



The Coast-to-Coast Life of Tomatâ du Plenty Becomes an Art Exhibit

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by Sandra Hale Schulman

Actor, performer, painter, raconteur. The colorful coast-to-coast life of [Tomatâ du Plenty](#) has been getting renewed attention lately with the production of a feature length documentary and a series of exhibits focused on his art and his work in theater and film in the coming months in New York City, South Florida, Los Angeles and Seattle.



Tomatâ du Plenty. Photo: Marva Marrow.

I knew of Tomatâ—real name David Xavier Harrigan (May 28, 1948 – August 21, 2000)—since the late 1970s as the lead singer of the infamous punk band The Screammers, who made heads roll with their unusual no-guitar band and vivid logo of a screaming man with spiky hair by [Gary Panter](#). I finally met him when he moved to South Miami Beach in the early 1990s, drawn by the lure of cheap rents, oceanfront apartments and a thriving art community.



The Screammers Logo by Gary Panter.

He immediately made friends with all the key people and was soon having exhibits at local bars and fledgling galleries. Perpetually broke, he lived in his small painting studio on Lincoln Road and made money from sweeping up bottles at The Deuce Bar when not selling his art for small amounts, usually \$10 to \$25. He gave away more than he sold just to be in people's collections; I ended up with about five of his pieces. He made watercolors on pages torn from books and then progressed to painting on wood and cutting out the shapes. These works grew progressively larger.



Portrait of Chuck Berry by Tomatâ du Plenty, circa 1996.



Tomatâ du Plenty with his work.

Back when no one was doing murals in South Beach, he did a mural on the side of the Hamlet Bar. I wrote a few stories for the local arts weekly newspaper on his exploits.

Sweet natured, quick to laugh with an impish face, Tomatâ made friends quickly. He knew a little about a lot, and drew his portraits from figures in the pop culture, music and literary world. I ran into him in unusual places, like the time I was covering a Billy Ray Cyrus appearance at a local circus. There he was on the sidelines, taking it all in as Billy Ray rode in on an elephant.

Tomatâ never talked much about his earlier life, though he careened from careers as a theater troupe founder in the 1960s in San Francisco to experimental punk band performer in The Screamers in the 1970s in LA to multi-media artist living in Miami, Seattle and New Orleans. Tomatâ seized the day in 1968: In San Francisco, he joined the Cockettes theater troupe ; then was funded by the city of Seattle in Ze Whiz Kidz, a lip-synch group he co-founded with the late Gorilla Rose. After bailing on Ze Kidz circa 1972, Tomatâ performed comedy with Fayette Hauser and Gorilla at CBGB in New York alongside The Ramones and the Stilettos with the pre-Blondie Debbie Harry.

Making his way to Los Angeles he made his mark with The Screamers, a band that had no guitars. Tomatâ was on lead vocals supported by just one ARP Odyssey synth, one Fender Rhodes with fuzzbox, and a minimal drum kit. They never recorded an album but became sensations at the Masque, the Whisky and the Roxy with their meticulously polished productions. Although Tomatâ was a fierce front man, he later said it was the unhappiest time of his life.

After the final breakup of the Screamers in '81, Tomatâ embarked on a new career as a painter, and evolved into a revered folk artist who worked the storefront-gallery circuit in Seattle, LA, Miami, New Orleans and San Francisco. He went from bar to bar with a stack of drawings, selling them to people for \$25 each.

When I was in New Orleans on a book tour with some punk pals in 1996, I mentioned to Tomatâ that I was reading a new autobiography of Waylon Jennings, with whom I had worked briefly. A day later he delivered a beautiful detailed watercolor drawing of Jennings to me at the hotel, framed and inscribed on the back. That's the kind of guy he was.



Portrait of Waylon Jennings by Tomatâ du Plenty, circa 1996.

Tomatâ was friends with [Arturo Vega](#) before Vega became the art director for The Ramones. Vega designed early fliers and posters for Tomatâ in San Francisco. Last spring I was asked to curate a show based on Tomatâ's colorful life for the gallery run by Arturo's foundation in NYC called Howl Happening. The show has now snowballed and will be rolling into other cities around the country where Tomatâ lived.

The New York City exhibit, "Tomatâ du Plenty: Coast to Coast," will be held on Thursday, December 7, 2017, from 7 to 9 p.m. at [Howl Happening Gallery](#), 6 E. 1st Street, NYC. This show will include: a one-night-only exhibit and sale of about 25 of Tomatâ's watercolors from the collection of Chuck Fulton; a slideshow I curated that gives an overview of the arc of his career from the beginning; and a panel discussion focusing on Tomatâ's time in New York.

Panelists will include his '70s-era off-off Broadway theater contemporaries Tish and Snooky of Manic Panic (the hair color queens); Jack Rabid, publisher of The Big Takeover music magazine who conducted one of the last interviews with Tomatâ; and Carlos Iglesias, LA based collector and producer of the upcoming film on Tomatâ's life.

The show will move to West Palm Beach from January 13 to February 14, 2018 with an opening from 6 to 9 p.m. on Saturday, January 13, at [The Box Gallery](#), 811 Belvedere Road, West Palm Beach, FL 33405.

Starting at 6 p.m., the opening will feature the slideshow curated for the New York exhibit and a panel with friends and former fellow South Florida Art Center Studio artists JC Carroll, Carlos Alves, and Rolando Chang Barrero and documentarian Carlos Iglesias. Then from 7 to 9 p.m. there will be a champagne reception for the opening of the exhibit of watercolors and painted wooden cutouts.

In Los Angeles there will be an exhibit opening in May 2018, at [Castelli Art Space](#), details to be announced. There is also interest in a Seattle show.

Tomatâ was quite a character, an artist ahead of his time who had cult status that has grown since his passing in 2000 in New Orleans. Art world collectors such as New York's Robert Miller were scooping up his work for years. He was pre-internet and pre-MTV, both mediums that would have made him a national star, but instead he had to do it the hard way, by actually going from one major city to the next to make a name for himself.

Why all this new interest? Carlos Iglesias explains:

"In the sometimes cyclical nature of renewed interest in past artistic movements, a rare, little known gem is unearthed," Iglesias said. "Such is the story of Tomatâ du Plenty, who found underground fame in such outfits as the Cockettes and Ze Whiz Kidz before becoming a punk icon as frontman of the Screemers."

Iglesias noted that it was Tomatâ's "Expressionist artistic nature" that led to a career in painting after he left the stage. "Tomatâ's paintings became a documentation of the various cities he called home and of the characters who inhabited those cities," he said, "while also capturing the pop and

cultural icons of Americana with his palette.”

BASIC FACTS: “Tomatâ du Plenty: Coast to Coast” one-night exhibition, slideshow, and panel discussion on Thursday, December 7, 2017 at Howl Happening Gallery, 6 E. 1st Street, New York, NY 10003.

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