

Femmes: Front and Center

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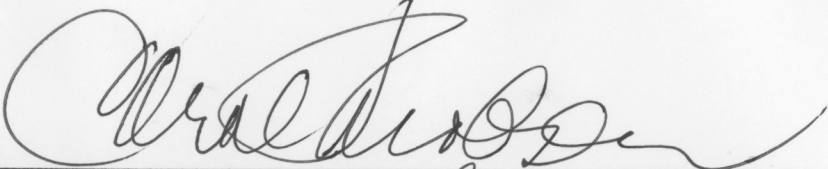
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Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the Degree of
Master of Fine Arts

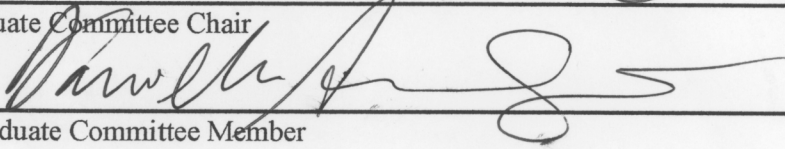
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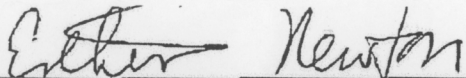
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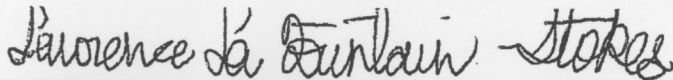
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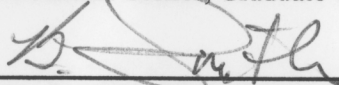
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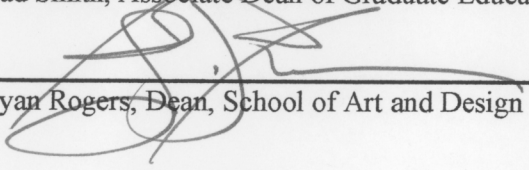

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Abstract

Femmes Front and Center is a visual and textual inquiry into the dynamics of queer femme performers within the queer community. Visually, *Femmes: Front and Center* brings the viewer face to face with queer femme performers through large scale, color photographs framed in classic, exhibition style. The exhibit reveals the intersections of gender identity, queerness, body size, race, and dis/ability. *Femmes Front and Center*, the written work, explores the history of queer performance culture from gay men and drag queens to drag kings to queer femme drag queens. It theorizes that queer femme performers and dis/abled queer femmes are disrupting existing paradigms of drag performance, gender identity, and body acceptance.

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To the many incredible people in my life:

You,
And you, and you
Braved the waters,
Laughing
Cajoling
Raging
Beside me
Three years long.

This moment is yours, too.

Words,
Any words, all words
Fail to signify
My gratitude for
The pushing
The pulling
The nudging
The believing

In what was possible.
In what could be achieved.
A writer in art school?
Who knew?
You did.

“Fail again. Fail better.”
“Worstward Ho” Samuel Beckett

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Frame One: Opening Shot

It's Saturday night at the International Drag King Extravaganza (IDKE) in Columbus, Ohio. I'm shoved against stage left, two cameras pulling on my neck, fans behind me shoving dollar bills at the stage. To my left, a young butch bounces to the beats blaring from the speaker above us. I glance around and notice I am the lone, queer femme photographer in a sea of camera-wielding butches who plaster the sides of the stage, all of us waiting for the next great shot.

The Arizona Kings prowl center stage, playing to their rabid fans and awaiting photographers. I peek beneath the stage, keeping a firm grip on the stage for support. My assistant is stage right, holding hands with a blue-eyed butch in a decked-out wheelchair. She waves at me, and I smile back. I'm glad she's met someone new, but I'm growing tired under the camera's weight. I know my time on the floor is limited.

Suddenly, I'm knocked under the stage as a well-built photographer with a large camera system pushes their way to the stage. I haul myself back to the floor, or try to, but the photographer has assumed my spot. I ask the photographer to move over to the right, showing them an empty space. S/he replies:

"No, I'll stand right here. This is a free country." S/he crosses his arms and waits for the next act to begin.

I try again to nudge myself back into place. I can feel his fuzzy arms against mine. His mustache is glistening with sweat.

"I've been here for 2 hours," I explain. "Can you please just move over a few inches?"

