Shady Ladies: Femininity Across the Gender Spectrum

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Shady Ladies: Femininity Across the Gender Spectrum

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In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts

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This thesis explores performing gender fluidity as a deviant act. The conceptual impetus is to tease out ways in which comedy and beauty can be used to subvert stigma against the gender fluid community in a cultural climate where it is still dangerous to be queer. Through aestheticized, heroic and subversive imagery, I utilize drag vernacular to contextualize my own feminine performance as a gesture of power. In collaboration with gender fluid models, we create imaginary spaces as a backdrop for the outlaw act of playing with the gender binary. Within recognizable systems of gender marketing, the cult of the feminine is subverted. Often, the final product is presented as a conflation of painting, photography and performance. Shady Ladies, can be interpreted as a Midwest gender protest. By including geographic information in the titles, I mirror the widespread violence against the gender-queer community due to limitations within the binary gender system.
INTRO

He came into my studio and sat down. It was my first time.

H: Have you ever performed before?

A: You mean other than every day?
The conversation with I had with my model, Andrew, was not surprising. Judith Bulter’s research on gender performativity in her book *Gender Trouble* was published in 1990.\(^1\) In over two decades her ideas continue to be contentious. In a reductive assessment: the concept that genitalia assigns gender is false. The limited diversity created by the gender market effects the opportunities that people have to express their gender. It is important to recognize the subtleties of this aggression. The inability to label breeds hate and anger, which is intersectional and pervasive. Compromise has been made by the gender fluid community in order to participate in a binary society. The compromises made are diminishing not only to those who identify as gender fluid, but anyone who does not wish to be defined by their gender. My thesis work, *Shady Ladies*, accepts the outlaw practice of daily existence outside the binary and turns it into a celebratory protest.

Emma Watson gave a speech at the U.N. in September 2014. The *He for She* campaign emphasized gender as a spectrum instead of two opposing ideals.\(^2\) Further she explained that once more expressions of gender are accepted there will be less pressure to identify. Gender fluid people are the victims of violence simply because they challenge the gender binary, but there is still a desire to fit into a community of others. While there are many terms to describe non-gender conforming. I will continue to use the expression, *gender fluid*, because it encompasses all of these communities.

Gender is indoctrinated in public and private space. Male and female performance is institutionalized. The reality is that there is a staying power, a resilience and a fight that has kept queer culture alive. I want to celebrate that, even when it is hard to do so.
The pretty pink box: alluring/disturbing.
It seems impossible for me to identify as one of the two options I am given. Because of my dissatisfaction with the gender binary, I am acutely aware of my own gender performance. As I criticize the compromise I have to make in performing my gender, I understand that I gain privilege as a white, thin, and biological woman. I can “pass”. This term I find disgusting, because it reinforces the power of the binary while simultaneously categorizing expression beyond male or female as failure.

Inheriting gender begins at birth. The reception of a baby is full of pinks and blues—the result of the gender market. Instead, I find subversive, irreverent approaches to gender appealing. Butler writes, “Parodic practices such as drag spotlight the imitative nature of all gender identities which are copies without an original.”\textsuperscript{3} The surge of popularity in drag culture post \textit{Paris is Burning}\textsuperscript{4} is the more visible critique of male and female archetypes.

Drags has fun through comedic realism. Performers accomplish their fantasy regardless of limitations. In a recent interview with the host, creator, and supermodel of the world, RuPaul, he talks about his life in drag

It [drag] actually didn't save my life, it gave me a life. I don't think there is a life in the mundane 9-to-5 hypocrisy. That's not living. That's just part of the Matrix. And drag is punk rock, because it is not part of the Matrix. It is not following any rules of societal standards. Boy, girl, black, white, Catholic, Jew, Muslim. It's none of that. We shape-shift. We can do whatever we want…It will never be mainstream. It's the antithesis of mainstream. And listen, what you're witnessing with drag is the most mainstream it will get. But it will never be mainstream, because it is completely opposed to fitting in.\textsuperscript{5}
Drag seeks to push against heteronormativity. Self-loathing and parroting have created rigid standards for gender to exist within. It is gender fluidity that breaks that rigidity. In framing gender expression in the way RuPaul talks about drag, I see no room for shame. Jessica Baran wrote for Hyperallergic that art needs drag.\(^6\) In an area that seems so boundless, art suffers from its own self-loathing. It takes time to move past that and explore with freedom, outside the gender canon, and “do whatever we want”.

I explore a feminine and theatrical approach to painting. The canonized ideal of a male genius painter has dissuaded me from continuing in that tradition. Instead, I chose to operate in the tradition of make-up artistry. The technical craft of make-up application in the drag community is a highly respected form of art. In both drag culture and my studio practice, challenging who can apply and who can wear the make-up is part of the work.

