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Portraying Drag

**APPROVED BY
SUPERVISING COMMITTEE:**

Susan E. Mickey, Supervisor

William (Bill) Bloodgood

Portraying Drag

by

Aaron Keith Kubacak

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Dedication

This work is dedicated to the drag performers in our local communities who work tirelessly every day to bring their artistry and craft to the stage and in loving memory of my grandmother, Pearl Fridel who taught me the joy of painting, art and creativity.

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Abstract

Portraying Drag

Aaron Keith Kubacak, M.F.A.

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Supervisor: Susan E. Mickey

This project investigates the varied sub cultures of drag in the local Austin community. Through a series of multi-step ethnographic, arts-based research and visual coding strategies I created a project in which I asked and answered these questions: How do local drag queens and kings design persona, create a visual narrative discourse and construct unique gender identities through costuming? --And: How do the everyday, unique costume choices of local drag queens and kings create a dramaturgy that either supports traditions or creates new meanings in the world of drag as a whole? In exploring the questions of this study, I was able to understand how the design process is enacted and functions as I translated verbal interviews and images of drag performers into a body of representational visual work.

In answering these questions I utilized a thematic coding method to pull meaning and context from a series of semi-structured interviews with five local drag performers. The questions I asked each subject related to their personal life

stories, ways of performing onstage, methods of performing gender, inspirations, personal style and costume choice as they related to persona creation. In addition to these oral interviews, I also explored each individual performer's archive of personal drag photographs in order to pinpoint a picture that reflected their drag persona and iconic drag costume. These images then became the source inspiration for a series of large scale paintings in which I collaged together the essence of each performer, re-encoding the information I gleaned from them via my own painting style, symbolic system of visual representation and discovering and utilizing a type of painterly visual story telling unique to the medium of ultra violet reactive paint. It was my hope in this process to highlight these unique local performers with celebratory honesty as they exist in this place and time in history.

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RUPAUL, NOT THE DEFINITIVE DRAG PORTRAYAL

The art form of drag has a complex and rich history that carries with it many stereotypical assumptions. Many people think that drag simply consists of a gay man throwing on a dress and performing on stage in the guise of the opposite gender, but television shows like *RuPaul's Drag Race* have revealed that there is an intense creative process and industry involved in making up a drag persona. RuPaul has in many ways knocked down the gay club door that once closed drag off from the masses, but has RuPaul gone far enough in its advancement of the artform? While *RuPaul's Drag Race* seemingly sheds a much needed spotlight on drag, its reliance on becoming a commercial success seems to have impeded it from becoming a true and honest representation across all fronts, especially representing the varied mosaic of drag performers who work and perform in local communities. For example, where does the over 50s drag queen fit into the RuPaul framework--or the sober queen--or the drag king? All of these examples have yet to grace the RuPaul stage. This is to say that *RuPaul's Drag Race* acts more as a beauty, talent and popularity competition, than an exploration of real drag sub-cultures that exist throughout the country.

Mary Marcel in her article "Representing Gender, Race and Realness" speaks to the disparity between those individuals who do drag in the local scene and those that are commodified for the sake of television viewership by the never-to-be quenched need of advertisers who wish to put a "looksist, skinny and hyper-feminine, Barbie-doll" (17) face to their products. This commodifying need, she says, adds up to a "misogynist synecdoche," for those individuals who don't follow the prescribed elitist

criteria of the show, maintaining that if a queen doesn't fulfill a certain image, they usually don't end up winning the competition. As a researcher and designer who is familiar with drag kings and queens in the local community, I am intensely aware that the world of drag is more varied, personal and unique than what is briefly written about in history books as "female impersonation" or put forth even on groundbreaking shows like *RuPaul's Drag Race*.

In order to take a look at the more varied sub cultures of drag in my local community, I conducted a multi-step ethnographic, arts-based research and visual coding project in which I asked and answered these questions: How do local drag queens and kings design persona, create a visual narrative discourse and construct unique gender identities through costuming? --And: How do the everyday, unique costume choices of local drag queens and kings create a dramaturgy that either supports traditions or creates new meanings in the world of drag as a whole? In exploring the questions of this study, I was able to understand how the design process is enacted and functions as I translated verbal interviews and images of drag performers into a body of representational visual work.

In answering these questions I utilized a thematic coding method to pull meaning and context from a series of semi-structured interviews with five local drag performers. The questions I asked each subject related to their personal life stories, ways of performing onstage, methods of performing gender, inspirations, personal style and costume choice as they related to persona creation. In addition to these oral interviews, I also explored each individual performer's archive of personal drag photographs in order to pinpoint a picture that reflected their drag persona and iconic

drag costume. These images then became the source inspiration for a series of large scale paintings (posters) in which I collaged together the essence of each performer, re-encoding the information I gleaned from them via my own painting style, symbolic system of visual representation and discovering and utilizing a type of painterly visual story telling unique to the medium of ultra violet reactive paint. It was my hope in this process to highlight these unique local performers with celebratory honesty as they exist in this place and time in history.

A HISTORY OF DRAG

Watching Dame Edna (as performed by the Australian comedian Barry Humphries) appear with Johnny Carson on the *Tonight Show* was probably my first introduction to a drag queen. She typified a type of drag that was welcoming and nonconfrontational. A drag fairy godmother, if you will. Her cheerfully-colored knitted cardigans, wire rimmed cat glasses, sweet smiles and temperament, I imagine, allowed her brand of performative cross-dressing to reach the masses, soothingly, like a cup of hot sweet hibiscus tea. I was a pre-teen then. It was around this time when the gay rights movement was just beginning to seep into the greater public consciousness. The AIDS crisis was still very much a concern, HIV was on the verge of being considered a manageable disease, and the idea that you could be born one gender and feel like another was considered a disorder not an identity. It was in this era that I discovered my own sexuality, coming of age at a time when Ellen proclaimed “I’m gay” on television--allowing me to feel confident enough in myself to come out to my high school girlfriend and live the life of a gay man from then on.

The first live drag queen I saw was here in Austin, Texas at a club called Boyz Cellar. I was the bright young age of 21 years. Her name was Paris Chenille and she was a beautiful queen of color, a dynamo and a trailblazer. I remember her distinctly performing in the smoky barroom lip synching *Proud Mary* and doing summersaults onstage in heels. I was blown away by her virtuosity and athleticism. She didn’t miss a beat; she executed her performance perfectly. I remember her blowing kisses to the adoring and awestruck crowd who showered her with hundreds of dollar bills, applause, hoots and hollers of love and affection. From what I gather, sadly, from her

friends' posts on Facebook, she passed away a few years ago. Knowing of her passing affected me because with her passing, so too passed a drag queen of a certain era.

I acknowledge that all these terms: gay, drag, transgender are separate and distinct categories and in the process of creating my thesis work, all of these terms come into play in their own beautiful unique ways. But drag didn't just start with my own awareness of it. Men dressing as women onstage can be traced back to the times of ancient Greece where the historical sidelining of women, and indeed the feminine, provided a means for women to be presented onstage without them having to be present. According to Ben Rimalower in his article on the history of drag for Playbill.com (*From Ancient Greece to Angry Inch, Take a Look at the History of Drag in Theater*) the very idea of men representing themselves as women onstage was fraught with masculine trepidation—perhaps even taboo. Scholars “Plato and Socrates worried about the damaging effects of male actors degrading themselves by representing female emotions and characteristics” (Rimalower). This idea persisted into the 15th and 16th centuries. During Shakespeare's era the idea of a woman acting onstage alongside men was considered indecent. No doubt Shakespeare was commenting on the relationship between women, society and theatre when writing gender-bending comedies like *Twelfth Night*. Charles II in the mid-17th Century changed everything. Growing tired of seeing only men onstage, he finally allowed that women to perform beside them. Women appearing onstage finally righted a wrong long held sacred, but it also opened up new possibilities for cross-gendered performance. Opera and ballet alike began to play with the idea of gender bending in the opposite direction--offering up “pants roles” (Cherubino in *The Marriage of*

Figaro) and travesty roles where, in fact, women overtook male roles. The ballet evolution of the 1850s and 1860s took women portraying men to the extreme. Sally Banes writes in her book, *Dancing Women, Female Bodies On Stage* that as the ballerina “grew in status [and technical prowess], the male dancer’s visibility decreased until finally his roles were taken from him and allotted to a female dancer” (39).

It wasn’t until the Victorian era that the term drag was first coined. According to Roger Baker in his book *Drag: a history of female impersonation on the stage* the term Drag was slang that described ““the petticoat or skirt used by actors when playing female parts’ suggesting that the word derives from the ‘drag of the dress (on the ground), as distinct from the non-dragginess of trousers””(17). Baker also notes the difference between ‘real’ and ‘false disguise’. It seems that Charles II’s declaration allowing women to perform onstage alongside men also created an environment where the self-reflexivity of cross-dressing now became apparent. Roger Baker gives us two ideas in his book that relate to this. Pre-Charles II actors took the roles of women in terms of real disguise, as Baker puts it: ““real disguise’ is when the actor playing a woman is taken by the audience and by the other actors...as a real woman” (Baker, 14). Even though the audience and actors may be aware that a man is playing a woman, in ‘real disguise’ this knowledge is irrelevant to the drama being played out. The second idea, ““false disguise’ happens when there is no attempt by the performer to pretend they are anything other than a man playing at being a woman” (Baker, 15). This latter idea became the major method of drag representation in popular theater (Broadway) and in movies, spawning films such as *Some Like it Hot* (1959) where

Tony Curtis and Jack Lemmon hide from the Mafia by dressing up as women and *Tootsie* (1982) starring Dustin Hoffman whose character dresses as a woman in order to land a part in a soap opera.

Later, as drag became a part of the social lexicon, it brought with it the rise of drag culture in gay clubs and cabaret shows. The subject of living one's life as a drag performer becomes a central focus in film and theater--what I like to call "the drag queen story": *The Rocky Horror Show*, *Priscilla Queen of the Desert*, *Kinky Boots* and *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* can all be seen as examples of this. The revival of *Hairspray* became one of the biggest musical hits of the 2000s. However, It wasn't until *RuPaul's Drag Race* that drag truly became a household word and entered the mainstream.

I have a ranch in Wyoming that I go to constantly and on the television in the middle of nowhere, our little show comes on and I can imagine some of the kids in the area flipping around and landing on [*RuPaul's Drag Race*] and getting an education, a real education. Not just gay kids, but anybody who wants to go out in this world and face their cross to bear.

RuPaul gave this quote to *Hollywood Reporter* journalist Seth Abramovitch in 2013. *Drag Race* had premiered earlier that year on VH1 and already RuPaul knew the significance of her show. Now it was possible for folks in rural America with little or no access to the gay clubs of big cities to see drag queens up close and personal, perhaps even inspiring new drag performers to try on the artform, individuals who may have never otherwise thought to perform in drag or create a drag persona.