While there is space for hir to move over, I'm flanked by people on my left.

"No." S/he says, clearly looking down at me. The mood starts to feel threatening. Did I just see hir chest puff-up?

"Do I need to get security?" I ask.

"Fine. Get security. I'm not moving." S/he says. This time I see a clenched fist.

"Do you think you can boss me around because you're a guy? A guy with a big camera? Is that it?"

I scream as the music blares around us.

The photographer stares back at me.

"I'm NOT a man!" she yells and steps even further into my personal space.

"Then stop acting like one!" I say.

I can't believe I've just asked someone at a drag king show to stop acting like a man. What kind of friend/ally to the transgender community am I? How can I photograph within this gender performance community when I'm yelling at people to stop 'acting like man'?

She moves over into the empty space and begins shooting the performance.

I feel both relief and guilt. I'm relieved to have personal space, again. I'm relieved to be able to photograph the show from the space I worked for and claimed as mine. I'm relieved I stood up for myself in a situation that felt threatening and misogynistic.

But why did this happen? Why did the photographer feel s/he had a right take over the space? Did s/he feel so emboldened by her male clothing and facial hair to enact male privilege, if even for one evening? Did the macho attitude set by the drag king conference encourage the cavalier attitude of "kings first" and "ladies second"? Perhaps she does not *see* me, a queer fat femme amidst the other butches with cameras. Realistically, she probably didn't care who she pushed under the stage. But symbolically, it speaks to the invisibility of queer femmes within the queer community and within queer performance culture, specifically.

The exchange has drained me— my energy, my breath, my vocal cords. I have Myasthenia Gravis, an autoimmune neuromuscular disease, and this exchange has set off a flurry of reactions. My thighs tremble under my leggings. My eyes are blurry. But I'll be damned if I'll show it. I let my pride take over, and I stay to photograph several more acts. Although I want to roam around the stage, the room and the dressing rooms, I refuse to lose this real estate. Even more photographers have arrived, and it will be difficult to navigate in and out of the crowd without losing my balance or risking my equipment.

After an hour and half of photographing the Showcase, I call it quits. I can no longer carry the camera upright without shaking, and double vision makes focusing too difficult. Do I stay and take more haphazard images, hoping for a good one? Or do I leave, knowing I've captured quality images, and get plenty of rest for tomorrow's activities? I wave goodbye to my assistant, and hail a cab home. I'm disappointed. The show is still going, as it will for another hour. But I can only work as long as this queer femme dis/abled body allows me.

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Frame Two: IDKE X

The International Drag King Extravaganza is a four-day long academic conference and entertainment showcase exploring drag king culture. In 2008, the Tenth Annual IDKE was held in Columbus, Ohio. I became involved with IDKE X in August 2008, after my proposal to talk about the value of ethical photojournalism within the drag culture, was accepted by IDKE organizers. In addition, I exhibited photographs from my first photo essay on Detroit's drag kings (*fig. 1*). IDKE was also the ideal setting to re-establish my academic and photographic interest in gender-based performance, queer culture, and ethnographic research. I discussed my goals to do field research on queer performance studies with event organizers.



Fig. 1. Austin Tyler

Organizers helped me to secure press passes and gain access to performers on and off the stage. I attended dress rehearsals and visited dressing rooms. Prior to arriving in Columbus, I posted my presence on the IDKE website. I developed flyers, business cards and posters to distribute during the conference. In addition, I hired an assistant to help carry equipment, distribute flyers and work with performers to sign model releases.



Fig.2: La Femme

queer femme performers including: Bevin Branlandingham, Cookie

Queer femmes, however, led me to IDKE. In June 2008, I was invited to exhibit photographs from my original “Femme” series (*fig. 2*) at the *Architecture of Femme Conference* in Chicago, Illinois. During the *Femme Conference*, I met several



Fig. 3: Cookie Woolner, Bevin Branlandingham, Zoe Femmetastica

Woolner, Leslie Freeman, Julie Serrano, Krista Smith (*Kentucky Friend Woman*), Zoe Femmetastica, and Jenny Lowry (*Pidgeon Von Tramp*). (fig. 3) Their excitement for queer performance spaces, as well as their history with IDKE, inspired me to revisit drag culture for my MFA thesis.

