

Towards Jamaica  
station in New York's  
subway, 1950s.

## FEATURE

All images © Estate Jesse  
A Fernandez / Collection  
F Mazin Fernandez,  
courtesy Sitor Senghor

# A LIFE LESS ORDINARY

He survived political upheaval in Cuba, became a refugee in Spain and nearly lost his spirit in New York. In Colombia, however, he discovered a new artistic voice. Donatella Montrone looks at the work of **Jesse A Fernandez**.

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Raquel Revuelta, Manuel Corrales and Mariano Rodríguez coming out of the Bodeguita del Medio, Cathedral Square, Havana, 1958.

Jesse A Fernandez was an artist in every sense, drifting from the written word to painting to sculpture to photography – adept at all disciplines, defined by no single one. In his early years he was plagued by ‘spiritual imprisonment’ – perhaps never more so than in the late 1940s, while studying painting at the Art Students League in New York. ‘As you know, there are spiritual prisons and I felt like a prisoner in New York,’ Jesse once told

biographer Arturo Matute. In his essay, Matute also recalls the words of Venezuelan intellectual Ben-Ami Fihman Zighelboim, who said of his friend: ‘Jesse’s prison had a name: New York. Poverty was his jailer; words his only way of escape.’

He was born in Havana in 1925, the son of peasants who had emigrated to Cuba from Asturias in Spain. At the age of seven he left for Spain with his mother and brother, fleeing the repressive regime of former Cuban president Gerardo Machado. ‘In Spain I learned to fish, hunt, dance, sing –

to become a peasant. I didn’t know anything about money,’ Jesse said of that time. But then the Spanish Civil War broke and the family returned to Cuba. It was a culture shock, not least because the Asturian he spoke was phonetically distinct from the characteristic Spanish of the island nation. ‘Everyone kept calling me *Gallego* (an often derogatory term for Spaniard),’ he said of his return to his homeland. ‘I had to fight to stand up for myself.’

Jesse studied at Academia de Bellas Artes San Alejandro – the most prestigious



New York, 1955.

fine arts academy in Cuba – and in 1947 accepted a place at the Art Students League in New York, a time of austerity, in which he felt spiritual suffocation. While there he met Cuban artist Wifredo Lam, who introduced him to the many European painters living in New York at that time, among which were Marcel Duchamp, surrealist Esteban Francés and the Austrian artist Frederick Kiesler. ‘Meeting Duchamp was a major influence on me,’ Jesse said. ‘He taught me that to be an artist, you have to be free, and to be free, you cannot have responsibilities.’

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He moved to Colombia in the early 1950s and started working at Propaganda Época, an advertising agency in Medellín, where he met Gabriel García Márquez and the sculptor Fernando Botero. While in Medellín he

started experimenting with photography, locking himself away with instruction manuals and studying the techniques of Henri Cartier-Bresson and Walker Evans. His artistic expression took on a fundamental transformation. ‘Photography became a form of contact with reality, and I found my own technique in Medellín,’ he said.

Jesse travelled to La Guajira, a desert region in northern Colombia bordering Venezuela, and documented indigenous peoples, ancient ruins and landscapes. In Cabo de la Vela, a remote village in the north,







Colombia, 1955.





Guatemala, 1956.