Here you have two worlds of drag. There's the world of drag created to tell a story such as *Hairspray*, *Some Like it Hot* or *Twelfth Night* and then there is the world of the drag performer, the one who puts on a wig and heels or binds their chest and

puts on a blazer and tie and steps out for the night to perform in drag clubs around the world. The identity they put on, a certain type of masquerade, becomes an extension of the performer's own being, a living breathing entity. These performers give birth to, live in tandem with, and hone a persona that becomes a life partner, growing and developing along-side them—like a friend or a site of channeling another being. These performers are the focus of my work. The magic that happens in the relationship between the drag performer and their story is important to me as an artist and my impulse to record these stories springs from both personal inspiration and professional duty. They are part of a diverse history that deserves to be kept, cherished and stored in a bedazzled, heart-shaped box for posterity. These are the performers that create experiences that verge on the spiritual, the ones that challenge our thinking, the ones that hearken back to a time when the drag performer was the master of ceremony, the subject of religious rites and the storyteller.

Roger Baker writes beautifully regarding the drag ancients:

She emerges from the mists of time and threads her way through the histories of all cultures and nations. She is present at solemn religious rites and kicks up her skirts at anarchic celebrations which mock authority and challenge the status quo. (23)

DRAG PERSONA: CULTURAL MASK AND GENDER ART

No doubt drag can trace its roots back to time immemorial. Already mentioned are the Ancient Greeks who grappled with men playing women in their plays, but interestingly enough men playing women have also been part of religious ceremonies since human civilization began. John Nunley and Cara McCarty speak about this phenomenon in their book *Masks: Faces of Culture*. In their book, they discuss tribal men who utilize a physical mask of the opposite gender to create ceremonial performance. Certain societies in Papua New Guinea, the Hopi Kachina of the American Southwest, Makonde, Dogon, Yoruba, and Chokwe peoples of Africa all create religious performances in which men mask themselves as women. “Through the transformation of the mask, men discover and explore aspects of the feminine. In certain cultures men even perform the couvade, in which they act out aspects of pregnancy, childbirth and nursing behaviors” (Nunley and MacCarthy 160). This spiritual evolution of gender performance laid the groundwork for modern day drag performers, but also for those who seek to challenge gender roles through drag performance and performance art.

“Under this mask, another mask. I will never finish removing all these faces” (de Muth 183) Claude Cahun wrote regarding her photographic work in 1928. Cahun, born Lucy Schwob in 1894 to a French middle class Jewish family, adopted a male identity in the 1920s and 30s which she photographed extensively. Cahun became an unsung hero as a gender-nonconformist and as an ardent protester of the Nazi Party. She was inspired by and created her artwork as a part of the French Surrealist movement. Her photographs were never intended for public exhibition and were only

brought to light when her partner Suzanne Malherbe passed away in 1972 and the photographs went up for auction. In these beautiful images, Cahun challenges female stereotypes posing with a shaved head and gender-neutral dress in some. In another series, she poses as a seated strongman, barbell placed in her lap, face done-up in clown-like makeup: skinny arched eyebrows, drawn-on eyelashes and hearts painted on each cheek. The skin-tight shirt she wears features two nipples and a chest tattoo that reads: “I am in training do not kiss me.” In another portrait she wears a cloak made of masks. Shelly Rice writes about Cahun: “She spent her life as a marginal figure, always fitting uneasily into the numerous circles she frequented—and her creative work was her form of rebellion.”



Figure 1: Self-portrait (shaved head, material draped across body) 1920, Claude Cahun.



Figure 2: Self-portrait from 'I am in training don't kiss me' series by Claude Cahun, 1927.



Figure 3: Self-portrait (full-length masked figure in cloak with masks) 1928, Claude Cahun

I would not have known about this artist if not for reading about Diane Torr's discovery of Claude Cahun in her book *Sex, Drag and Male Roles: Investigating Gender as Performance*. Diane Torr, an amazing gender performance artist in her own right, writes about first seeing Cahun's work at an exhibition at the Guggenheim in 1997. Torr writes beautifully about her attraction to Cahun's work which inspires and bolsters her own. This "is the first time I had seen a truly comprehensive exhibition of visual artwork dealing with shifting sex and gender identities...the image[s of Cahun] seemed to me to epitomize the themes of gender performance and androgyny that I had been exploring since the early 1980s.," Torr writes. Like Torr I was inspired by the photographic work of Cahun and the realization that such work existed and thrived in a time where a great social and political unrest was pressuring a conformist attitude by force, where gay and Jew alike were being extinguished. It is also incredible to me that Cahun's work survives in order to reassure and inspire us today. It's a miraculous survivorship of artistic expression and in this recorded narrative of Cahun's and Torr's I found the pivotal moment in the design of my thesis work. In that moment I decided that the histories of individuals who perform drag at the most-real local level should be recorded in some way--and to that end, be recorded in a visual way as well. In an attempt to discover and understand my subjects, I chose to paint large-scale poster portraits as my method of delivery. Through these paintings the performers are revealed and immortalized and in this written work I gift their stories to you.

DEE DEE DAVIS: AUSTIN'S OWN DOLLY PARTON

“I’m 52 years old, Dale Bowersok for the record,” Dale says demurely, leaning forward to speak into my cell-phone-turned-recording-device. Dale is an un-assuming man with kind blue eyes framed in glasses. He’s nicely dressed in a light colored button down shirt and slacks—even though this is a Saturday (I feel under-dressed wearing simple shorts and a t-shirt.) I can’t help but wonder: is this a generational difference in our clothing choices, or is Dale just that polished and put together—all the time? My instinct is the latter. His apartment is well appointed with Tuscan style decor and I can tell he has immaculate taste. As our interview progresses I cannot help but draw a comparison between Dale and his counterpart Dee Dee Davis. Both are sweet, put-together and have a quiet demeanor. These qualities seem to be the definitive essence of Dale’s being across all personas. Dee Dee (who often impersonates Dolly Parton, a performer who is loved and renowned for her own darling, kind and wise persona) seems to synergistically exist within all the guises Dale takes on. Although these layers may seem to act as a nesting doll masquerade—to me, getting to know Dale and playing back his words to myself as I write this piece, these layers become more of a revelation of inner self than a donning of constrictive costume and mask. “Dee Dee Davis is still me--” Dale confesses sweetly in a quiet southern drawl. “I don’t really have a separate persona for Dee. A lot of people say they have a drag persona and then themselves, but I’m just an entertainer—it’s all a performance, its all acting. Dee Dee is just a name they use for me onstage.”

Dale grew up in St. Marys Ohio a little town just north of Dayton. His parents divorced when he was 10 years old. For the next 8 years of his life he traveled around

from city to city, his mother and her new boyfriend, interestingly, employed themselves by making and selling tourist maps in various locales. Dale attended different schools in Nashville, Myrtle Beach, Little Rock and St. Petersburg, FL during those years. His family ended up back in Ohio just in time for Dale to graduate from High School. After graduation Dale came to Austin, TX and immediately went into the job force as a sales clerk at Dillard's department store, eventually becoming a manager. Later, he took a job with the Lottery Commission where he works to this day.

“I went out dressed as Dolly Parton one year for Halloween and somebody saw me and said I should be in a show,” Dale says of the moment he started doing drag 22 years ago. He was unsure of performing in drag as Dolly at first, but his friends talked him into performing at 5th Street Station in a drag show the very next week. “When I performed [that first night] as Dolly, the crowd went crazy and I fell in love with it,” he tells me wistfully. Dale's authentic portrayal of Dolly stems from his love and observation of the performer. “I was always a fan of Dolly and my family is from Kentucky so the little hillbilly in me just wanted to come out.” Dale modestly tells me he doesn't think he resembles Dolly that much, but he acknowledges that the authentic performative aspects of his portrayal are the key to devising a realistic portrait. “I had all the mannerisms of Dolly and I moved like her and that's what makes the difference.” He also gives credit to the shoes: “performing female has a lot to do with the heels,” he says with a grin (quite matter-of-factly) “once you're in those shoes you have to move in a certain way otherwise you're going to fall on your ass—when I'm wearing the Dolly shoes, the tall spiked heels, there's just no way around it.” Even

though Dale says he's impersonated other female performers such as Streisand and Marilyn Monroe, he's constantly asked to do Dolly. "I've been billed as Austin's own Dolly Parton for years," Dale tells me.

Our conversation turns to Dale's personal drag style and the effect of *RuPaul's Drag Race* on the new generation of drag. "I would say that's the difference between drag queen makeup and real-women—we use black and we use a lot of it when painting our face," Dale tells me. Learning to paint his face was a process for Dale. A co-worker who worked behind the Chanel makeup counter at Dillard's department store did the makeup for his first drag performance. He admits the quality of that first makeup look was way lighter and more authentically female. He notes that back when he started drag, YouTube makeup tutorials and *RuPaul's Drag Race* didn't exist. It wasn't until two local queens took him under their wing that he was properly schooled in the way of drag—B Shannon and Scarlet Lee became Dale's drag mothers (experienced drag queens who teach up-and-comers the ways of drag are called 'drag mothers') gave him makeup advice and coached him in the ways of proper padding and tucking. Back then "we just had to learn from each other as we went along." Dale says he started out shoving rags in a bra for boobs and not really any padding in the hips, but then after utilizing his 'drag mothers' advice, "everything was foam and filled out properly."

Regarding makeup, Dale says B Shannon and Scarlet Lee both told him he needed "more black around the eyes [talking about powdered shadow] --now if you watch YouTube everyone does it differently," Dale continues insightfully, "but for me going on 22 years of learning old school...doing my eyes, I start with my lightest

colors first and then build out. Next I put the darker color and finish out with a black contour.” He uses Ben Nye powder which he buys from the local makeup shop, The Bazaar. “I still have people make my outfits and my hair,” Dale admits and laughingly states that he still has wigs that are 30 years old that are still set—15 wigs at least-- which is a testament to storage, care and love of his costume elements. “I used to have more costumes,” he tells me” but downsizing from a 2,800 square foot house to a 700 square foot apartment—I don’t have a whole lot of costumes anymore.”

He does, however, still have a plethora of Dolly Parton Inspired looks. He excitedly shows me a sparkling number, pulling it from storage. It was nicely kept in a garment bag hanging along with a line of other glittering, fringe-laden gowns. It was a sweet dress—all sequined in iridescent blue, green and silver with a criss-cross bodice and knee length skirt--perfect for Dolly. He told me that it was his favorite dress in his collection and that he would like to have a replica of it made eventually because he loves it so much. “Dolly takes precedence in performances because people ask me to do her. —They say specifically: ‘you’re going to do Dolly, right?’ And I say ‘I can do Dolly or I could do whoever—and they say ‘no I want you to do Dolly.’” And he does Dolly expertly. I’ve seen Dale perform several times as Ms. Parton and when you see him dressed up with the makeup and the wig and the heels performing on stage anyone can see that the resemblance is remarkable. —I was totally star-struck the first time I saw Dee Dee Davis do Dolly. Dee’s performances are truly a joyous celebration of practiced drag performance and an expert study in Dolly Parton mannerisms and style sensibility.