In subsequent conversations about queer femme performance, I realized many femmes performed, or still perform, as both drag kings and drag queens (including neo-burlesque performers). Take for instance, Krista Smith (*Kentucky Friend Woman*) of Oakland, California. (fig. 4) According to her biography in *Femmes of Power, Exploding Queer Femininities*, Smith began her performance career as a drag king with Santa Barbara's Disposable Boy Toys (Dahl 176). She's also performed as a female drag queen with Seattle's The Queen Bees (Dahl 176). She tackled fat oppression, classism, racism and gender bias on

Fig. 4: Krista Smith (aka) Kentucky Fried Woman

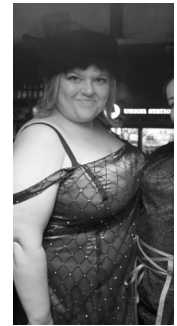


Fig. 5: Krista Smith and Butch Tap Troupe



stage. Today, she is leading a butch tap troupe in the Bay area, as well as performing solo as Kentucky Friend Woman. (fig. 5)

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Frame 3: What is Drag?

Although drag, which is the act of one sex (i.e. male, female) dressing in the clothing of the opposite sex for theatrical purposes, dates back to the Greek stage; drag performance also has a significant and complicated history within the gay community. Esther Newton, Ph.D., the first anthropologist to publish field research on drag queens and female impersonators, writes of the gay male's drag scene:

The word "drag" attaches itself...to the sex role... drag primarily refers to the wearing of apparel and accessories that designate a human being as male or female when worn by the opposite sex. By focusing on the outward appearances of role, drag implies that sex role, and by extension, role in general ...[that it] can be manipulated, put on and off again at will.

(Role Models 26)

In addition to discussing the outward/inward and male/female dynamics at play within gay male drag performances, Newton also defines *who* performs as drag queens. Newton writes, "In homosexual terminology, a drag queen is a homosexual man who often, or habitually, dresses in female attire. (A drag butch is a lesbian who often, or habitually, dresses in male attire)" (18). Although many drag queens also refer to themselves as female impersonators, Newton clarifies, "...all professional female impersonators are 'drag queens'" (21). According to Newton, one of the main differences between a drag queen and female impersonator, is that "the female impersonator is a *professional* drag queen" (14). The female impersonator sees herself as nightclub performer, no longer a want-to-be drag queen, but a bona fide (paid) performer (Newton 14).

Nineteen years later Judith "Jack" Halberstam, in *Female Masculinities*, writes that the drag king is a "recent phenomenon" (232). She describes the drag king as "a female (usually) who dresses up in recognizably male costume and performs theatrically in that costume" (232). A male impersonator, however, is a throwback to a centuries old theater culture; wherein a woman dresses as a man to convince

her audience that she is indeed male (Halberstam 232). Thus, a greater divide exists between male impersonator and drag king in *Female Masculinities*. Halberstam argues that a drag king is performing some parody or expression of masculinity, not to be read as *biological man* by her audience (232). Furthermore, in a nod to Esther Newton's distinction about *who* performs as drag queens, Halberstam argues that while drag kings and male impersonators do not necessarily need to be lesbian [but tend to be], the butch or (drag butch) "most definitely is" (232).

Given the previous theories regarding drag, what then do we make of today's queer femme performers? What happens when IDKE's keynote speaker is Debra Kate, a fantastic bio-queen (short for biologically female) performer who once transitioned from female-to-male, but now performs as a high-femme queen? Or when a queer femme drag queen recreates the stage as butch tap dancer? According to Rachall Devitt in the essay, *Girl on Girl: Fat Femmes, Bio-Queens and Redefining Drag*, these gender performance renegades are reshaping the "gender performance battlefield, long ridden with land mines of interpretation, appropriation and identity" (29). Devitt defines the femme drag queen (or bio queen) as, "[she] who drag queens or performs a heightened femininity. She is at once campy and earnest, parodist and ecdysiast..." (29).

Although Devitt's drag queens are referenced as women, Devitt is not married to the gender binary. By jumping on Halberstam's choice of the word *usually* in "a drag king is (usually) a female..." (232), Devitt argues that drag allots for greater gender slippage and the possibility of a non-binary gender system of drag (29). She turns to Judith Butler to support this argument. On quoting Butler, Devitt writes:

[Judith] Butler suggests that drag...is not a secondary imitation that presupposes a constant and repeated effort to imitate its own idealizations [of masculinity, of femininity], but that hegemonic heterosexuality is itself a constant and repeated effort to imitate its own idealizations.