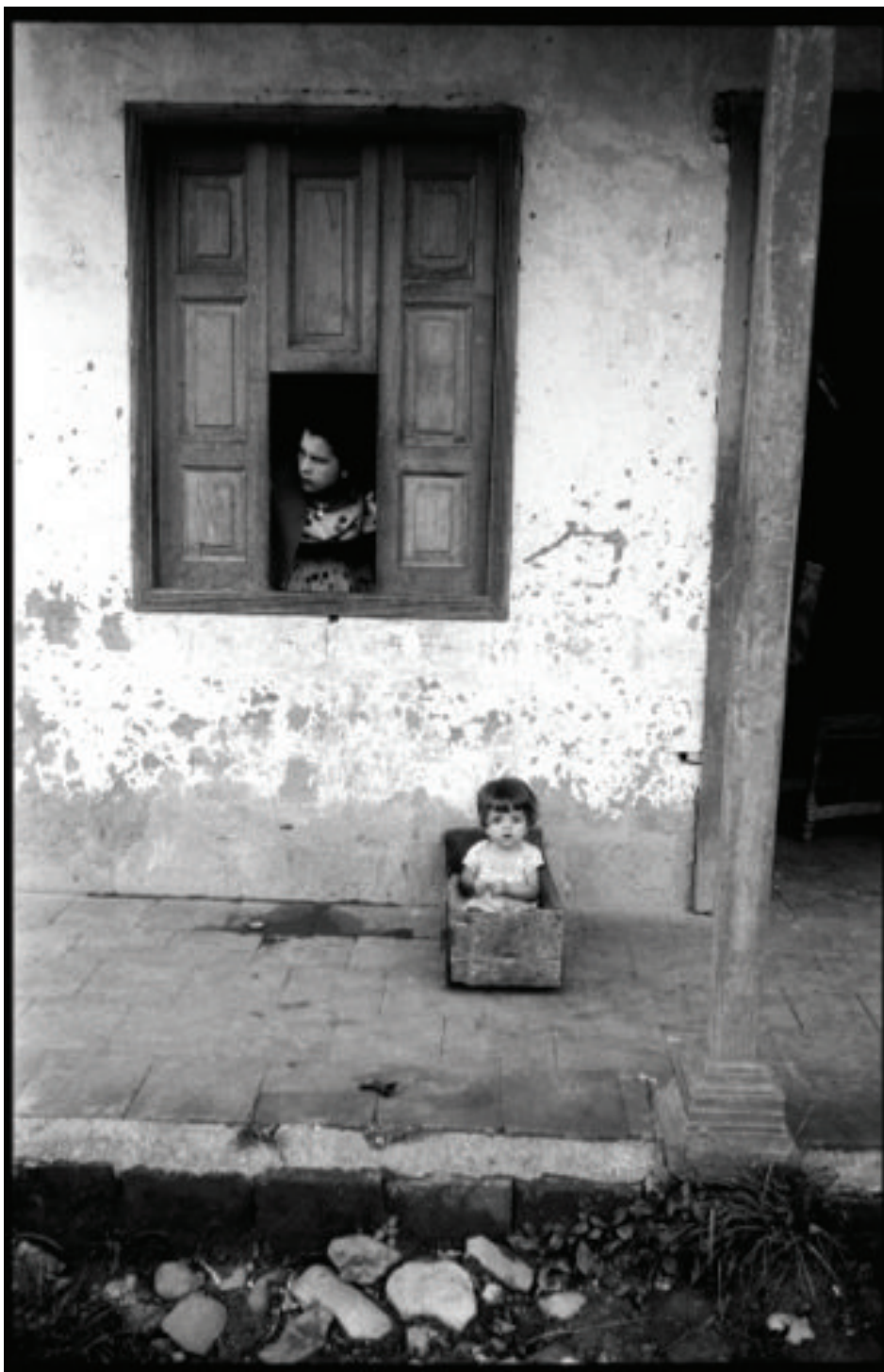
he photographed the funeral of a young goat, 'which ended up in an orgy,' he is quoted as saying. 'It was night time, and I shot those photographs using the jeep lights.' His nomadic spirit called him across continents, where he captured daily life in Latin America. He travelled to Mexico and collaborated on a documentary project with Spanish filmmaker Luis Buñuel, eventually returning to New York. While there he took commissions for *Time* magazine and the *New York Times*, as well as *Paris Match*,

*Cosmopolitan* and, importantly, *Life* magazine, which resulted in what are 'two masterpieces of portrait photography' – a photo of the Cuban poet José Lezama Lima and one of Ernest Hemingway. Jesse made a staggering 6,000 black & white photographs in Cuba, including many memorable ones of Fidel Castro and the revolution that ensued. He is noted for having photographed some of the most important literary, intellectual and artistic voices of the 20th century, including Willem de Kooning, Susan Sontag

and Tennessee Williams.

Arguably his most astonishing body of work, however, is his photographic essay on the Capuchin mummies of Palermo, photographed in the catacombs' dimly lit chambers. Displayed in the bowels of the Capuchin monastery are some 8,000 corpses and 1,250 mummies, the oldest of which dates back to 1599. It is the most comprehensive documentation of Sicily's mummified corpses in existence and was published as a book, *Les Momies de Palerme*.





Medellín, Colombia, 1950s.

Independent curator Sitor Senghor assists and advises long-time friend France Mazin, Jesse's wife of 12 years, on the affairs of the Jesse A Fernandez Estate in Paris. 'When Jesse died in 1986, at the age of 61, his work had never been shown in the UK,' explains Sitor, who introduced Jesse's work to British audiences for the first time at the 2019 London Art Fair. 'Reception of Jesse's work in England has been strong among all generations. The mummies of Palermo and his portraits of celebrities are a good

*'He always happened to be at the right place at the right time.'*

example: they appeal as much to teenagers new to his work, as to art critics and collectors.'

Jesse was a free man, says Sitor – he seized opportunities as they arose. 'And he always happened to be at the right place at the right time – witnessing Salvador Dalí having his

moustache cut off by a jealous artist, for example.' Jesse always followed his calling, however ephemeral. And even during his bouts of spiritual deprivation, he chose not to merely exist but instead to live.

**To see more of Jesse A Fernandez's work visit [jessefernandez.com](http://jessefernandez.com). For information on upcoming exhibitions, contact curator Sitor Senghor via his website at [sitorsenghor.com](http://sitorsenghor.com)**





Colombia, 1955.