

ARTFORUM

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Frederick Weston. Photo: Clifford Prince King.

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FREDERICK WESTON (1946–2020)

Artist, fashion designer, and poet Frederick Weston, who explored the queer body, mass media, and accumulation in elaborately intimate collages and designs, has died of cancer at seventy-three years old. A longtime member of Visual AIDS and a self-professed attendee of “Clutters Anonymous,” Weston lived and worked in New York with an impressive collection of both paper and fabric ephemera for fifty years.

Born in Memphis in 1946, Weston, whose family moved north during the Great Migration, was raised in Detroit by his young mother, Freda, and his grandparents. He first learned how to sew by watching Freda make her own showstopping versions of haute couture dresses. Weston attended Ferris State in Great Rapids, Michigan, where he and his love of dancing played an

instrumental role in the founding of the college’s first Black fraternity, the Zeta Beta Chapter of Alpha Phi Alpha. After graduating, he spent a few years in Detroit working at an all-Black modeling agency and began to frequent clubs in self-designed ensembles along with future fashion designer Claude Payne, model Billie Blair, and jazz singer Stephanie Crawford.

In 1973, Weston moved with his group of friends to New York City with dreams of becoming a fashion critic. He lived in the Breslin and other single-room occupancy housing spaces and went out to the Tenth Floor, Studio 54, the Loft, and other clubs. Initially unable to find a job in the straight world, he worked at the concessioner’s stand in a Times Square porn theater. Weston’s art practice began to develop in this period as he used photocopiers and other office appliances to create vibrant event flyers. When the Fashion Institute of Technology introduced a menswear major in the early ’80s, Weston eagerly joined the program, graduating magna cum laude in 1985 with a concentration in marketing. He had a number of jobs in the field, including at Stephen Burrows—the first Black American designer to develop an international clientele and reputation—but he grew frustrated with the industry’s racism, and never started his own line.

Only around 1996, when Weston received a positive HIV diagnosis, did he start to think of himself as an artist. For a series titled *Blue Bathroom Blues*, he began displaying homoerotic, blue-toned collages and sculptures on and around construction sites (an iteration of this series was shown earlier this year at Ace Hotel Gallery, formerly the Breslin). During a meeting with Visual AIDS, in which the artist was showing work by his friend Franz Renard Smith, the organization became aware of Weston's own work and quickly drew him into the fold. Through Visual AIDS, Weston worked as an activist and art educator, an experience recounted in a 2016 interview conducted by Theodore Kerr for the Smithsonian Archives of American Art's "Visual Arts and the AIDS Epidemic: An Oral History Project."

His first solo exhibition in New York, "Frederick Weston: Happening," was staged in 2019 by Gordon Robichaux gallery, which represents the artist and his estate. This year, he was awarded the Roy Lichtenstein Award from the Foundation for Contemporary Arts. In December, Tribeca's Ortuzar Projects in collaboration with Gordon Robichaux will open a large survey of Weston's work, planned before his passing. The release of Visual AIDS's seventh book in their series of DUEETS, featuring Weston in conversation with novelist Samuel R. Delany, will accompany the exhibition.