(30)

In other words, Devitt (through Butler) is suggesting that queer drag performances are based on what the normative, straight culture *idealizes* as man/masculinity or woman/femininity, not what the LGBT community idealizes as masculine/feminine or male/female. Rather than imitate how lesbians enact masculinity within *their* culture, drag kings copy or parody the ways heterosexual men enact masculinity (i.e. the rap singer/the boxer/the boy band). In addition, as Esther Newton discussed in *Mother Camp*, the queer audience needs to know a woman exists under the masculine clothing for the drag illusion to work (26).

If Butler/Devitt are right, however, then queer femme performers are uprooting and challenging the classic drag dynamic by asking audiences to accept their feminine-identified bodies, as well as their exaggerated performances of femininity without the typical “incongruity of ‘actual’ and staged gender” (Devitt 30). In other words, queer femmes are signaling a new era of drag by performing without the hidden agenda (sex role reversal). By using their wit, charm, bodies, and camp— queer femmes engage audiences in a new drag paradigm.

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FRAME 4: IDKE: Front and Center

Femmes: Front and Center is comprised of nine photographs culled from more than 1000 images captured over four days. During IDKE weekend, I photographed two drag showcases, one burlesque show, academic seminars, workshops, and impromptu events. On Saturday, I presented my paper about photojournalistic ethics within the queer community. (*fig 5a*).



Fig. 5a: Kristin Kurzawa

As I photographed the shows, I saw a clear gender hierarchy between drag kings and queer femmes. I

Fig. 5b. Drag King Emcee and Dancer



realized queer femme performances were often slotted as pre-show acts or scheduled as “filler acts” between the large drag king numbers. I noticed photographers and audience members showing less respect for femme performers, either by leaving the stage during their acts or refusing to tip performers. In drag culture, tipping is a sign of audience appreciation and reception. In addition, the only all-femme burlesque

show was held off-site, at 12:00 am. Krista Smith (*Kentucky Fried Woman*) also shared her disappointment in the burlesque show’s policy that “Non-feminine identified persons were not allowed to perform at this event” (email). The organizer’s choice only reinforced the gender binary. In addition, a drag king hosted the show. He often treated the on-stage femmes like props. (*fig. 5b*) Smith also wrote that she and other femme activists have worked for years to make space for queer femme performers at IDKE (see Appendix A).

It was the residual stigma against queer femme performers, which encouraged me to photograph, document and exhibit the power of these performers/performances. In choosing nine performers, I chose images reflexive of IDKE’s community. The women and genderqueer folk represented in *Femmes: Front and Center* are between 20-40 years old. Body size was critical, as queer fat femmes are reviving the neo-burlesque movement. In addition, I wanted to reflect IDKE’s diversity where drag kings and queer femmes of all races and creeds performed.

Fig. 6. Viva Valezz





Fig. 7: Ceci My Playmate

As a queer femme photographer, I bring a unique perspective to this project, that of an insider. Their on-stage physical vulnerabilities are also mine. Like Viva Valezz (*Fig 6.*) those are my body parts jiggling in front of the camera. What then does it mean for me to photograph Viva Valezz from behind— with her ass and cellulite visible for all to see? What motivates me to

capture Ceci My Playmate as she struts off stage with fists of cash? (*fig. 7*) Does my queer femme insider status erase my voyeurism, my gaze? Or does it complicate my relationship with the bodies in this exhibit? Although I classify my gender identity as queer femme, I also identify as a lesbian- a woman who (usually) dates or partners with women. Clearly an erotic gaze is at work. However, more complicated intersections of dis/ability and hegemonic heterosexual expectations of femininity complicate my gaze, or what I find myself photographing.

Should I assume because I am a white, dis/abled, working class femme, that all femmes enact femininity like I do? In fact, I became conscious of my queer femme identity, and my place within a larger queer community. I also became aware that by claiming or naming myself as a queer femme and/or my subjects as queer femme performers, I fail to represent *all* queer femmes or the many ways in which queer femininity is lived, on or off the stage.