“Overall my style is softer and not as dramatic as most queens now a days,” Dale admits. “It’s more a realistic female look than theatrical look of current drag.” As an observer it seems to me this realistic female look has it’s roots centered in the makeup counters of Dillard’s Department store where Dale first had his makeup done as well as the generation of drag performers who influenced him. Previously, it seems, drag queen makeup tilted more to glamour and less to the avant-garde. “If you look at *RuPaul’s Drag Race* performers--the girls on that show—their paint is very heavy and extreme,” says Dale. “I have a softer look. But I have a softer personality than they do. I think they’re very talented but I could never make it in the realm they do.” But as I sit there listening to Dale talk, a huge wonder crosses my mind in big rhinestone-studded letters: why COULDN’T Dee make it in that realm and why SHOULDN’T she make it? I am emboldened by this idea to make Dee’s story known. Dale is quick to note how much *RuPaul’s Drag Race* has benefited the contemporary drag community and helped to give birth to many new draglings (young drag performers) expressing to me what a wonderful training ground the show is. “*RuPaul’s Drag Race* teaches them to be well-rounded,” he says, showing them not only how to paint their faces, “but also how to have a certain attitude, the fact that you should be able to make your own costumes and style your own wigs and that you don’t have to depend on other people.”

Because drag queen names are perceived to be one of the most important part of the drag persona construct, I asked Dale how Dee Dee’s name came about. “I try to block that memory out,” he says to me with a laugh. He prefaces the tale with --“this is stupid.” He takes me to a moment when he was 18 years old, sneaking into a bar

and stumbling upon a drag pageant in progress. His friends quickly dared him to go out on stage and compete. “I threw on some big old stupid country dress and they pushed me out on stage.” He tells me it wasn’t truly a performance. “I don’t consider that night my first drag, but I guess it really was. The drag show judge said ‘oh girl, you need a country name because YOU are DEFINITNELY country!’ So when I went outside I saw a poster with the name Davis on it and that was when I said ‘I’ll just be Dee Dee Davis.’”

I think what struck me the most about Dale and indeed all the drag performers I spoke to for this project was the innate need to give back to their own community. In fact, most performers I interviewed utilize their gifts as a way to spread important messages and raise money for charitable organizations that help out the LGBTQ community. For Dale, drag pageants became the vehicle for performing in drag and for his philanthropy. Dale as Dee Dee was crowned Empress of the United Court of Austin twice, once in 1999 and once in 2013. The United Court of Austin is a non-profit organization that raises money for local HIV/AIDS organizations, breast cancer research and for Out Youth. “I’ve been raising money in conjunction with the United Court for the past 22 years,” says Dale, “—now, even if somebody were to pay me to perform, I would just give that money to the charity.” Dale also just recently started working with Dragoween a charity that benefits Austin Roundup, an LGBTQ-centered drug and alcohol recovery conference. Dale came to these charities, in part, because his own life has been affected with these issues. His first partner died from AIDS-related complications and Dale himself has struggled with alcohol and drug addiction. Dale has been drug free for quite some time now and credits drag performance, a

program of recovery and charity-involvement as the keys to success and happiness.

“My experience has drawn me to a life of public service—seeing my partner die was a lot to take in. I saw all the support he needed. All of those organizations that were way under-funded. As soon as I saw a way to help, I got involved.”

Dale tells me the most memorable drag moment for him was getting crowned the first time as Empress of the United Court of Austin. Much like winning a race for public office, the winner has to be elected for the post by the local community. The road to the United Court Election is a rigorous process of building points via fundraising and attending other coronations around the country. “We hold an election once a year in July and everybody in Austin can go vote for the next Emperor and Empress of Austin,” Dale says. “The night I was crowned was insane,” he continues “—it was a very close race throughout the campaign and I was certain the other person had won. For months my opponent had been throwing party after party to gain votes and popularity.” Dale remembers on the night of the coronation (which is same night the winner gets announced) he performed an elaborate rendition of Hello Dolly complete with extravagant costumes and back-up dancers. “The audience went crazy,” Dale says, but that still wasn’t enough to convince him he’d been popular enough to win the vote. At the moment that the winner was announced Dale says he was so sure of his opponent’s success that he even stepped aside to let the other contestant receive the crown, but the emcee soon grabbed Dale (Dee Dee) announcing to her and the crowd, “no, it’s you! You won!” “I nearly passed out—I was so in shock,” Dale tells me. I can’t help but draw a fantastic white hot-spotlight-drenched picture as Dale describes to me that he knelt before the departing Empress to have the

crown bequeathed to him amid the melee and adulation of the crowd who offered cheers of congratulations, perhaps, being showered with vast amounts of glittering silver and gold confetti.

PAINTING DEE DEE DAVIS

Posters are an artform of promotion dating back centuries. according to John Banicoat in his book, *A Concise History of Posters: 1870-1970*, the graphic-centric idea of the modern poster had it's coming of age in 1870 with Jules Cheret who was able to start producing quantities of colorful lithographs from his own printing press in Paris. Banicoat notes posters' deep-rooted relationship with painting. Artists Cheret, Henri De Toulouse-Latrec, Salvador Dali and Picasso where among the notable artists who for at least of portion of their careers chose posters as a medium for expression. Traditionally seen as a as lower-class art form having been utilized as vehicles for propaganda and advertising in the streets and subways. Banicoat notes the special importance of the artform that marries written word and art, arguing that that poster art should be considered a higher--not secondary medium to painting. Not only because of its singularly special attention-grabbing nature, but because of its close relationship with painting (the artist) and technology (advances in printing) (7).

“They cover the walls that flank our streets;” writes Max Gallo in his book *The Poster in History*, “they are part of the landscape of our cities, and if, suddenly, it was decreed that they must disappear, we would have the impression that all color had disappeared from the urban landscape, that the walls had turned a mournful gray” (9). Gallo sees the poster as a mirror, a reflection of society and the psychology of society, saying:

posters channel our dreams, excite our desires. For a poster to be effective it must speak to us and secretly appeal to weak spots of which we ourselves are not aware. It must use a code that corresponds to one of our own. And the

more the poster appeals to those aspects of our character that we ourselves hardly know, the greater will be the penetration of its message (9).

When I walked into the 9 x 9 foot cinder-block-faced Texas Performing Arts scene shop spray booth that I would call my studio for the next four months and came face to face with the newly stretched 4'X6' canvas on which I would be the painted poster of Dee Dee Davis, the meeting seemed more like a confrontation than a kinder artistic union. In that moment I was faced with the enormity of trying to capture the likeness of local drag icon Dee Dee Davis in paint. The large scale of the painting surface as well as the medium that I had chosen to use seemed scary and unwieldy to me. Acrylic paint, itself, is a challenging medium. It has a very quick drying time that makes blending difficult. Added to that, I wanted the portraits for this series to glow under ultraviolet light. Skin tones are challenging in UV because ultraviolet paint comes in specifically non-skin like colors: neon greens and yellows, fuchsias and oranges. Tilting those kinds of colors to a more natural palette is an exercise in patience. Also, UV paint is notoriously watery and can become streaky if not careful. Perhaps the most important challenge I found in this process was creating equal values and hues—between normal and UV paint when mixing them together. Sometimes the life-like color I spent so long trying to mix correctly on my palette, appeared like a dark black smudge under UV light in comparison with other colors it was applied next to. To do Dee Dee justice and create a convincing portrait of her in all lights proved to be a mind-bending process of patience and trial and error.

One central image really acted as the driver for me to follow through the arduous process of creating this series of UV reactive portraits. That image was the idea of how all of these wonderful, larger than life drag performers with their

extravagant hair, and jewels and makeup would look glowing together on display as if they themselves were emitting a central kind of light. I pictured these paintings acting as a symbolic promotion and contemporary contribution to a great tradition of art, namely poster art, where for centuries performances and performers have been promoted on walls throughout the world. For me this was an act of tribute.

There is something very psychologically and emotionally appealing to me about the composition of the photograph Dale and I selected for Dee Dee Davis' portrait. The source image of the portrait is a selfie that Dee took in her bedroom as she was about to head out to a holiday fundraiser for Project Transitions. She'd posted the selfie on Facebook. Selfies, no doubt, are the means by which we as contemporary human beings create online personas by posting them on virtual walls to promote how we were on this day and time in history, displaying that information publicly. Selfies could be considered the modern form of portraiture. It intrigued me to think, as I was painting Dee, that I was actually capturing the modern form of portraiture and taking it back to its previous painted embodiment.

Keeping the "bigness" of Dee was important. The fact that her persona is bigger than life, that this is a selfie and her face fills up the frame, that we can gaze deeply into her eyes which are done up with exquisite drag queen grandeur—and that she gazes back at us. We see her wisdom and kindness. She seems fairy god-mother like. She has the essence of Dolly Parton, but she is still Dee Dee Davis. Her hair is lit like a halo with a flash-fire flare of bright white light erupting from behind her impossibly fantastic-styled up-do. Her exquisite jeweled necklace sparkles with light silver, blue and indigo (I squealed with delight, internally, when I first came across the

photo because I knew how fun the necklace would be to paint!) and her black dress with a sweetheart neckline that exudes classic elegance. Discovering the face, the contours and shapes is part of the fun of painting for me—and when a likeness comes through, (it doesn't always appear), but when a likeness comes through, it's like a divine moment of discovery.



Figure 4: Selfie source image for Dee Dee Davis portrait.

Figuring out how to utilize the unique medium of UV paint was an important moment for me in the process of creating the Dee Dee Davis portrait as well as all of the other posters I created for this project. That realization helped me to continue on the journey of creating these paintings with a certain amount of confidence and delight. The essence of this knowledge is wrapped up in the idea that the ultraviolet painter has a unique ability to tell a story with actual light. In the dark, under the glow of the UV lamp, my paintbrush is astonishingly incandescent. Dee's backlit hair can appear to be lit from behind. Her necklace can actually sparkle. I can capture magenta and cyan light within its jeweled facets and that light can be reflected back up under

her chin and up into her hairline. The text of her name can become a searing hot pink splash across the canvas and that glow can transmit in a bright streak across her phone-holding selfie arm. The butterfly that flutters just beyond Dee’s gaze can appear backlit, with veins illuminated, surrounded by glittering moth-like sparkles. Everything involving light is a possibility. Magic can happen.