_**Fig. 3**_
Mark Aguhar was a gender-queer artist in the MFA program at UIC. She ran a Tumblr page called Blogging for Brown Gurls with the tag line, “I’m starting a blog and it’s all about self-acceptance.” Most of the posts were beautiful images of other gender queer folks and messages that supported her tagline. In her own practice, Aguhar talked about her work as a continuous exploration of queer expression and what it means to have grown up gay on the internet. Aguhar collects visual artifacts from queer online communities and uses them in their work to define and redefine who they are and what their body is. Aguhar’s work combines porn, fashion, textile patterns, optical effects, trans identities, and queer jokes. They do not intend to make teaching work, or art to represent the entirety of the LGBTIQA community, they express their situated experience of the spectrum.

This blog became a Tumblr sensation. She was loved and embraced by many member of the queer and gender-queer communities.

Her work, *Making Looks* (See Figure 4) was featured in a Hyperallergic article called *An Archival and Artistic Exploration of Transgender Identity* discussing the importance of the 2015 exhibition *Bring Your Own Body: Transgender Between Archives and Aesthetics* which sought to widen the perspective of transgender identity skewed by the mainstream media. The mention of her identity as a queer person of the internet is distinctly important. This work speaks so succinctly of that identity—it is formally simple, poetic and it is one of the most complex works included about transgender culture. It infers that the artist not only does not feel beautiful performing masculine, but does not equate the masculine with beauty. The artist transforms herself and she is not even present.
Even though it seems that the artist was on the rise in the art and queer communities she still fought against the hatred of confused hetero cis culture. In 2015 Mark Aguhar committed suicide. Hyperallergic’s article published just eight months after *Why Be Ugly When U Can Be Beautiful?* written by a dear friend of Aguhar’s who remembers her with: “She was a genderqueer pioneer who was Tumblr famous before the term was ever born, and the images and video of her that live on continue to queer eternity itself.”¹⁹ This image of (see figure 5) Aguhar in her studio titled *Leggings*, showcases the artist performing her gender in clothing manufactured by her. It is intimate and simultaneously posed.
The loss of this gender pioneer gravely emphasizes how much push there is against gender-queer culture. It is not something that one can escape even as an artist or activist. Aguhar’s untimely death is among many in her situation. It is uncommon for gender-queer women of color to have a voice in changing policies that directly effect their rights. It is not just a queer issue, it is a human rights issue.
S: Are all these models gay?

H: …

S: Well they look gay.
Placing identity into a binary system makes no sense. As Rae Spoon says, it is “absurd.” This is the case not just for gender identity. Many times the work I make is associated with both gender-queer and queer culture altogether. Sexuality is not a part of the work, and gender performance is not an indicator of sexual preference. When it comes to that kind of misunderstanding, it seems that in order to confront uncertainty a person may default to their understanding of gay/lesbian/pan culture as a coping mechanism for labeling a counterculture that cannot be labeled as something more familiar.

The best way to explain the difference between gender preference and sexual preference is that gender is who you go to bed as, and sexuality is who you want to go to bed with. They are mutually exclusive. Not everyone in the drag community is gay and vice versa. Again, genitalia does not determine gender, or sexual preference.

Artist Nancy Grossman experienced a similar misread of her leather mask works. She was working in New York during the rise of BDSM culture. Her heads were misconstrued as hoods. The hoods available for sale at that time were much different than her sculptures. In fact, it would have been impossible for her to use her work in BDSM play. Nonetheless, her works were bought up fast because of the similarities to the new sexual deviant movement. She combatted this with a statement describing the works as “self-portraits.” There was confusion and frustration at her assertion that the heads were in fact self portraits. The forms of the faces seemed too traditionally masculine for the audience to accept them as Grossman herself. Not only that, but the leather working she utilized was gender itself. She was always deconstructing and reconstructing. The relationship between that element of her process and gender construction
is uncanny. These works were made in the late 1970s when drag was still a criminal offense and the gay community had little way of protecting themselves from prosecution. So, the read that Grossman herself was gender fluid or even just related more to a masculine gender performance was harder for audiences to swallow. It wasn’t until reading David Getsy’s *Abstract Bodies: Sixties Sculpture in the Expanded Field of Gender*, that I even read the work that way.\textsuperscript{11}

Her focus on the head as the most important performance of gender has influenced my practice. Before moving to the head sculptures, Grossman’s assemblages of deconstructed leather were uncannily genital. She always decried them as funny, citing that to discuss the work’s relationship to gender based only on a resemblance to genitalia was reductive because genitals do not describe someone’s gender, pointing at the obvious distinction between sex and gender performance. I have to say that I agree, not only with her sentiment on genitals, but with gender’s hilarity. I take the definite dark, political motivation of my practice and satirize it.
Ian Brodie’s *A Vulgar Art: A New Approach to Stand-up Comedy* analyzes situations like Tig Notoro’s in a folkloristic way. Tig uses comedy as a way to talk about tragedy. Audiences were responsive because of the performer’s vulnerability and honesty. Notoro was able to create an environment in which she could push uncomfortable content to the forefront. Because of that skill people were able to laugh about topics like cancer that usually are burdened with grief. Brodie discusses comedy’s enriching role in both performance art, or even more broadly any type of narrative art making. He breaks down the joke within a set and describes why it cannot exists within any one else’s practice, and in doing so provides sociological analysis.\(^\text{12}\)