Fig. 8: Pidgeon Von Tramp



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Frame 5: Reframing Dis/Abilities

When it comes to dis/ability, the visibility issue becomes more fragmented. The queer femmes in my collection appear to be able-bodied, persons not currently living with a physical dis/ability. In a recent interview with HomoFactus Press Contributor Darrah du Jour, fellow femme and crip (a word reclaimed by dis/abled activists to self-identity their physical dis/ability) poet Leslie Freeman writes about being a femme in today's femme performance culture:

I've also watched femme burlesque and theatre performances of sexual desirability, which have re-enforced a tacit aesthetic hierarchy, privileging curvaceous, cissexual female femme bodies... ideals of feminine beauty which are inaccessible to many, if not most, people with physical dis/abilities.

(HomoFactus Press par. 4)

Freeman is right, no *visibly* dis/abled femmes performed at IDKE. The IDKE performances abounded with movement, dance, speed, energy and sexuality. Where were the performers who use chairs, scooters, walking sticks, or companion dogs? In addition, where were those living with hidden disabilities, conditions that cannot be immediately seen: diabetes, cystic fibrosis or myasthenia gravis?

Freeman writes:

If a 'real femme' is one ... who dances—in a variety of standing positions—with or for a butch partner, without shaking, spasming, falling, or hesitating; who calls herself fierce but doesn't complain about pain-- Well, honey, that ain't me...I'll be the one at the back of the bar, with the naked scarred face and scruffy tomboy clothes.

(HomoFactus Press par. 5)

Like Freeman, I am a dis/abled femme with tomboy tendencies, favoring t-shirts and jeans over mini skirts and push-up bras. I cannot dance onstage without falling, quivering or stumbling due to my neuromuscular disorder. I often feel like a *fake femme* because I can't wear high heels. Tantalizing as they are, my knees and ankles won't cooperate. I love eye make-up, but drooping eyelids leave false eyelashes on my cheeks. Why then did I fill a gallery with seemingly able-bodied women/genderqueer folk?

Perhaps I am photographing the loss of my body to dis/ease. Perhaps, through these seemingly strong bodies, I am exposing the gap between what was once possible with my body and what is now changed. On the other hand, why should I assume my subjects are dis/ability free?

Butler and Devitt challenge the drag scene to see beyond the limits of traditional drag as the replication of "heteronormative heterosexual" ideals, to push queer performers to break this trajectory among non-binary gender performances (Devitt 30). I argue that presuming queer femme performers are able-bodied is predicated on a set of culturally determined, almost mythological ideals representing the, strong, perfect body. To allow for "imperfections," to photograph performers with the knowledge that most people will deal with a dis/ability at some time (be it aging eyes, a broken leg, diabetes, etc.), encourages me and the viewer to deal with the incongruities between the idealized body and the actual body.

My imperfect body not only informs the work I do, but it challenges me to rethink accepted practices and philosophies regarding photography, as well as my identity as an artist. Prior to diagnosis (2003), I identified as a writer, not a visual artist. I saw these as distinct roles, like butch/femme or drag king/drag queen. Writing held legitimacy; photography was a naïve dream. Yet, I kept both a daily writing and photography practice during this time. Myasthenia Gravis, or rather its effects, disrupted my grid-like existence— where writing lived on Axis X and photography on Axis Y. Like many queer femmes, I learned to create from the middle.

As a photographer with MG, I work strategically and efficiently. Camera gear is carefully selected for stability, weight and accessibility. I hire assistants when I can, and maintain contacts with working professionals. I continue to write; my work is more about feedback and collaboration, than pride. Publishing is not a solo/single act, but a process. Similarly, my photographic practice must be flexible and open to raw and unexpected moments.

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Frame 6: Queer + Femme + Dis/ability = Identity

In 2004, raw and unexpected moments erupted within my photojournalism class. After studying the work of Susan Meiselas, Catherine Opie and Sally Mann, I realized I wanted to become a community-based photographer. Either through photo documentaries or photo series, this was way to marry my love of writing, photography, and community activism. I searched for a community to photograph, a community I *knew*. As a queer femme who dated butches, I knew a great deal about butch/femme dynamics and drag king culture. I looked for Detroit's drag culture, assuming my queer femme identity would provide universal access. Turning to the Internet, I wrote to an electronic message board for Detroit Drag Kings and Queens, asking for photographic subjects. Within a week, I was at Stiletto's Night Club in Inkster, Michigan.

