



“DESIRE”

**WHEN YOU
STEP
OVER THE
LINE,
THE
LINE BECOMES
YOU**

Jimmy DeSana, *Quotations from Jimmy De Sana*, Pat Hearn Gallery, 1988

Who is this YOU, and what is the nature of this border that transcends and defines the subject, all in a single step? Whose desire, whose journey of becoming? Jimmy DeSana's work embodies a complex reckoning with the space that permeates discourses long thought to be discrete – history, sexuality, politics, and artistic inquiry. His art steps over the line of which he speaks, even as that volatile, ghostlike line fills the soul of his images to the breaking point. DeSana, like his photographs, was a hybrid, an indefinable combination of public and private personae whose camera was not a window, but rather a hall of mirrors that begat a myriad of reflections.

In *Party Picks* (1981), DeSana invites us to explore exactly this indeterminacy. Innocuous objects, the flotsam and jetsam of long-gone houseguests, become extensions of the camera, thereby allowing it to explore that which cannot be seen – the oft-overlooked crevices between teeth that teem with invisible life. DeSana's camera squeezes us into a world that is at once within and beyond the body; we experience a mixture of excruciating pain and boundless ecstasy as seams are exposed and the weight of the indefinite bears down upon us. We come ever closer to the intersection of desire, identity, and the formal qualities of the art object. Like the crevices forced open by DeSana's scene, the photograph expands in response to the viewer's own longing for completeness, for unencumbered access to the unknowable. This revolutionary sensibility is present in works ranging in subject matter from portraiture to kaleidoscopic interiors to acts of sexual domination, each carrying its own turbulent and carefully chosen technical, structural, and thematic composition. The undated *It...Future...Robert* begets a deferral of desire, a gargling utterance that leaves us desperate to fill in the ellipses. In *Gauze* (1979), DeSana positions the male form in a kinky half-cocoon, neither a chrysalis nor a metamorphosed entity, and his portrait of Yoko Ono (1975) occupies a stolen moment from a narrative that will never be realized.

A similar operation is at work in *Toothpaste* (1980), in which DeSana divides his subject into parts with horizontal blinds whose organizational function falls apart in their encounter with flesh. The explosive uncertainty of the body, emphasized by the photograph's asymmetry and disorienting play of light and shadow, undoes the line even as it attempts to impose itself upon the scene. In its capacity to at once go beyond and exist within DeSana's world, the human form exposes boundaries of all kinds at the very moment of their conception. She becomes the line; she defies it, yet it endures in all its fragility – shot, processed and printed.

As a result, Toothpaste is as much about the creation of a photographic landscape as it is about our racial, sexed, and gendered selves that intermingle with and ultimately rupture accepted modes of being. Like DeSana's plastered model, we are ourselves crisscrossed by the normative lines that follow us, enrapture us, and spring from us with each step. By no means is this a unification of bodies and objects, as has often been posited; rather, these photographs point to the exact moment in which Self and Other are formed – the primordial jump over the line that DeSana articulates both poetically and in his imagery.



A visionary photographer with a simultaneously critical and celebratory eye, DeSana also straddled commercial, artistic, social, and personal worlds with startling fluidity. While maintaining a commitment to a new way of thinking about photography, he skillfully and subtly documented an unsung avant-garde whose productivity has been underestimated by scholars and critics alike. DeSana's contributions to publications like *New York Rocker* and *Village Voice* bridge yet another divide between two spheres – commercial photography and art photography – in a crucial era of the medium's own self-definition. He invested in photography as more than a static product of the explosive growth of media culture or a worldwide invasion of the private sphere with commodities. For DeSana, the camera was a participant in the creation of culture, rather than a passive receptor. It offered a way to break down the labels that would soon retroactively characterize his generation. Neither post-identity nor limited by his context, DeSana's oeuvre runs the gamut of representation by speaking the unutterable, by stepping over and becoming the line. The photography of Jimmy DeSana tears apart and reconfigures the layers inherent in our individual and collective processes of navigating the world. He captures for us a nonlinear amalgamation of intimate, social, and aesthetic experiences that have the potential to modify current art historical thinking about embodiment, agency, and subjectivity – indeed, the very foundations of selfhood.

William J. Simmons, Harvard University