In *Shady Ladies*, there is humor behind the visual language of the different bandit masks. The patches are sourced from a biker patch website patchstop.com from the subcategory: girly patches. My choice to use the female biker vernacular is both personal and historical. What constitutes these patches as girly is based in the gender marketing. The logic that a blond gone
wild must be female is a silly notion. The biker community continues to be an outlaw culture that both empowers and limits female performance.

While my mother is a biker, she has been adherent to traditional femaleness. The phrase, female biker, itself is funny because one could describe someone like my mother as biker alone, the female portion of her identity only becomes important because of its disruption of the machismo surrounding the biker community. So, I infiltrated the patchstop.com website to understand its visualization of girlyness. I communicate the absurdity of this classification with female outlaws played by non-biker, non-binary, biologically male youth. The images of the Shady Ladies celebrate their own gender fluidity, but also operate in a similar way to Grossman’s work. I consider a lot of the play to be a reflection of my own position on the spectrum. It is unresolved and ever evolving.
My return to beauty was motivated by seduction.

In order to see something differently I may need to be seduced.
The styling and make-up in my work were choices that I made based solely on my attraction to drag and fashion. The way that women are painted makes me feel proud to wear make-up. There is a rich history behind make-up that I experience on a naive personal level. When I do my own make-up it is to enhance what beauty I feel like I already have. This is not to say that I need it, but I want it. It makes no sense to me to persecute someone who wants to feel beautiful.

Feminine aesthetics are tricky. Sometimes the gender market ends up winning with no transformation of the visual language at all. Instead of being irreverent or subversive the exercise can look exactly like a part of the binary system. The transformation is key. Within the transformation of my models lies the transformation of feminine performance. We are seduced into seeing an alternative. I struggled with beauty. I sacrificed my attraction to beauty as an attempt to get closer to work that was more honest, and I characterize that time as being in a kalliphobic state.

Arthur C. Danto discusses the fear of beauty in relationship to avant-garde artists of Fluxus. The Fluxus artists felt that they could not make beautiful art as it would be a false reflection of the disarray in that cultural climate. The actions they took, however, beauty-less, contributed heavily to the internal meaning of the work. Further, Danto states, almost in affirmation, that,“There is really no reason internal to the concept of art, for artists to confine themselves to beauty or such other of the aesthetic qualities that evoke visual pleasure.” So in making beauty central to my practice, I felt that it was less true. Beauty, or glamour if you will, plays a significant role in my intentionality. Using seduction helps to subvert the confrontational.
Perhaps this idea is carnivalesque, but I do not want to be repulsed by female performance. *My Lady of the Flowers* (Figure 3) points to the repressed expression of femininity across the gender spectrum and helps to identify the struggle in an attractive way. I communicate with humor and glamour which is the same way drag plays with gender through provocative performances that challenge the gender market.

Blindly, my friends and I mimicked, a historical photograph by Christer Strömholm. After this photoshoot for *My Lady of the Flowers* (see figure 9), I found the following image in Christer Strömholm’s exhibition catalogue from The International Center of Photography.  

![Fig. 10](image)

Figure 11 from the series *Les Amies de Place Blanche* resembles the pose and power of the model in my contemporary work *My Lady of the Flowers*. Here we are exposing the inherited tradition of gender marketing. However similar the pose and aesthetic may be, the images are conceptually completely at odds. I was playing with performance, and Strömholm's body of work functions through the lens of documentary photography.
It is important for me to position myself against this genre of art making. Historically, documentary photography has explored transgender and drag culture, and it has done so through an anthropological gaze. This creates a sense of otherness that further alienates a community. The photographic imagery that I produce is the product of a collaborative performance between the models and myself. It is not motivated by cataloguing or recording, rather it utilizes commercial and documentary aesthetics to challenge the existing visual history of male and female representation within the medium. Together we take the intimacies of drag performance by interaction of producer/myself, performer/collaborator and show-goer/audience, just as a queen would on a Friday night. The images produced from that place operate in a way that is emulating both perpetrator and victim—easy to consume and hard to stay with.