For two years (2004-06), I photographed Stiletto's drag performers. Each weekend, camera in hand, I sat backstage with the kings as they masked their faces with facial hair and heavy brows to transform themselves from women to drag kings. Similarly, I attempted to signal my queer femme identity by dressing in feminine clothes and wearing heavy make-up. However, several kings failed to read me as a lesbian. Apparently my queer femme identity (not dyke, as the kings referred to themselves), coupled

with my conservative clothes and expensive camera equipment, had the working class kings thinking I was another upper-class college girl working them over for a grade.

In fact, I wasn't read as a lesbian until I brought my masculine-identified partner to the club. Even then, it wasn't altogether clear what *I* was. My partner was just beginning his transition from female-to-male, from a masculine woman to a man with chest hair. When I introduced my partner as Mitch, the kings stared at me with confused expressions. Later they ask me, "if your girlfriend becomes a dude, how can you be a lesbian?" Rather than untangle the club's transphobic culture, I put on a new mask, complete with jeans, t-shirts and no partner.

My dis/ability also remained a secret. By *looking* healthy and failing to reveal my weakness or exhaustion, I donned another mask each weekend. Eventually, I shared my story with Damian Ross/Linda, my main subject. Linda was both a nurse and temporarily dis/abled. But pride kept me sharing my frustrations about applying for Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI), even though I knew Linda received SSDI. The choice to mask my vulnerabilities created an impenetrable layer of distrust between photographer and subjects. As such, relationships remained at the club level- where our differences were erased by the blaring music.

Today, I realize how my masks informed my work with the drag kings. Judith Butler writes in *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory*, "Actors are always on the stage, within in the terms of the performance" (526). I, the actor, was always on stage— even if I didn't realize it at the time. As a young woman newly diagnosed with myasthenia gravis, struggling with her partner's decision to transition from female to male, I sought a stage (community) where I was not visible. Four years later, I found a stage where I can claim the complex identity of queer dis/abled femme photographer with both pride and resistance.

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Frame Seven: Pride and Resistance

Pride and resistance also describe the work and career of Catherine Opie; whose artistic practice and powerful images have encouraged me to be a queer photographer. Like many, I first discovered Opie's work through the *Portraits* or *Being and Having* series, which were recently displayed as part of *American Photographer*, a retrospective of Opie's work at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York City.

Mike and Sky (1993) Courtesy of Catherine Opie and Regen Projects, Los Angeles



to

These large, color-rich images of drag kings, transgender folk, and members of a San Francisco leather society defiantly, lovingly, and fiercely portray the queer community. Contextually, the portraits challenge viewers (gay and straight) who are unfamiliar with queer culture, leather culture, or gender politics. However, Opie's aesthetic nod to Hans Holbein and the traditional exhibition style, allows the images to blend into the fine art gallery. As Holland Cotter wrote a *New York Times* review of the *Being and Having* series, "they were like shock troops crashing a mannerly art-world party" (par. 5).

Before preparing for *Femmes: Front and Center*, I visited Catherine Opie's retrospective exhibit, *American Photographer*. I was overwhelmed by the exhibit's scope. Four floors dedicated to a living, out lesbian photographer. Within one exhibit, I saw how Opie's lens captured the ice houses of Minnesota, surfers, the streets of LA, and the many faces of the queer community within a documentary, yet humanistic style. After viewing the show, I realized that who or what you photograph is not as important as photographing what you feel connected to in life. I also paid particular attention to the technical aspects of Opie's work. For in an era where blurry, half-focused images are deemed acceptable, I really saw the contextual impact of her photographic skills, i.e. composition, color range, scale, and focus.

As a result of these insights, I credit Catherine Opie’s exhibit, *American Photographer*, for refocusing my MFA thesis. Prior to seeing *American Photographer*, my thesis was based on drag kings, not queer femme performers. Having started my photographic career with drag kings, I felt obligated to continue in that community. But after seeing the wide range of communities Opie photographed, I was encouraged to change course, to explore another community with which I connected. As a queer femme, I wanted to discover, photograph and document the work of queer femme performance artists. In her notes to the *American Photographer* catalogue, Opie writes, “[my goal for *Being and Having* was] expanding lesbian identity and showing how lesbian sexuality is heterogeneous and complex”—which meant treating this community with respect and care, and validating its position within the culture at large” (Guggenheim/Opie par 3).

