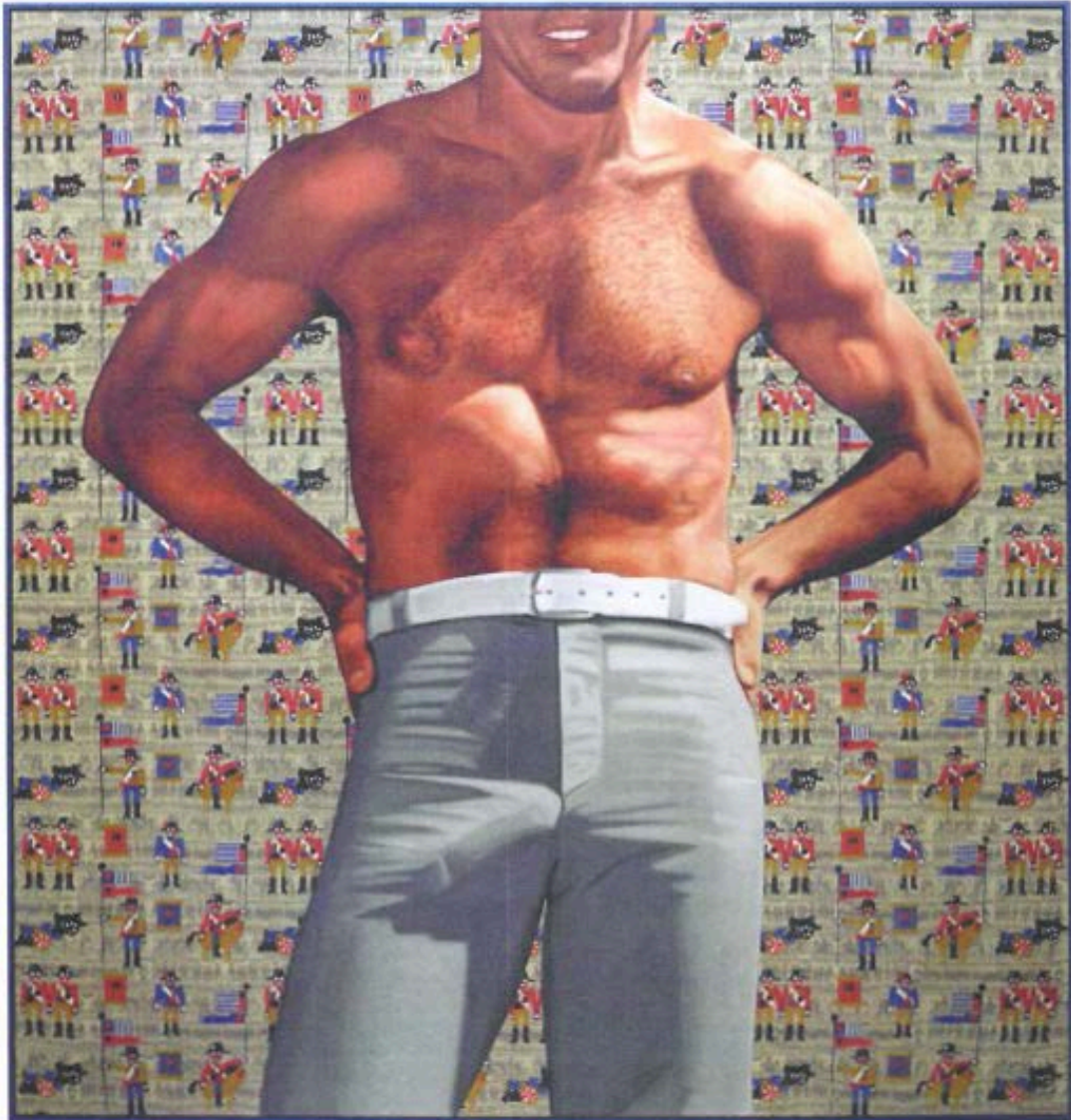
"Just because I went away from the art world, or whatever you want to call it, doesn't mean I was upset all that time," Early said. "I was actually very, very happy."

His break from art allowed him time to be introspective, to think back on everything that led him to New York, to Pruitt-Early. The place Early escaped to, mentally, ended up being the same place he returned to when he finally decided to re-enter the art world: his childhood.

THE FUTURE'S PAST

For many young gay men, Manhattan is like Neverland, filled with Lost Boys who left suburbia for something bigger and brighter.

For Jack Early, North Carolina was left behind. His world was small as a kid. He grew up in Raleigh and graduated from the North Carolina School of the Arts. "It wasn't until college and Boy George that I discovered, you know, gay stuff," he said. One of Early's vividest memories involves his childhood bedroom, where he spent a lot of his time. "I was very bedroom proud," he said.



"Everything in it [was] carefully chosen." Early recalls his mother allowing him to pick out the wallpaper; after "hours and hours trying to chose," he decided on a pattern of toy soldiers in red and blue coats. "It seemed like the best choice to lend the idea of masculinity." Early shrugged. Deep in a red beanbag chair, however, he stashed an issue of *Playgirl*.

It was this remembrance that inspired his latest work at Basel. To make the memory tangible, Early re-created the wallpaper pattern and, over the print, superimposed large-scale images of men in short shorts and tight T-shirts. After so much time in his bedroom

spent fantasizing about men in clothing catalogues, Early fused these fantasies with the decorations of his bedroom to create two pieces, "Poolboy" and "Sock and Balls." In front of these canvases, a large, yellow Victrola played an autobiographical story called "Jack Early's Life Story in Just Under 20 Minutes," which Early recorded himself reading. Like his childhood bedroom, the exhibition popped with primary colors.

It was deeply personal. Each piece represented a time in Early's life when, as a child, he had no way to express his sexuality other than in his head. "I wanted to take everything I had internalized





as a kid and bring it into this time...and celebrate it," he said. "What I didn't expect, though, was that others who lived through exactly the same thing would feel celebrated, too. That was its biggest success."

OUT AGAIN

New York City's art scene, and the world surrounding it, has changed dramatically since Early's departure. "Everyone is fatter, balding and gay," he said.

He left behind his tiny Midtown apartment for a home and a studio in Greenpoint. He saw a cute boy on the subway, met

him for coffee and fell in love. They've been together ever since. And every piece he showed at Basel sold. What's so cool about Early's comeback is its honesty. He didn't stage and fabricate some massive, dramatic resurgence. He simply disappeared from a small scene in a much larger picture, and did other things he liked to do.

Early's story is something everyone can understand. Things don't go as planned; things fall apart. The autobiographical thread he draws through his work shows how rarely life moves linearly. Rather, it breaks and puts itself back together, readying memories for a new arrangement, one we can build. Keeping a tight hold on small happy moments, as Early did, helps us put it back together. ■