By the same token black plays a part in telling a story with UV paint. My Alfonse Mucha poster research revealed the use of graphic line in its’ conversation with form and outline and I realized through that lens how I could create a style of painting that embraces a certain graphic quality and how these graphic elements could also live on the canvas which more naturalistic ones. These graphic lines, in the case of the Dee Dee Davis portrait, can be seen as tendril-like curling outlines in Dee’s hair



Figure 5: Dee Dee Davis portrait process shot showing example of “knocking back” ultraviolet under painting with washes of black.

and also creating the shapes of her bold brows and eyeliner. Black washes also became key in toning down the initial coat of super bright ultraviolet paint that helped me carve out and contour Dee's face. Starting bright and "knocking back" became a part of my process for creating all the portraits in this series and it found its roots in experimentation but also literally within the words of Dee herself who had drag queens use more black when they paint their faces.

Dee's portrait not only was an exercise in capturing her likeness, but was also a world in which I could render and infuse symbolism in order to evoke meaning and get to an underlying ideology within the work itself, tapping into the performers' drag persona. In Dee's portrait I chose to juxtapose her image alongside a glowing ethereal butterfly. I asked myself this question: how is a mask like a butterfly? I would argue their semiotic significance is that of transformation as well as their special relationship to the spiritual. Claude Cahun, (who's photographic self-portraits were the impetus for my desire to create this series of work that speaks about drag and gender-identity), found her identity by discovering herself via artistic process through the utilization the different masks and personas he/she could wear and photographing them. Sarah Howgate suggests in her analysis of Cahun's *Self-Portrait (full-length masked figure in cloak with masks)* that Cahun "belie[ved] she was made up of multiple selves" (99). During my conversation with Dale I realized that he too has this same mode of being. Dale Bowersok finds an aspect of his true self by putting on the guise of Dee Dee Davis and additionally finding another aspect of self by putting on top of the persona of Dee the persona of his idol Dolly Parton. Stacking these selves one upon the other is how he transforms in order to get at becoming all aspects of his true being. It is this

beautiful process of finding self through building personas via performance and costume that catapults drag performers, especially Dee in this case, into the realm of the spiritual.

The practice of costuming and performance *is* by its very history a spiritual process of artistry. I think again to McCarty and Nunley's discussion of the religious aspects of evoking the feminine via mask and ceremony as seen in certain indigenous societies throughout New Guinea, Africa and the American Southwest and couldn't help but want to create a very symbolic representation of this spiritual idea of drag in the portrait of Dee. My solution was to incorporate the symbol of the butterfly. For me, personally, as an artist, the butterfly has a special significance. My grandmother, who was an oil and china painter, taught me to appreciate and love art. She taught me how to see things artistically. She taught me how to paint and started me on the road to incorporating art and drawing into my daily life. One of her favorite subjects to paint, especially on china, were butterflies. The butterfly in this work is partial homage to her and my roots as an artist. I think of her as a spiritual presence and a guiding force in my own life. Added to that, the idea of that the butterfly represents transformation makes it an apt comparison to the physical transformation that a drag performer under-goes –and as any true Dolly Parton fan can tell you, Dolly Parton uses the symbol of a butterfly quite often to promote herself and her music. For me, this symbol speaks to many aspects of art, drag and self.



Figure 6: Finished Dee Dee Davis portrait under normal light conditions.



Figure 7: Finished Dee Dee Davis portrait under ultraviolet light conditions.

SIMONE RIVIERA: BARBIE GIRL NEXT DOOR

Simone Riviera is still an enigma to me to a large extent. She's the only drag performer in this series that I didn't formally interview. I'd spoken to Simone briefly on the phone a few times and we exchanged texts. She's very lovely, but also, I've found, a very busy queen. In those brief conversations I had obtained her blessing to use the image that would eventually become the inspiration for her portrait, but our schedules just didn't pan out in the right way to sit down and actually talk. As a researcher/artist I saw the lack of interview source material for Simone Riviera as an opportunity to employ a different methodology in my process of making meaning and creating art. Instead of utilizing a verbal interview, I was able to pour over wonderful photographs and posts written by the performer—which I gleaned from her online site—in order to stitch together a version of Simone that speaks with its own wonderful perspective to the world of the drag portraits I created for this project. Overall, I discovered that there IS a quality of the enigmatic encoded in Simone's representation of her own persona, mainly for the manner in which she promotes herself via a clever system of captured and reinvented branding.

"I'm the Barbie Girl Next Door," Simone writes in the intro box of her Facebook page. These words are punctuated by a series of emojis: the kissing lips, a blushing happy face and a series of red hearts. I initially went to Simone's Facebook site to get an idea of who she portrays herself to be even before I reached out to her via the phone. I was immediately enamored with the glamorous persona Simone puts forth. Simone is simply gorgeous. In image after image, she curates photographs of herself that highlight her very put-together style--glam hair and makeup, she wears

many styles of colorful posh body-conscious dresses. A drag queen after my own heart--pinks and purples are among the favorite hues in her wardrobe. Her photo album looks like the Society Page in *Vanity Fair Magazine*: Simone pictured at the club in group shots with other local drag talent; Simone standing amid a bevy of bare-chested, divinely muscled go-go boys; Simone alongside drag royalty at various United Court functions (a tiara is very present in these images. During the time I was painting Simone's portrait she was the reigning Empress of the United Court of Austin); Simone performing onstage in the middle of a circle of adoring crowds. Alongside these photographs are also image after image of "posters" promoting the ongoing *Tucked* drag show that takes place at the local gay club Highland Lounge in which Simone is frequently featured. From these images I gather that Simone, no doubt, is a social butterfly that exudes a classic beauty queen persona and exemplifies a certain idea of feminine perfection following in the tradition of Barbie and beauty pageants.

The fact that the guise of Barbie makes its way into this project is very telling, especially since the main thrust of my thesis is to on some level to call attention to the disparity between local drag performers and those pristine, hyper-produced images seen on TV. Simone would seem to support the visual ideas, ones that Mary Marcel and feminists alike have criticized, but that RuPaul and commercialized television adores. It is for that reason that Simone, I think, is so ingenious for the fact that she takes the candy coated ideal of what feeds consumerism, this idea of a beauty queen like perfection, captures it and utilizes it to promote and forward her own agenda free of the constraints of corporate interests. On Facebook Simone and Barbie become

synonymous with the equalizing effect of the internet. Her strategy is one of repetition. Much like Warhol tackled the idea of consumerism and celebrity with endless images of Campbell's Soup cans or grids of Marilyn Monroe faces, Simone repeatedly evokes the name of Barbie by placing the iconic doll's name alongside her own image. She IS the Barbie girl next door. Her banner reads in pastel pink lettering "Barbie Girl" accompanied by a scattering of artfully drawn makeup and hairbrushes. In most of her photos, including her profile picture, Simone wears an ever-present gold necklace which spells out in the very recognizable font that has been emblazoned into the minds of girls (and some boys) everywhere--the name "Barbie."

I wanted Simone's portrait to exemplify the image tactics Simone employs and perhaps even comment on societies' relationship with the image of Barbie. Simone represents, to me, a contradiction because at her core, she is a drag queen evoking a cisgendered female icon, usurping the male gaze and perhaps even the straight female gaze that have become clichéd (argued in the essay "The Gaze Revisited or Reviewing Queer Viewing" by Caroline Evans and Lorraine Gamman) and perhaps forging a new path not yet undertaken or blessed by mainstream corporations. As far as I can tell Mattel's Barbie has yet to break through into the realm of queer representation, although that may be on the verge of changing. According to an article in the *Chicago Tribune* from just this past December, an Arizona couple, Matt Jacobi and Nick Caprio, recently garnered media attention when they were contacted by Mattel after they Tweeted a photograph of a same sex wedding set they created for their niece with the following message to Barbie's maker:

'Happy Holiday. We had a difficult time finding a same sex wedding set to give to my niece for her 8th birthday. She and her little sister are flower girls in

our upcoming May wedding. We thought it would be special to give her something with a little meaning behind it. What a bummer you [Mattel] don't make one with two grooms. Anyway, we had to get creative and make a couple purchases. I hope our custom gift inspires you to make a #GayWedding set!' (Instagram)



Figure 8: An Instagram post by Matt Jacobi urging Mattel to make a same sex wedding set. (Instagram)

Employing the art of craft, the couple ended up buying two tuxedo-clad Ken dolls and re-packaged them along with two uber-cute “flower girl” dolls clothed in lavender summer dresses and, of course, accompanied by an accessory white-frosted wedding cake to create the set. Mattel has yet to move forward on making the same sex wedding set, but this example illustrates the manner in which the queer community must create for themselves products that represent the realities of their own lives because none exist in the marketplace.

But just because Mattel hasn't blessed the world with a “certified queer” Barbie, doesn't mean that the public isn't ready to embrace that idea. In 2012 The Blond Diamond Barbie produced by Mattel was nicknamed “Drag Queen Barbie” by the media. This nickname was an idea that was never intended by the company. According to an article by Kevin Fallon that appeared in *The Daily Beast*, the Blond Diamond Barbie was given the nickname “the first drag Barbie” by the press who

couldn't help but draw a comparison between the doll and its creators, designers David and Phillippe Blond. The Blonds, who have created looks for Gaga and Katy Perry, tapped into their own personal style which ricochets between leather-clad-biker-Ken and cool-blond-Barbie-goddess, bringing to the market place an outrageously dressed Barbie. The doll is fantastically clad in a diamond-studded corset dress and stunning pink-satin-lined white fur coat which drapes luxuriously from her shoulders pouring down to the floor, trailing behind her nine inch stilettos. I can see why the media would make this comparison. Phillippe Blond, who is a drag queen in her own right, very much resembles the Barbie she and her brother created. The doll's very straight blond hair, makeup and clothes resemble the styling of Phillippe Blond perfectly. Even while seemingly encoding her personal style into the iconic figurine, both the Blonds deny that drag Barbie was their intent.

"It was a surprise to all of us," David [Blond] says, the goal was to create "an outfit so over the top that she wouldn't have it in her closet," he says. "it was never Drag Queen Barbie" (Fallon). It is curious and encouraging to me that the media are the forward-thinkers in the story and a little discouraging that the Blonds have no inkling to the implication of what a drag Barbie could mean. Are they toeing a corporate line in order not to make waves? The reality of the situation might lie in the physical form of the doll itself. Fallon notes in his article certainly and by tradition there are no genitals on the Blond Diamond Barbie and he also notes that the controversy has generated promotional gold by raising the interest of Barbie collectors everywhere.



Figure 9: Blond Diamond Barbie.
(barbiecollector.com)



Figure 10: David and Phillippe Blond arriving for the amfAR NY Gala. (zimbio.com)

The denial of the Blonds about having created the first drag Barbie leaves the door wide open, I think, for Simone Rivera's persona to take the lead. Far removed from major media outlets, Riviera creates her own splash in the local realm by simply doing her own thing. I certainly find affinity with the idea of being myself no matter what the public around me thinks. I have often said that every day for an out individual is a protest march. Every day I march for equal rights and the rights of gay and queer folk everywhere because I live the life of an out gay man. I don't apologize for being gay, I try to give my viewpoint as often as I can and I'm learning that my own voice is important. Living in a world where I don't see myself portrayed all that often or even queer life portrayed in a healthy and loving way, I wanted to really drive home the uniqueness of Simone's personality as it sits alongside the name of the iconic doll.