I, too, fought to find an aesthetic fitting for my performers. For example, most of my subjects are isolated center stage, surrounded by near or total darkness. Rather than choose images with many performers on stage or images backstage, I chose shots focusing on one or two performers. In this way, the viewer is forced to confront the femme, the body without distractions. Without a placard to describe the image, a viewer must speculate as to what the performer is doing. Is she dancing? Modeling? Was there music? Who is she?

Fig. 15: Metaphetamina Acid



Fig. 16: Andy Roginous/DC Kings



My images also reflect a commitment to strong color and vivid lighting. Take for instance, the photograph of *Metaphetamina Acid* (fig. 15). Shot without a flash, the subject is bathed in the strong stage lights, giving her a blue or purple haze. Another example is *Andy Roginous* (fig. 16). Here the

sharp contrast between the red stage lights and the dark background highlights the dramatic face and stance of the performer.

Many images from *Femmes: Front and Center* were originally shot from below; therefore, the performer appears to be standing slightly above the viewer/photographer. While this was a technical issue at IDKE, in the gallery, it gave the queer femmes a larger-than-life

presence. In addition those images with off-center compositions, like *Mae the Belly Dancer* (fig. 18),

Fig. 18: Mae the Belly Dancer



revealed the possibility for audience participation. In contrast, *Becky Buxom* (fig. 19) is a traditionally composed photograph, with each third of

the photographic frame activated. Similarly, her act was primarily performed center-stage.



Fig. 19: Becky Buxom

I knew, having read Deborah Bright's *The Passionate Camera: Photography and Bodies of Desire*, that "photographs of sexually charged subjects...made them vulnerable to accusations of 'pornography' and 'obscenity'..." (1). In order to garner the most respect for my subjects/our community, I again recalled the work of Catherine Opie. I chose to present my images in an aesthetic inherited from fine art galleries.

I personally printed the images, each one approximately 20"x22. Then framed them in black frames (28"x30") with off-white matte. Rather than display labels beside each image, which would only further distract from the performer's presence, a statement about the work was available at the front of the gallery.

Fig. 20: Femmes: Front and Center Exhibit



In terms of digital imaging, I work by a set of standards as a documentary photographer, which stems from my long membership in the National Press Photographers' Association. The premise of the association's ethical statement for digital photographers is the following:

As journalists we believe the guiding principle of our profession is accuracy; therefore, we believe it is wrong to alter the content of a photograph in any way that deceives the public.

(par. 1)

Therefore, I refused to digitally alter my images, if altering them meant changing the viewer's understanding of the event or subject. It was important to ensure a sense of trust with my audience and my subjects. Granted, viewers at *Femmes: Front and Center* are seeing queer culture through *my* lens/world view, but my goal was to provide viewers with the most authentic view possible.

As a dis/abled queer femme photographer it makes sense that I insist on seeing the unaltered image or document. I photograph, write about, and exhibit images regarding communities that are raw, complicated and resistant to being prettied-up by outsiders, let alone insiders. But insiders, inside marginalized communities, have the best chance for upending the status quo, be that in the drag community, the dis/ability community, or in the art world.

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Frame 8: Redux

It's Saturday night. People have come to see *Femmes: Front and Center*. In front of me, nine large portraits of queer femme performers hang under professional lighting. I'm proud of the work I've done within this community project. I think back six months and realize how many people have been involved in making *Femmes: Front and Center* a reality.

I watch butch-femme couples talk in front of the portraits. Occasionally, a femme slaps her butch as the butch stares too long at the performer's lush body. A college-aged femme walks along the wall, pretending not to notice the performers' nakedness; rather, she stares intensely at their make-up. I notice an older lesbian couple approach from the back of the gallery. They look disapprovingly at Viva Valezz's ass and swinging tassels. And as professors arrive from the University to congratulate me, I'm aware of those who approach the work and those who stay safely by the door.

