

Charlie Porter, "Embracing the Resourceful Spirit of the 1980s," *Frieze*, March 11, 2025.

FRIEZE

Embracing the Resourceful Spirit of the 1980s

London is awash with exhibitions celebrating the past – what can figures like Leigh Bowery and Peter Hujar teach young artists today?



BY CHARLIE PORTER IN OPINION | 11 MAR 25



What are you doing right now? Likely, you're reading this on your phone – we all know about dopamine-hit addiction. If you're an artist, you might be taking a break from a doom scroll, despondent at what other artists are doing, or what galleries are showing, fuelling a sense of isolation and despair around your creative acts. What else could you be doing?

In the background, the global art market falters, especially for young artists, still struggling to assimilate into the system known as the art industry. A photograph from 42 years ago could jolt us into a different perspective.

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Nicola Tyson, Judy Blame and John Moore mudlarking under Blackfriars Bridge, 1983. Courtesy: © the artist

One day in 1983, student artist Nicola Tyson went down to the foreshore of the River Thames. She was between courses: she had quit a graphic design programme at Central Saint Martins in London to switch to art, but had to wait three years before she could get another local authority grant to study. She was 23, and on the dole.

Tyson was wandering around the Thames with friends. A tidal river, beaches appear on its edges every day when the water is out. The friends went down onto one around Blackfriars Bridge. Tyson took some photos.

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Linder performing with Ludus at The Hacienda, Manchester, 1982, film still.
Courtesy: the artist

With her was a young Judy Blame, who would become a beloved jewellery-maker, stylist, creative director and collaborator in fashion. Also present was John Moore, a gifted shoemaker who, three years later, would establish the House of Beauty and Culture, a short-lived radical shop and studio in Dalston.

Blame and Moore were crouching down when Tyson took their photo, the pair collecting clay pipes washed up on the shore, each artefact at least a century old. It was Blame's first time on the foreshore, the beginning of a lifetime of making pieces from what he found there. The framing of the photo excludes the river, or any buildings – we just see Blame and Moore tight against the metal sides of the river embankment, on the shingle – and because of their handmade clothes, it's hard to date the image. They could be young artists photographed this afternoon.

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the moment.’**

The gift of Blame, Moore, Tyson and their milieu was boredom: no mobile phones, just landlines; no email, just letters; no streaming, just TV channels. Boredom fuelled them. What else could they do except look beyond the heteronormative life prescribed to them? What mattered was resourcefulness, community, self-belief and self-realisation.

520 W 25th Street New York NY 10001

Tel 212 680 9467 Fax 212 680 9473 info@petzel.com www.petzel.com

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They had nothing, and they were doing something. In London right now, this seems to be the message of the moment. Tate Modern’s ‘Leigh Bowery!’ show is all about what broke queer kids can do. At Raven Row, the Peter Hujar show, ‘Eyes Open in the Dark’, is punctuated by desolation – dead animals (*Dead Gull*, 1985), collapsed shacks (*White House Collapsed*, *Queens, NYC*, 1984) – recognised by the eye of someone outside the status quo. At the Hayward Gallery, Linder shows what can be achieved with simple scissors and glue.



Peter Hujar, *Canal Street Pier, New York (Stairs)*, 1983. Courtesy: © 2025 the Peter Hujar Archive / Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY, DACS London, Pace Gallery, NY, Fraenkel Gallery, SF, Maureen Paley, London, and Mai 36 Galerie, Zurich

It’s easy to dismiss a comparison between now and the time these artists were most active, the 1970s and ’80s. Yes, living was in some ways ‘easier’ then: in the UK, where Bowery flourished, there were benefits, cheap rents and social housing, while New York, Hujar’s backdrop, was a broken city that could be navigated with barely a dime. Today, to be an artist in either city is to be crippled by home rent, studio rent, transport, food prices, heating bills and more.

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The system is clearly not working: at the end of 2024, *The Guardian* reported that the median income of artists in the UK is just GB£ 12,500. Try to play the art industry game, this metric suggests, and you’ve likely lost before you’ve even begun.

‘Can we allow these ways of thinking and acting collaboratively, resourcefully and outside of pervading systems to regrow today?’

Moore’s House of Beauty and Culture can inspire us. A similar instinct can be found today at Fantastic Toiles, a pop-up instigated by designer **Nasir Mazhar that sells one-off pieces of radical design**. We can think beyond fashion, too, taking inspiration from Tate’s Bowery exhibition to question the accepted categorisations of what constitutes art, fashion and design. Bowery, after all, never had gallery representation. He was too busy making and being.

Nicola Tyson’s photograph of Blame and Moore appears on the cover of my new novel, *Nova Scotia House* (2025). I intended the image to set the scene; I wrote the story to try to reconnect with the queer philosophies and experimental modes of living that were curtailed by the HIV/AIDS crisis. Can we allow these ways of thinking and acting collaboratively, resourcefully and outside of pervading systems to regrow today? It’s not easy, but I believe it is possible.



Dave Swindells, *Daisy Chain at the Fridge Jan '88: Leigh & Nicola*, 1988, photograph. Courtesy: © Dave Swindells

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The point is not nostalgia – I have no interest in trying to recreate or relive an era. We cannot hide from the difficult times which we are in. Instead, it is about recognising elementality: what we make, how we interact, what we eat, how we live. Can we become more essential? And so, I ask again, what are you doing right now? What is it that you can do?

*‘Leigh Bowery!’ is on view at **Tate Modern**, London, until 31 August. Linder’s ‘Danger Came Smiling’ is on view at **Hayward Gallery**, London, until 5 May. Peter Hujar’s ‘Eyes Open in the Dark’ at **Raven Row**, London, until 6 April. Charlie Porter’s *Nova Scotia House* will be published by **Penguin Random House** on 20 March*

Main image: Nigel Parry, Leigh Bowery Photoshoot at Home (detail), c.1990. Courtesy: Nigel Parry

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