Simone has some amazing photographs of herself in her archive. A vast majority are of the aforementioned beauty queen type, but there were a series of photographs that stood out to me for their vibrant, marked difference from the beauty-queen identity branding Simone creates for herself again and again in photographs. I chose to paint Simone not as that symbol of traditional, straight laced American womanly idealism that is Barbie, but instead as a powerful drag performer dressed in the regalia of a show stopping Beyoncé or Tina Turner rather than the tiara and beaded gown of a Vanessa Williams. The photograph I chose of Simone, taken in mid-performance by local photographer Harry Roberts, is a sampling of Simone's performative dynamic virtuosity and style encapsulated in still-frame. She wears a cheetah print leotard, her hair is gorgeous and untamed strung through with feathers and she has fringe for days decorating her hips and neckline. Prominently displayed in this look is also her signature Barbie necklace. I was drawn to the repetition of line in the photograph, of pattern, and how these elements outlined and accentuated the curves of Simone's body. In this image she stands with her hands on her hips, fringe swirling about her legs and she's smiling, biting her tongue as if to say: "fuck yeah." I love how by virtue of branding and re-invention of guise Simone takes on the guise of a powerful woman performer and conjures up the guise of the unruly in the face of society's idea of what a boxed immobile beauty doll should be.

Sam Sanders host of NPR's "It's Been a Minute" recently interviewed Anne Helen Petersen the writer of *Too Fat, Too Slutty, Too Loud: The Rise and Reign of the Unruly Woman*, and he posed this definition of the unruly woman based upon Petersen's work:



**Figure 11: Inspiration Simone Riviera photo by Harry Roberts,.
(facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=1939118669692169&set=t.1030503906&type=3&theater)**



**Figure 12: Simone's iconic Barbie necklace.
Photo by Harry Roberts.
(facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=1885835648353805&set=t.1030503906&type=3&theater)**

They're powerful women who have agency and...are in control....all of them are their own manager...Yet at the same time, they are all hobbled by these structures and constraints that cripple women...Like Kim Kardashian, who is so rich and who is so in control and still has to grapple with the way that we treat pregnant women. ("It's Been a Minute")

In her book, Peterson writes about celebrities like Nicki Minaj, Hillary Clinton, Lena Dunham and says that the through line for all these women are the fact "They're all too much of something" aka unruly. Petersen also thinks about the unruly as a modern schema of challenging of the patriarchy and the male gaze. Sanders, in this interview astutely concurs saying that cradled within the post-feminist movement is the idea that there is a freedom to being the individual (a unique force) which gives the whole group agency rather than being just a part of a larger movement where individuality is lost. This idea of unruly individuals being considered "unique forces" is a great way to summarize my methodology for this project and Simone's

counteraction of the traditional guise of Barbie. For the benefit of society, knowing of these drag performers—or anyone really--doesn't stem from a version of drag seen on TV, but through the eyes and experiences of individual performers who create the art form.

Also too, this idea of the unruly Petersen presents in her book pours over into the arena of queer theory and its relationship to the world of drag itself because queer individuals must be unruly themselves in order to live and thrive. Traditionally boys are not supposed to dress up like women or evoke the womanly in manner and style. They aren't supposed to fall in love with other boys and they aren't supposed to play with dolls--but they do. I find empowerment in that. To that end, a gay couple must make their own gay marriage play set to find their own identity in the marketplace. To become powerful female performers, gay men must dress as Streisand and Dolly Parton and Simone must become the first drag Barbie in order to overturn the ancient gendered construct of corporate America --in effect, we all must be unruly to create change by uprooting and shaking up normative thought in our art and our actions.

“I like to say that I was a child of drag,” writes Magnus Hastings in his book entitled *Why Drag*. Hastings, who is an accomplished photographer, creates stunning, evocative and sometimes humorous drag queen portraits. *Why Drag* is a collection of these portraits, which, I think, provides the epitome of what capturing contemporary drag persona in portrait form can be. “I grew up coveting all the girly gifts that were lavished on my sister, longing for my own Barbie to play with,” he says. “I would regularly dress up and put on shows for my parents, always casting myself as the female lead and relegating my sister and step-sister to supporting roles. During my

umpteenth rendition of “My name is Tallulah,” from Bugsy Malone, my mother finally snapped in exasperation: ‘Will you ever play the boy?’” (Introduction).

I, like Hastings, was drawn to the idea of Barbie and dressing up. While I’ve only just experimented here and there with drag as an adult, I was consumed with the idea of dress up as a child and creating a world inhabited by all sorts of Barbies complete with fabulous clothes and accessories. My parents were mostly supportive of my queering of child’s play and my grandmother often said I played with Barbie like a boy because my Barbies didn’t stay at home and cook dinner and go on dates-- instead they acted as Charlie’s Angel-type-spies, engaged in intrigues and catching international jewel thieves –or sometimes WERE the international jewel thieves. (In my mind this was why Barbie had so many vocations—who other than a spy could be a cowgirl AND a glitzy glamour queen?!) I loved the TV show *Wonder Woman* and my parents let me watch *Dallas*—probably when I was way too young—but I was intrigued with the idea of a powerful woman and the allure of episodic soap operas-filled with stylish businesswomen who could turn the tables on their male counterparts with ease and aplomb.

I can remember as a child I totally idolized my mother who was the secretary to the president of a bank in Round Rock, Texas. She was also a long-time member of the American Business Women’s Association. I was very close to her growing up. She often shared her feminist viewpoints with me (although I didn’t know they were feminist at the time). She made me feel like a part of her tribe of woman in a way. She supported my need to express queering gender play as a child, however, coming out to my parents as a gay man when I was a freshman in college seemed more like a

process of confirmation than a celebration—I am grateful for a loving family who accepted me and wanted to hear my viewpoints by embracing my quest to create a life that was right for me.

Painting the portrait of Simone was a remembrance of my childhood relationship with Barbie. In researching different fonts Mattel used for Barbie packaging over the decades, I immediately decided to use the one the company used to promote the doll in the early 1980s. This resonated with me of course because it aligned with the Barbie of my youth. Tiling the text across the back of Simone’s poster was my method of encoding through repetition the reinforcement that occurs through the persistence of consumer advertising.

Tim Gunn, design mentor on Project Runway has called Barbie “the ultimate gay icon,” even though Barbie is still a volatile object in the world of feminist theory for her totally unattainable bust to waist ratio and the myriad of jobs that range from doctor to astronaut undermined by her persistent “sexy” attire. Sherman and Zubriggen in their study of the persistence and reinforcement of female objectification via the Barbie write about their test group of young girl subjects who felt they could do significantly less than their boy counterparts because of the sexualizing of women encoded visual makeup of doll. For Simone and gay men everywhere, though, the opposite seems true. The fact that Barbie IS a woman and she IS beautiful and she CAN seemingly do every job imaginable are traits that make her such a compelling and empowering figure. The enigmatic aura put forth by the Barbie doll tradition is an essence that begs to become an adornment. Simone Riviera brilliantly takes on this

idea creating ownership over the idol and cleverly carves out a persona that utilizes this doll's mystique and propels it into a brand new era.

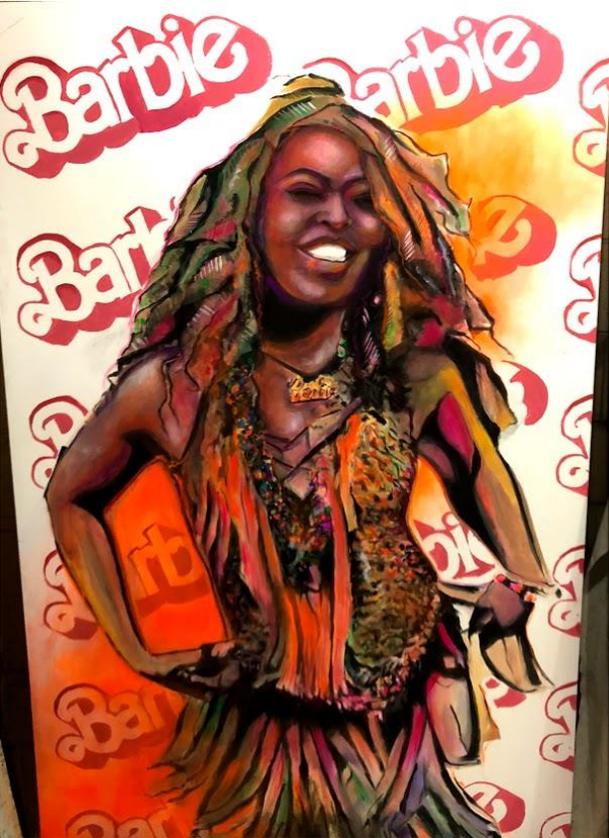


Figure 13: Finished Simone Riviera portrait under normal light conditions.



Figure 14: Finished Simone Riviera portrait under ultraviolet light conditions.

KRYZTAL VAPORZ: SPIRITUAL BEACON AND SOBER COMMUNITY BUILDER

When I saw Kryztal Vaporz for the first time in drag, she was towering high above every other queen and chorus boy in the cramped backstage corridor of the Texas School for The Deaf the venue for *Dragoween—Frightmare on Glam Street* the 2013 installment of the annual sober drag show benefitting Austin Roundup. Her makeup was flawless, Divine-inspired, she wore a slinky black and silver geometric dress that poured down her uber-statuesque form to size fifteen, six inch heels and she was rocking a leonine, blown-out-Beyoncé style wig. I was totally in awe of her, but this amazing presentation of persona through stature and costume was just another day



Figure 15: Kryztal Vaporz and me backstage at *Dragoween—Frightmare on Glam Street*. Photo by David-Augustine Ysla.

at the drag office for her. Kryztal was a radical transformation from her male counterpart, Cel, whom I had gotten to know in rehearsal the past three months. That year I was a chorus member of the show and, I realize now, I was a pretty bad performer—I could barely dance, I had never really performed onstage before, but being in the show gave me a much needed outlet for my new life in sobriety and access to a group of folks who embraced recovery whole-heartedly. Among this group were amazing drag performers and dancers and it was from this initial experience that my true curiosity and love for drag grew. The

photograph I took with Kryztal that night back stage--me with my leg wrapped around her like a giddy schoolgirl--and her looking fierce as fuck, is still one of my most prized photographs.