Signe Pierce is another artist that utilizes this dichotomy. Her film *American Reflexxx*, filmed by Alli Coates, was published on YouTube after being screened in the Miami Art Basel in 2013. In the YouTube description of the piece viewers read this

*American Reflexxx*, is a short film documenting a social experiment that took place in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. Director Alli Coates captured performance artist Signe Pierce as she strutted down a busy oceanside street in stripper garb and a reflective mask. The pair agreed not to communicate until the experiment was completed, but never anticipated the horror that would unfold in under an hour. The result is a heart wrenching technicolor spectacle that raises questions about gender stereotypes, mob mentality, and violence in America.15

From the start, there was a cynical tone. The shift in pace and interjection of the bright subtitles gave a forbidding vibe. As I continued to watch the reaction of the crowd enhance the tone. A common issue with the crowd is that it is almost impossible for them to identify the sex of the performer. To me the gender identification is unnecessary, but to them it is annoying, almost insulting that they cannot figure it out. The challenging presentation of gender causes the crowd
to become antagonistic mostly in the form of arguing that the performer is a “fuckboi” or a “girl.” As mentioned the performer and director do not speak the entire time, so there is no answer to this query. Instead of letting it go, they become violent: throwing water, tripping and eventually pushing down the artist. 

Fig. 11
Pierce’s piece is bright, attractive and shocking. The artist dances with a majority of confused people who expose their own ignorance. This was not the original intent of the work. The original intent of the piece was to play with female stereotypes and the aesthetics of Myrtle Beach. Coates, the director, was quoted saying

At the time, in 2013, we were living in New York and we wanted to step out of the NY art bubble to make some work in the real world. Making art in NYC for NYC can sometimes feel like preaching to the choir, so we wanted to get out of the echo chamber. We had been making some video art pieces dealing with femininity and stereotypes, and wanted to take those themes into a real life situation.\(^{16}\)

Throughout the article neither the director nor the artist mentioned the work’s intention to be aggressive. The reality of how the crowd handled the artists hyper-female, sexualized posturing, directly reflects the stigma associated with the marketed female gender. It is compounded by the mask that reflects the viewer into it placing them in the face of the unidentifiable. Rather than working as documentary piece, Pierce and Coates’ film is performative and inherently collaborative. In my own practice, I would not utilize myself as the performer, and I do not give so much control to reaction of the audience. It is a brave act to directly place one’s self into the uncertain and perhaps dangerous reality behind the work.

Since this film was made in 2013, I thought it was a powerful reminder that gender performance is still being persecuted. Pierce did not intend to have her gender questioned, but once that became an issue of the crowd it afforded negative attention to her. The chaos
surrounding the inability to label Pierce as man or woman, is a prime example of daily gender persecution. Fear and confusion drive incidents of violence. A dialogue is what is needed to prevent that.
H: Thanks again for coming.

D: No problem, this is the first thing I wanted to do after turning 18.
Shady Ladies will continue as a celebration of gender non-conforming culture though beauty and hilarity. This is a work created in the studio as an immersive space for play between myself and my friends who volunteer to work with me. They come because they want to. They identify on the spectrum and believe in a project that glamorizes that. I parse through visual language of drag, sociological delivery of comedy, and theoretical discussion of gender. This subversive characterization allows for exploration of feminine identity as opposed to succumbing to the derogatory culture surrounding feminine performance. In those photo shoots, my collaborators and myself adopt the identity of outlaws. We work together to make and perform characters that defy our gender boundaries.

Each role a person plays adds to their complexity. To have my identity reduced to just a female or just an artist would deny me of that complexity. The same concept applies to gender performance. No longer does one have to pass as one sex or another, or feel shame for their own identity. This idea is insulting to the gender spectrum. As co-author of Gender Trouble and musician Rae Spoon would say, “I’m retired from gender,” a quote that seems almost impossible to enact is the result of their complete rejection of the masculine, feminine and what has been sloppily labeled as “in-between.” The motivation to label an identity is counterproductive to gender fluidity. It is not all or nothing. Terms become confusing. Genderqueer, gender fluid, gender neutral, transgender, cis gender, bigender all mean very different things. Having the opportunity to choose is what matters. It takes courage to be the most authentic version of yourself.

Les Feinberg’s book Trans Liberation: Beyond Pink or Blue began with their address to a room of women and their husbands who were also dressed as women. Les described their
understanding of how difficult it is to be open and expect someone to be open in return. This conference Les attended was only an annual get together. Some of the people there were only able to perform their truest expression of gender, without fear, for one weekend. The time they spent there was a reminder of the broken systems of gender we all live in. In reference to existence on the binary they say, “I do not hold the view that gender is simply a social construct — one of two languages that we learn by rote from early age. To me, gender is the poetry each of us makes out of the language we are taught.” That is exactly how I feel about my identity and my work.
LIST OF FIGURES

7. Nancy Grossman, Blunt, wood, hardware and lacquer. 43.5 x 19.1 cm, 1968.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


ENDNOTES


