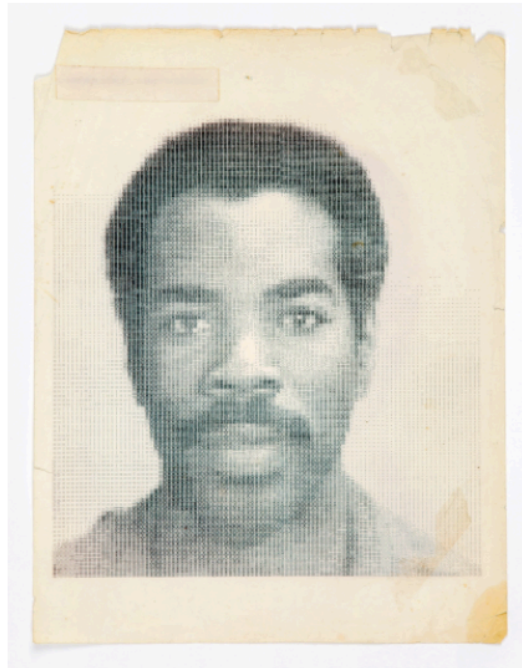


# The New York Times

## Frederick Weston, Outsider Artist Who Was Finally Let In, Dies at 73

For decades he made his art in dingy Manhattan hotel rooms, living hand-to-mouth, hoping for his big break. It finally arrived, just a few years before his death.



"Self Portrait, 1979" (Dot matrix print, tape), by Frederick Weston. For years he made his art on his bed in cramped hotel rooms. Gregory Carideo, via Gordon Robichaux, NY

**By Alex Vadukul**

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Frederick Weston, a belatedly recognized New York artist who inhabited the cramped apartments of the city's single-room occupancy hotels for decades, hermetically creating meticulous collages exploring the male body and Black queerness, [died](#) on Oct. 21 at his apartment in the Chelsea neighborhood of Manhattan. He was 73.

His cousin Denise Weston said the cause was complications of bladder cancer.

It was only in recent years that Mr. Weston's art finally received critical attention. Before then he'd long existed on the margins of New York.

He arrived from Detroit in 1973, aspiring to enter the fashion world, but he retired his dream after encountering, as a Black man, stifling racism in the industry. In the 1980s, in a harsher Times Square than the one that exists today, he managed the concession stand at a pornography theater and checked coats at gay bars like Stella's in the theater district. He learned he had AIDS in 1996 and lived sparsely off his disability assistance. And he resided in the bleak old S.R.O. hotels of Midtown, like the Esquire and the Senton, where rooms cost just a couple of dollars a night.

In the 1990s, [Mr. Weston](#) settled at the crumbling Breslin Hotel on Broadway at 29th Street and lived there until 2009, when it was converted into the sleek Ace Hotel and its longtime residents were forced out. A buyout deal provided him with a one-bedroom apartment in Chelsea. One afternoon last month, a friend and his gallerist went to visit him there, but no one answered the buzzer, so 911 was called. Upstairs, Mr. Weston was found to have been taking a bath when he died.

As he survived day-to-day in New York, Mr. Weston created his art privately.

He worked on his bed, trimming clippings from magazines, fabrics and Polaroid photos to use in his collages. Almost daily he visited Kinko's to photocopy money, body parts, sunglasses and practically anything else he could slide under the machine's lid. His rooms were heaped with his ephemera, but he was as organized as an archivist, labeling boxes and files with descriptions like "Taxi," "Clubland," "Bears" and "Hobo."

"A true artist can be creative with whatever is available," Mr. Weston said in 2008 in an [interview](#) with Visual AIDS, an organization that promotes the work of artists living with the disease. "If I am not creating art, I am not living. Being able to create is real power."



“Freddy in Green (Paradise Garage),” 1979. Marker on graph paper. Gregory Carideo, via Gordon Robichaux, NY



“Body Map I,” 2015. Mixed media on paper, 65 by 32 inches. Gregory Carideo, via Gordon Robichaux, NY

He explored the male form, and the mass media’s representation of it, as his subject matter. Two typical collages, titled “Dark Meat” and “Tops and Bottoms,” used clippings of erotic male escort ads; another, “Body Map,” featured headshots of Hollywood actors. Mr. Weston also explored consumerism, gluing logos from food and cleaning products into his elaborate collages.

“The one thing I have never been able to get around is being Black and male in this world,” he said in the 2008 interview. “It colors my every dream.”

Mr. Weston didn’t think of himself as a professional artist until 1996, however, when he learned he had AIDS and discovered more meaning in life through creative expression. Soon, his work was discovered by [Visual AIDS](#), and he started exhibiting his collages in gay bars and day-treatment centers.