I came back to *Dragoween* in subsequent years. Not as a performer but as a costume maker—eventually I was asked to design costumes for an entire show. My work on *Dragoween* mirrored, in a lot of ways, my academic career. What I learned in my Textiles and Apparel classes--patternmaking and draping--soon became the knowledge I used to create looks for the drag queens of *Dragoween*; the elements of theatrical costume design I learned in the Theater department became the basis of my ability to design and realize a whole show.

Over the next few years working with Kryztal on *Dragoween* she became a friend to me and a touchstone on my sober journey. She was a guiding light of possibility. She showed me that in the absence of drugs and alcohol one could find a life rich in art and expression.

“There’s a whole wave of dreams and ways of being that people don’t see when they are blinded in their addiction--sobriety keeps me on my heels,” Cel said to me with a wink when I sat down to speak to him for this project. He was skyping me from his home office turned makeup, drag lab at his residence in San Antonio. I could see just behind him a lineup of fabulous up-dos on wig heads displayed proudly on shelves like wonderful works of art and a white vanity stocked with a about million brushes and stacks upon stacks of shadows and powders and drawers which contained, I imagined, false eyelashes of every shape and color. Cel tells me he’s in the midst of doing an inventory of all of his costumes and wigs in order to prepare for his

application to *RuPaul's Drag Race*. “The reason I’m applying is to let people know, especially who suffer from drug and alcohol addiction that there is life after addiction, that you can get sober, you can perform sober and remain sober—I want to reach out to a marginalized group of people.”

He tells me the art form of drag first presented itself front and center when he was tricked into going to a sober drag show in early recovery back in 2007. “I remember the laughter and just the energy and so I knew I was going to be on stage really soon.” Cel had never done drag before, but coming from a very artistic extended Mexican family in San Antonio, Cel had always performed and lip-synced as a kid. He tells me that as a child he and his cousins would put on plays and the love for performance and sing-along remained (albeit for a time at the back of his mind) as an adult. “I am naturally drawn to Billie Holiday and Aretha Franklin—Etta James,” Cel tells me, “the thought that I could be a female impersonator had always been a little spark in the back of my head, but I was too afraid to do it when drugs and alcohol took priority over everything.”

Cel said from the beginning he had a very supportive group of gay men from the recovery meetings who helped him with encouragement and support, but still he had to learn drag through trial and error. “I didn’t have a drag mother,” he tells me. Learning how to do drag makeup, especially, was a lesson in craft for Cel. “While I don’t have a drag mother, I have,” Cel says “spawned a lot of drag children—so many drag babies” he says with a sweet chuckle, “because when I practice makeup on others it was easier to learn makeup and learn how to do my own face.” He tells me he offers makeup services to any new member of Lambda (the LGBTQI recovery clubs)

throughout Texas and says it's every gay man's right to try drag at least once. He eventually created what he calls the House of Vaporz based upon the house system of drag which was highlighted in the 90s documentary *Paris is Burning* which focused on the ball culture of New York City. The house system consists of a drag mother who is the knowledge-holder and teacher and her drag children. This drag mother disseminates her drag knowledge to her young and in this process of teaching encodes her particular brand of style, of makeup and performance. Kryztal, utilizes this blueprint as well with one added bonus: Kryztal provides recovery-related support in addition to teaching her drag artistry. She credits sober drag queen community building as the foundation of staying sober for the past 11 years.

Cel tells me the first time he performed in drag was a sober drag show he planned for a 12-step home group and invited his real-life adopted mother and sister. He said he hired a girl to do his makeup who'd never done drag makeup before "I had no idea what I was doing either, but that was the first time I learned you don't have to look perfect to be a good drag performer," Cel says. That first performance took place on a little homemade stage in a church hall. Cel says he borrowed a Divine-style *Pink Flamingos* dress from another queen and wore it with a black wig. Vaporz performed a remix version of "When Doves Cry" by Aalyah and closed with Etta James "At Last". "I had such a great time. I loved the applause and adulation and I fell in love."

"My drag style is Texas huge" Cel tells me when I ask about his drag style "—big ass, big hair, big titties—that is my aesthetic." Cel tells me that if he doesn't have at least two wigs sewn together on his head, he's not doing a Kryztal Vaporz style of drag. "I can knock the audience out with my sheer size and I'm as big as a line backer

so when you're that big, you're intimidating, but if you're that big and proportioned correctly, it gives you a diva-like presence." Cel as Kryztal knows what his advantages are. He knows what works and what doesn't. "I want to be beautiful, but that doesn't mean fish or effeminate or a female. I don't want to try to get away with it. I want people to know that I'm a man in a dress who is absolutely stunning." The thing that enamors me most about Cel as Kryztal is the way he owns his own body and perfects Kryztal's image via that knowledge—Kryztal's a diva, a total diva—and this curvy confidence was something I eventually sought to capture in my portrait of her.

In order to costume himself as Kryztal, Cel has to get creative. He relies on unique stores, his own crafting ability and artisans in the local community to help create Kryztal's signature look. Cel frequents full figured women's apparel stores for clothes or stripper stores for shoes (Cel wears a womens 16.) "It's very rare that I can go and buy something off the rack that will incorporate my shoulder and arm size," Cel says and for that reason he goes with a lot of open shoulder outfits. He admits that if he wants something that fits him the best, he must have it custom made.

As a true diva, Cel loves extravagant, large and sparkling adornments. Places like Sam Moon, he tells me, are especially good for their selection of chunkier and gorgeous costume jewelry, but Kryztal can also get crafty. "I've actually made bracelets out of masking tape or duct tape rolls—my hand will actually fit through there and then I will use hot glue and bead them—yeah I'm a hot glue queen," Cel laughs.

He tells me that he has a wigologist named Lala in Austin who does custom wigs. "No queen could ever get their hair that high—and so Lala knows how to

proportion the hair to my body.” Cel tells me that Lala (who is also a drag queen) collects drag clothes, wigs and jewelry has frequent sales of these items when they no longer suit her personal style. Cel tells me that that the blond wig Kryztal wears in photograph I chose to paint for this series started out as an item in one of Lala’s sales. “I saw the wig sitting there and said to Lala ‘I love that hair—but it’s just too flat’ and Lala said to me, ‘that’s not a problem, I’ll just sew two wigs together and stuff the top,’ she totally layered it up like a Las Vegas star!” Cel adds that good storage is a must for wigs. “You don’t just take off a wig and throw it on the ground—if you have a piece like that. It’s like a work of art. You don’t throw art on the floor.” As far as Kryztal’s signature makeup goes, Cel tells me he always “paints for the back row.”

Kryztal’s style and persona IS a work of art. She’s big and outrageous--diva-inspired, she’s curvy, glamorous and over the top and she’s quite simply radiant. When I first saw the picture I was to use for the inspiration for her portrait all of these qualities of Kryztal were completely evident to me. The big blond yummy golden chiffon hair, makeup featuring bold black-feathered eyelashes that extend out for days and diamond chandelier earrings that reminded me of something Marilyn Monroe might wear. Perhaps the most striking feature of the photograph is the vibrant orange, red and yellow body-con dress decorated with tendrils of black lines that criss-cross her voluptuous frame. Her stance is bold; hands up by her face as if she’s leaning against a window frame, peering out into the daylight as a soft glow is cast upon her face.

Cel says the photograph was taken by a gentleman at the Houston Lambda house (a recovery center) on a night that Kryztal was the star performer at a fundraiser.

All of the monies collected that night went towards paying off the 30 year note the club had on the building. “I think they only had \$1,000 left to pay and the event was something I conceived along with another drag queen. It was fantastic.” When I asked about where Cel had gotten that wonderful dress he told me that it came from another queen in San Antonio, Lady Licious (Gilbert). “Gilbert is really crafty,” Cel tells me “Gilbert gets tons of stretchy knit fabric in bulk and sews the dresses from scratch, but Gilbert never knew how to do two arms, so all of his dresses are single arm.” (This explains its asymmetry.)

The story behind the dress and Kryztal’s styling of it makes this portrait special to me. It was important to recognize Kryztal’s recovery and her spiritual beacon-like status within the portrait and the fact that her persona is a product of all the community and craft that went into creating it. I was inspired by photographs of architecture, particularly stairs, to pair in some way with Kryztal’s image. Kryztal uses structure, she utilizes the 12 steps of recovery to help those she sponsors and creating an artistic collage with architecture was a way to encode that idea with her image. I turned a photograph of steps on its side and made that the background of Kryztal’s portrait. The steps in forced perspective became almost like a series of rays erupting from behind Kryztal. In my mind she becomes like a drag Madonna--a modern take on the biblical mother of God. Kryztal is a wonderful example of how the art form of drag and systems of drag culture can be cultivated and utilized in a new way to help those in need.



Figure 16: Finished Kryztal Vaporz portrait under normal light conditions.



Figure 17: Finished Kryztal Vaporz portrait under ultraviolet light conditions.

CHEEKI KAHNT: GENESIS OF A NEW DRAG DIVA

The thing I love most about Cheeki Kahnt is the way she unapologetically rocks makeup, baldness and chest hair all in one phenomenal bodily visual discourse. Cheeki started popping up on my Facebook feed a couple of years ago (friend of a friend) and I was immediately enamored with the image she puts forth. Cheeki Kahnt's makeup is a paint job of intergalactic proportions usually consisting of very sharp swaths of fuchsia and purple that extends radiantly from the edges of her eyes and erupts from the contours of her cheeks like some futuristic glam cyborg. Her eyelashes are exquisitely curated, dramatic elements of spidery artistry and her eyebrows become lightning bolts that are electrically discharged from her brow. Her outfits have a super cool 90s resort wear styling, she loves to don a small rhinestone crown which she glues to the top of her shaved head and often wears a necklace emblazoned with the words "Butt stuff" giving her an almost rapper-like air. Her outfits always include a deep v at center front exposing a mass of wonderful chest hair which has become her signature. I was immediately intrigued by Cheeki's persona—especially the means by which she manipulates gender and I knew I HAD to reach out to her in order to interview and paint her for this project.

Michael Reyna met me at my local Starbucks. Wonderful and outgoing he came up to me and immediately gave me a huge hug. He doesn't look totally unlike Cheeki as a man, except he wears glasses. We met at the tables outside the café and his warm and outgoing personality filled up even the outdoor space. His exuberance for the world of drag and his brand of drag in particular is apparent. For Michael drag is a new journey and you can sense a fresh excitement when he speaks.

Michael says he started doing drag just a little over a year ago on a challenge. “My friend was going to do this thing called drag class and he was like ‘I really need somebody to give me some competition.’ Michael admits he’s very competitive and was ‘in’ immediately. Michael tells me drag class was a show created by Sabel Scities that takes place at Rain on 4th street which is a competition for new drag queens. These drag babies are mentored by local, experienced drag performers in order for them to hone their skill, build their wardrobes and learn what to do and what not to do. For Michael this was an amazing opportunity to create a character off-script.