It's after midnight; the show is over. My femme family and I are relaxing. Suddenly, the front door swings open. The cooks from across the street are weaving their way into the gallery. Drunk and loud, they finish the relish tray. Finally, they notice the portraits. A nervous glance sweeps through the femmes. What were we going to do with a group of drunken men at 12:30 am?

I sit quietly and wait. Will they mock the women? Will the images get knocked off the walls? What if they try to take one with them?

The men are in love with the images. Amidst the smell of beer and whisky, they remain courteous and respectful. All the pictures remain on the wall. A tall man drags his friend to the back corner to see *Becky Buxom* and says, "Now this, this is the kind of woman I want." The others continue to walk from image to image, commenting on the beauty and allure of the performers.

I'm torn. Do I ask them to leave or tell them to go? Their male gaze rings loud, obnoxious and well, *very real*. It was as real as my gaze was when I captured these images. As real as the voices of my queer femme family when we talked about being queer, fat, dis/abled, and femme. And as real as the lust I witnessed earlier, before unsuspecting butches were slapped for staring at these very images. So with a small smile, I keep my mouth shut and let the men continue with their private viewing.

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Appendix A

The Bio/Femme Queen Manifesto

“This piece was inspired by an open letter originally written to the drag king community, and presented November 2001 at the closing plenary of IDKE 3 as a way to address both policy regarding and recognition of Bio Queen performance in drag king spaces. We'd like to publicly thank Jay Sennett, who was extraordinarily supportive of Bio Queen activism during the conference, and graciously gave us the time to present our letter.*

During IDKE 3, we heard many people talk about the transgressive power of drag. Regardless of our specific gender identities off stage, gender is something, which can be and is performed on stage. Drag illustrates the performative nature of gender, not just in front of an audience, but in every day life.

Many of those involved in the burgeoning drag king scene may not be familiar with the term 'Bio Queen'. As with many definitions, we can't offer a concrete, stable meaning for the term, nor are we invested in creating one. For the sake of discussion, we offer the following: Bio Queens are 'biologically female' or 'female-identified' individuals who consciously perform 'female' genders as a means of engagement, critique, and/or celebration. Bio Queen performances insist that there are many ways to perform gender. As women, we perform various kinds of femininities and female genders---from heterosexual housewives to working dominatrixes---which are not equivalent to our 3real life2 identities. Our gender performances may resemble or be connected in some way to our gender identities off stage, but they are valid *performances* nonetheless.

'Drag king' started with a simple definition: a 'real woman' playing a 'man'. We know that this definition doesn't work for many of us, just as the boxes our culture offers (M or F) don't work. People often assume that those boxes are a comfortable fit for female-identified women or femme dykes, but they are not. When Bio Queens are told, "You're girls playing girls, what's radical about that?" or when we are excluded from drag performances, our form of gender performance is devalued and invalidated. Many kings don't identify as women or female, but their performance of masculinity on stage is still valid and valued. We can see the potential and power within trans-identified drag king performances; we can allow individuals the right to claim their own transgender identities and perform variations of those identities as and in drag. Therefore, we need to open our definition of transgressive to include all active performances of gender, including those of Bio Queens.

We care deeply about the drag king community; we have great respect for the importance of self-defined space for communities. We'd like to offer two examples of the many ways of creating such communities. Consider the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival: many of the issues surrounding MWMF come from the organizers' inability to engage with an evolving culture. On the other hand, various queer organizations which began under the rubric of 'gay' over time have become LGBTQIA. This evolution certainly brings its own difficulties, but the struggle builds a stronger, more dynamic community, one based on mutual recognition and respect for difference. Consider the first example---a community built on exclusion and rigid definition ('womyn-born womyn'), and the second, one built on inclusion and the ability to evolve along with its constituents. Clearly, IDKE is an example of the latter.

Appendix A (con't.)

Drag is certainly entertaining and fun, but it's also highly political. We'd like to begin a dialogue within our community in order to push at our boundaries and definitions. We assert that Bio Queens are already vital members of this community, and not just as back-up performers or cute side dishes. We make important contributions to drag performances and dialogues, and we want our participation recognized and respected. We do not want to be tolerated or even invited into your space. We want to work together in a shared space to build community, inspire each other, and challenge the mainstream world's views on gender.”

By:

Eve (full name edited out) aka Summer's Eve
Kentucky Fried Woman
Tristan Taormino aka Miss Triss
and Venus Envy