“I am sure if you look long and hard enough, you may see some references to the virus,” he said of his art. “It is just another coin in the pouch. Sometimes it comes out heads; it’s a blessing. Sometimes it comes out tails; it’s a curse. There are a lot of coins in my pouch.”

The [Gordon Robichaux](#) gallery in Manhattan began representing Mr. Weston in 2017, and last year he had his first solo show in New York. Last winter, a series of his collages were exhibited [to favorable reviews](#) at the Ace Hotel as part of the city's annual [Outsider Art Fair](#). (Arrangements were made for Mr. Weston to spend a night in his old room, which now had a minibar.) Last January he was [recognized](#) with a Roy Lichtenstein Award, granting him \$40,000, from the Foundation for Contemporary Arts.



Mr. Weston in May 2019 in his apartment in Manhattan's Chelsea section. He was a familiar figure in the neighborhood. Clifford Price King, via Gordon Robicheaux NY

The author [Samuel R. Delany](#) interviewed Mr. Weston last year about his experiences in the Times Square of the 1980s for a book that Visual AIDS plans to publish this January.

“He was like a much less known Keith Haring,” Mr. Delany said of Mr. Weston in a phone interview. “Most artists don’t become known, or they become known very late. Art is a disproportionate enterprise.” He added, “I think Fred Weston was that kind of an artist.”

In recent years, Mr. Weston was glad to see his art receive attention, but he couldn't help but consider the long path he had walked to get there. Speaking last year to Senior Planet, an organization that teaches technology to older adults, he said, "I'm getting recognition as an artist now basically because I'm 73 and a professional AIDS patient who has managed to survive and has been practicing art all this time."



"Blue Bathroom Blues #13," 1999. Collage on color photocopy, 8½ by 11 inches. via Gordon Robichaux, New York

Frederick Eugene Weston was born on Dec. 9, 1946, in Memphis. An only child, he briefly met his father when he was a boy. His mother, Freda Weston Morman, who worked in a children's hospital, raised him in Detroit, where they lived in his grandparents' house. A seamstress as well, she taught him how to make clothes.

After graduating from the High School of Commerce in Detroit, Mr. Weston earned a bachelor's degree in marketing from Ferris State University in Big Rapids, Mich., where he had helped found its first Black fraternity.

He dreamed of entering the fashion industry, however, and headed to New York in 1973, where he immersed himself in the city's Black creative scene and its gay nightlife.

Aspiring to be a fashion critic, he became [disillusioned](#) when he couldn't land a job, his calls going mostly unreturned. "There's already André Leon Talley," one magazine editor told him, referring to the Black fashion writer and Vogue editor. "Why would we need you?"

When the Fashion Institute of Technology in Manhattan introduced a men's wear major, Mr. Weston joined the program and graduated with honors. But he struggled to find work as a designer and ultimately abandoned his fashion ambitions.

To make ends meet, he worked night shifts in Times Square, selling hot dogs at the X-rated [Big Top](#) movie house and assisting at the [Broadway Arms](#) steam baths. While managing the coat check at [Trix](#), a theater district gay bar, his boss paid him to wallpaper the place with his erotic collages — possibly his first artistic commission.

As New York entered the new millennium, Mr. Weston became part of a [vanishing](#) side of the city. He was living in the decaying [Breslin Hotel](#), where elevators malfunctioned and broken faucets in shared bathrooms were mended with duct tape. Real-estate developers eyed the building. In a short documentary film made at the time, "[Voices of the Breslin](#)," Mr. Weston acknowledged that New York was changing.

"I remember sitting looking at the newspaper at all these places that were going to become high-rises," he said, "and I felt like at the time, 'Well, this is going to happen, but by that time I'll be making so much money, and I'll be able to stay in the neighborhood.' Well, that hasn't happened. But I'm determined not to leave without a fight."

He won his fight. After developers [acquired](#) the Breslin's lease for \$40 million, he was offered a buyout deal that provided him with an apartment in the Penn South housing complex in Chelsea.



“The one thing I have never been able to get around is being Black and male in this world,” Mr. Weston said. “It colors my every dream.” Clifford Prince King, via Gordon Robichaux, NY

Soon, his new home filled up with his diaries, sculptures and collages. He became a recognizable neighborhood character, with his natty attire and pencil-thin mustache, and a fixture at a nearby FedEx Office, where he used its copy machine.

Mr. Weston learned he had an advanced stage of bladder cancer this year. He was wary of chemotherapy, worried that it might interfere with his H.I.V. medications. He was also willfully optimistic: His next solo [show](#) was on the horizon, he’d just won a prestigious grant and a Manhattan gallery was finally representing him. He decided not to seek more hospital treatment, and he remained at home focusing on his art.

“He had faith,” said Denise Weston, one of four cousins who survive him. “He didn’t believe it was terminal. He had goals he planned to make.”

She added, “He was determined to make it to his next show.”

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