“I looked at drag as a way to create a character from the ground up,” Michael says. “I get to decide what she does and how she does it and when she does it—and how she looks. ‘Yes, and’ is the rule—it’s a good improv rule and I get to say ‘yes, and’ to anything I want to do and no one else, no director, script-writer, playwright is going to tell me what I can and cannot do.”

This makes perfect sense given that Michael’s first vocation is acting. He grew up loving musical theater and pursued acting in high school and college. He continued on to become a professional actor. Michael was in the East Coast tour of *Rocky Horror* (playing the role of Dr. Frankenfurter), he lived as an actor in New York City for a time and when he moved to Austin became part of the cast at Esther’s Follies. He later joined as a cast member for productions at Zach Scott Theater, most recently acting in their production of *Pricilla Queen of the Desert*. Before his friend’s drag challenge Michael never really thought of drag as a career path. He tells me he was always drawn to performers like Tim Curry, David Bowie and Freddie Mercury. “When I saw Tim Curry in Rocky Horror I was like ‘what’s this--?, boys can wear

fishnets and heels—oh, okay that sounds fun.” Michael admits he was really intrigued when he realized RuPaul was really a guy dressed in drag—this happened when RuPaul hit center stage in the 90s around the time Michael was a teenager and laid the foundation for what would later propel him into the art form.

“What does it mean if I do this?” was Michael’s first question when confronted with the idea of trying out drag. He tells me he paused momentarily before launching off into the stratosphere of taking on the guise of Cheeki, interrogating stigmas attached to drag by society and perhaps biases he himself might have for drag performers. He tells me that he grew up in a very large Catholic Mexican-American family. “I remember when I was growing up and I came out to my dad he said ‘all I want for you is to be happy, but if you’re ever going to do drag or something—just let me know.’” It was that Mexican machismo and his father’s possible disapproval that he says stayed at the back of his mind even as he embarked upon creating Cheeki. “I could be interested in this [creating a drag persona], but am I allowed to be? What are my parents going to say? Is this going to be okay—but then I was like, I’m 33 and I don’t give a fuck. I’m going to do what I want to do and I’m going to keep my chest hair because I still want to get laid!”

It’s that impetuous attitude and flying in the face of what’s expected and deemed appropriate that gave rise to Cheeki Kahnt and eventually won Michael’s dad over to the fact that he was now doing drag—that and the fact that he possibly could make a living at it. Michael recounts when he told his mom that he was in drag class and her reaction was super sweet, “I showed her pictures of me,” says Michael “and she said ‘oh you’re so beautiful! You kind of look like me when I was younger!’ so

then I said to her ‘I need to tell dad’ she was like ‘oh he won’t mind.’” When Michael’s father got on the phone and Michael told him about Cheeki he said “Hey if that’s what you want to do—you’re getting paid, right?” –No, but I could be,” said Michael, and his dad quickly replied: ““get paid.”” Now Michael says they are very supportive of his drag career and the money slowly but surely is coming in. Michael says his parents help him out sometimes with costume expenses and travel and his family has come down to Austin to see Michael perform as Cheeki. Michael says some of his dad’s coworkers even came to see Cheeki perform when they were in Austin.

“It’s been so much fun,” says Michael, “I’m enjoying it and enjoying exploring the art form and really figuring out what I can do for it and what it can do for me.” Besides being another line on his acting resume, Cheeki has proven to be an unwieldy persona even for Michael himself. He sees Cheeki has a younger version of himself. “She made a lot of mistakes, but Cheeki is like this teenager.” Michael admits. “Cheeki has a mouth that can get her into trouble. She reminds me a lot of myself when I first moved to New York—like my 22 year old self. You’re making stupid mistakes and you’re still kind of figuring it out, but in your head you have an idea of who you are—it might not be exactly who you are, but you have an idea of who you might be. That’s where Cheeki is right now.”

Cheeki, as Michael describes her, seems like a very real human being--not some persona he puts on. The literal alignment of this idea, that Cheeki really is a new born within the universe of drag and possesses the personality quirks of someone just discovering themselves, makes Cheeki Kahnt very identifiable and compelling—she’s

figuring out who she is in real time, the audience is witnessing her as she takes this journey and there is excitement in the promise that Cheeki will evolve and change over time.

Performatively, Michael and Cheeki's musical tastes dovetail in a wonderful way paying homage to Michael's roots in theater. Michael says that Cheeki gets to live out the fantasy that Michael always wanted to live. He says he's been totally inspired by actress/singers like Jennifer Holiday, Patti Lupone and Ethel Merman and as Cheeki Michael feels great satisfaction in being able to perform their repertoire. "She gets to do the Mama Rose stuff from *Gypsy* and she gets to do the Jennifer Holiday stuff from *Dreamgirls*—Michael can't always get away with that. Michael can't hit those notes as a boy and lip-syncing that stuff, I can get away with it." There are a few numbers though that Michael, a talented singer in his own right, can get away with singing as Cheeki live. Most notably "Dr. Long John", "Sweet Transvestite" and "Fever", which he says he pulls out to perform especially on Valentine's Day.

If there's anything that I learned from my conversation with Michael is that it can be dangerous and shortsighted to define a drag performer by labeling it. In Evans and Gamman's very complex and exhaustive discussion on the queering of the male gaze, *The Gaze Revisited, or Reviewing Queer Viewing*, the idea of genderfuck is evoked and analyzed. Genderfuck is described in their work via June L. Reich's assessment of the term, which simplified, is "'the play of masculine and feminine on the body'" (41). Although Reich's work looks mostly at the idea of genderfuck as a performance mechanism, genderfuck has become a visual idea in the drag world in

terms of costuming the body. Just as the distillation of the male gaze blots out the complexity of the viewer/subject/creator relationship outlined in Evans and Gamman's treatise, Michel also holds that his brand of drag is a reaction against even the stereotypical categories of drag represented traditionally within the drag world. When I tried to categorize his drag as a genderfuck style he kindly railed against my labeling. I totally appreciated his viewpoint because it supported so much of the conversation happening in Evans and Gamman's work. "I think people want to put labels on other people's drag without asking the person 'what is your drag?', you know?" Michel tells me pointedly. For him the term genderfuck is an oversimplification. He cites Rify Royalty's recent reaction when someone tried to construe him as a genderfuck. "She's like, no, 'I'm a drag queen'," Michael recounts to me and as he describes his own transformative process I realize that Cheeki's visual presentation, meaning what Michael chooses to do and not to do when putting on his drag look, is not so much a body negotiation as much as an embracing of what one's own body is and how that can impact expressions of gender costuming upon it. It also speaks to the wonderful way in which a performer can step into a drag role comfortably without letting society tell them what a drag queen should and should not wear and how they should or should not present themselves.

For Michael not shaving his chest hair and not always wearing a wig were non-negotiable points--and why should they be? Upon his first meeting with his drag mentor Topaz Crawford in preparation for drag class, Michael tells me he was the one that set the ground rules—not Topaz and that his brand of drag formed around him and not the other way around. He cites the chest hair conversation. Topaz questioned his

staunchness. “I told her, no, I don’t want to shave it because it hurts when it grows back and I get bumps. I told her that I’m going to leave my chest hair and if somebody wants to read me for that they can, but it’s who I am—that’s how Cheeki got started,” says Michael. “The whole thing goes back to the question of: what’s your drag? My drag is hairy-chested bald-headed queen” and Michael has found great success in creating his own brand and style. “I think there’s a heightened illusion to what I do that goes beyond just genderfuck—when I was genderfucking I was just throwing on some eyeliner and some glitter and calling it a day. Now, I’m honing my craft.” Cheeki has also helped Michael embrace himself as a male. “As a boy [becoming Cheeki] has helped me get back into being very comfortable with my own body—I needed a way to reclaim it,” he admits, confessing to me—(even though I think he looks fantastic) that after moving to Austin he’s gained a few pounds. He tells me that he successfully completed drag class and now he has his own mentee, Banshee Rose. In addition to being a drag mentor, Cheeki/Michael also acts as an ambassador with the International Drag Festival as a way to reach more people and help them to really understand the art form of drag. The Drag Festival is not just for drag performers, but for anyone who has a curiosity or a love for the art form.

“Cheeki loves sparkle,” Michael tells me when asked about his drag counterpart’s style. “She likes body suits and likes to show off her butt, whether she’s wearing pads or not—sometimes it’s boy butt with a tuck, sometimes its full hipped like Niki Minaj,” Michael tells me with a big grin –“always showing as much chest hair as possible, um, very East Village Bushwick-y, but somewhat polished. So polished trash if that makes sense; a little piggy with glitter on her like if a leather

daddy wore sequins.” To me these are brilliant summations. I presented two photographs to Cheeki as possibilities for her portrait. One, was her clad and posed as if for a society page in a magazine clad in a graphic solar system print onesie (created by Daniel Henson out of L.A.) paired with her signature “Butt Stuff” necklace. The other was a picture that she’d been using for promotional purposes taken by William Boyd. In it, Cheeki is very poised, her hand on hip in full attitude resembling a vogue cover model staring off fiercely into space bedecked in sparkling jewelry and wearing a textured pink and black kimono (opening deeply in the front to show Cheeki’s ample chest hair.) Her face is pristinely painted, angular and on point. In the end we centered on the idea of joining the two images. I was intrigued by the outfit presented in the latter photograph because of its stunning posed-perfect quality. “I do perform in that outfit,” Michael says to me, he tells me the photo was an early one of him and his makeup skills have improved since then, but admits that he loves the photo a lot. The



Figure 18: Cheeki in 'universe' onesie. Photo by Gilbert Hernandez.

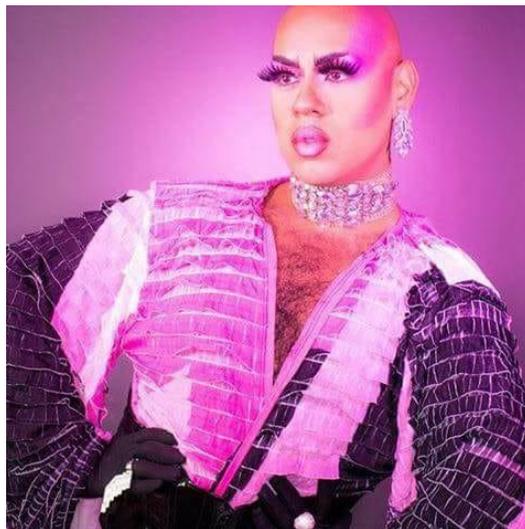


Figure 19: Inspiration photo for portrait of Cheeki. Photo by William Boyd.

jewelry and kimono once belonged to his drag mother, Topaz Crawford. “When Topaz left the city in kind of a hurry I ended up with a lot of her stuff. She told me ‘Cheeki, just take care of it for me.’ So I take care of it.” Michael tells me that the kimono is a fun number and I comment on the geometric beauty of it. “All those flaps move and the sleeves are down to there,” Michael says motioning almost to the ground. “It barely covers my butt when it’s on, but it’s a fun little piece.”

In painting Cheeki I really sought to capture her bold attitude. The universe onesie became an actual celestial presence that exists behind Cheeki in the portrait and it was an interesting and exciting process to create a glowing solar system that could back drop this amazing drag performer. I only realized after the painting was complete the story that I was capturing. It was artistic kismet. I realized later, going back through my interview with Michael, that the thematic elements we both were trying to portray him in costume and me in my artwork centered around Cheeki’s bold newness. The painting in this way becomes a homage to the birth of a persona into the universe. It’s precisely this excitement and journey of self-discovery that is so wonderful and fresh about my interview with Michael. For him and Cheeki the sky is the limit and undoubtedly as Cheeki grows in crafting her own art form and via her commitment to being an ambassador for the drag community, she will solidify her place in the local drag pantheon as a Broadway-loving gender-defying force of nature for years to come.

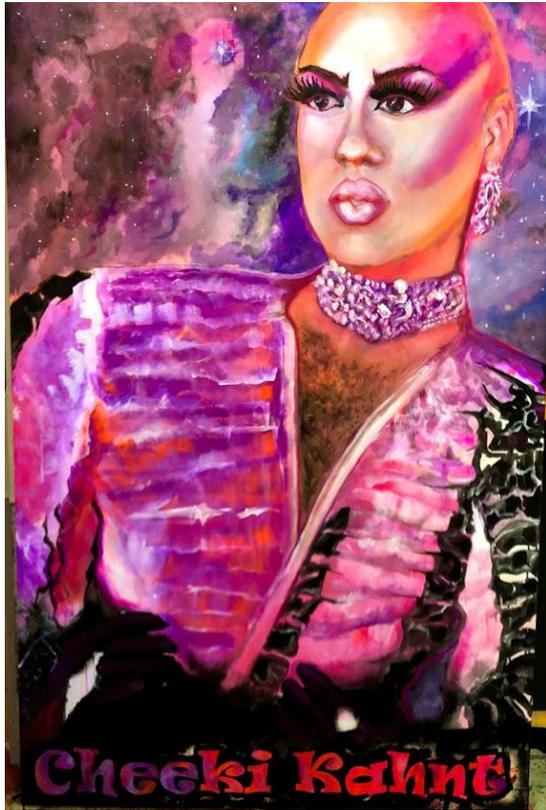


Figure 20: Finished Cheeki Kahnt portrait under normal light conditions.

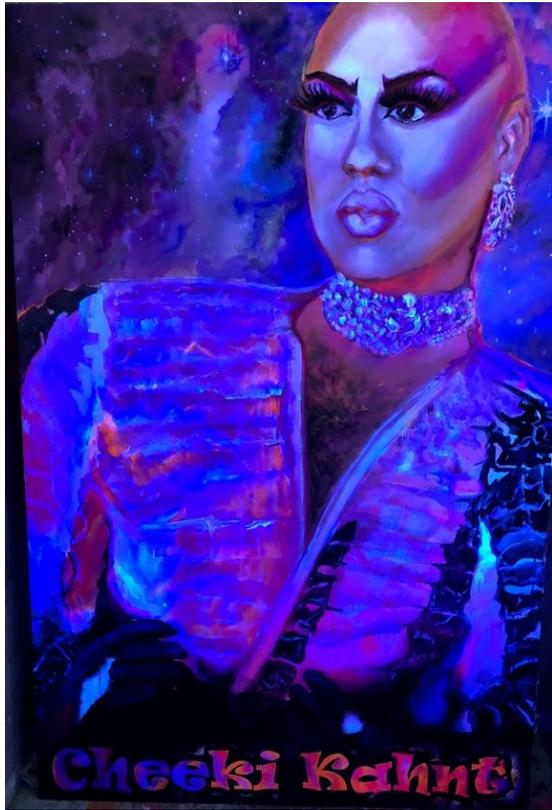


Figure 21: Finished Cheeki Kahnt portrait under ultraviolet light conditions.

MAX MORRISON: TRANS/BURLESQUE/Drag KING

Max Morrison struts out on stage dressed in an elegant black tuxedo, exuding the debonair qualities of golden age leading man. As the sultry and soulful “Body Party” by Ciara plays, Max levels his suave gaze at the audience, striking a strong pose belonging on the pages of GQ, hands in pockets, he then strokes his chest and coat lapels tantalizingly becoming the object of desire. With supreme control he beckons the audience to adore him and quickly silences them, striding to a nearby chair, bending over it and engaging in seductive butt gyrations and leg stroking, hip pulsing and straddling the chair, he flings sparkling confetti jettisoning it into the air from some secret place within his inner jacket pocket. It flutters out, a possible prelude to self-celebration. As the glittering elements hit the stage, Max sits, undoes his bowtie, teases the audience with it and then flings it aside. To applause and hoots he stands and unbuttons his tux shirt revealing flesh colored chest binding and a myriad of arm tattoos. Turning away from the audience he pulls out a golden paper crown from the back waistband of his trousers, placing it on his head, he shows us he is the king of this performative moment. Max takes off his trousers revealing striped boxer briefs; with a sexy bump and grind he beckons the audience to contemplate what exists within his underwear. Reaching down into his drawers slowly and seductively, Max pulls out a flashing red party horn adorned with streamers, puts it to his lips and blows (Youtube).

Max Morrison was gracious enough to sit down to talk with me for this piece at what had become a favorite meeting place, the local Starbucks, and speaking to him helped open my eyes to an experience not shown in the mainstream nor on shows like *RuPaul's Drag Race*. It is unique, vibrant and worthy of the very brightest spotlight. As a researcher of the drag experience as it relates to style and costume my work is possibly ongoing. There are countless wonderful personalities out there and thanks to the modern embracing of drag performance, numbers are growing. The personal style of each performer I interviewed for this piece is a unique fingerprint constituting a complex mixture of history, community, craft, taste and identity/persona creating a spectrum of limitless colors and possibilities. To that end I didn't think that this

project would even feel in any way close to being an overview of local drag performers without including the experience of a drag king. Honestly, I think that the drag king experience warrants even more inquiry.

Max is extremely intelligent, insightful and creative. Blending all the elements of handsome Hollywood leading man with performance art and burlesque cabaret show, he creates in his work an environment of gender play and camp that I found vastly interesting.

Standing in stark contrast to the performance I just described, Max says as a child he was terribly awkward and shy. “I didn’t try theater or anything until college, but my parents put me in a summer camp because I did like music and I was able to play an instrument so that kind of gave me a taste of what it was to perform on stage.” It was at the camp that Max says he met a trans person for the first time. Max has recently begun the process of transitioning female to male saying that he’s been on hormones for eight months and is taking to them well although he says his facial hair isn’t growing in quite as quickly as he’d like.

I ask Max about his first time performing in drag. Max fast-forwards from the awkward days of summer camp to a performance Max calls death by fire in 2010 when he did drag for a PFLAG event that promoted the art form on the Texas Tech campus where Max went to school. “Mind you, I had never seen a drag king before,” Max says “there were like 400 people there—it was a really large crowd--and I had never done this in front of anyone before.” He says at the time Justin Bieber was a big deal; “everyone was always telling me how much we looked alike, so I’m like ‘fine, I’m going to use this to my advantage—so I did a Justin Bieber impersonation and that

was my first experience with drag.” Then I asked him how it went. “It was amazing!” he smiles, “I had no choreography, I had picked up moves from dancing in the clubs so I had never been classically trained or trained period—I’m kind of self-taught but they loved it!” He tells me there was a girl there who was totally star struck by him and living her best life and I was like ‘this is amazing!’”

Seven years later Max says he’s fighting the biggest stigma against drag kings, that they aren’t entertaining. “We’ve been fighting that one for years,” says Max. According to him, the drag king culture was on it’s deathbed when he started out. “I was really mad that I wasn’t getting gigs. Venues weren’t taking chances on kings. Unfortunately drag is—I hate to use the word patriarchy, but it’s queen dominated—it’s kind of a mind fuck and so it’s still a man’s world. We’re always fighting for our own space,” It was in this environment that Max along with five other performers, birthed an idea to create their own drag king signature showcase (which they named Boiz of Austin) in order to challenge drag king stigmas and create a market for themselves in Austin and throughout the country. According to Max the core values of Boiz of Austin centers on supporting all body types and gender expressions and well as celebrating difference. It is in that love of difference promoted by the group that the other talents of its members emerged and has found a fertile place to grow and thrive. More than just a drag king troupe, The Boiz of Austin brings other varied elements to table beyond gender artistry, they also showcase performers who mix drag with aerial work and in the case of Max, burlesque.

“Burlesque is like my secret weapon,” Max says. “I like burlesque because it makes people think –‘I’m turned on by this, human sexuality is---whaaat?!’” Max is

unabashedly handsome and exudes a masculine charm that is decadently suave and he has the power to make girls swoon and gay boys, and perhaps straight men alike, question all that they hold dear about attraction and masculinity. It's just that atmosphere of questioning that Max loves to bring to his work. "I got into burlesque because I had a lot of gender dysphoria and that's because I'm trans so for me burlesque is a way to honor my body even though I'm not necessarily comfortable in it—it forced me to get on stage and be vulnerable." He sees burlesque as a type of therapy. The 'Body Party' piece I described at the beginning of this section has become his hallmark performance evoking the idea of self-love and celebration. Max began his study of burlesque watching boylesque videos on Youtube. He says he had a partner at the time who was into performing fem burlesque. "It was different from the type of burlesque I wanted to do, but it was enough to teach me the mechanics of performance and it gave me the confidence to try--I thought, 'oh okay, I can do this, I can take my clothes off for money.'" Now, beyond his own performances, Max also teaches the art form at the Austin Academy of Burlesque.

The added elements of aerial and burlesque spectacle have helped the Boiz of Austin make a name for itself while challenging the traditional image of drag king. Max says these exciting and unique talents are the essence of the troupe's existence. "It's wildly entertaining—so that's why we exist," saying to potential venues who might not have otherwise booked a drag king troupe: "We're good too, you should give us a chance and it's changing the more we go out there and show them." The Boiz of Austin has successfully carved out an ongoing venue at local club Elysium on Red River, bringing to the stage shows like *Dungeons and Drag Kings*, *Boiz in Film*,

Boiz on Broadway and “*Show Me Your Kitties*” a Cat Tuesday Mardi Gras celebration. Besides their home at Elysium the troupe has become a trailblazer in the bigger drag king community, touring the country doing outreach and workshops as part of the Drag King Project which promotes the art form. Max says that even the drag queen dominated bars on 4th Street are finally starting to include Boiz of Austin members in their shows. “We don’t get booked as often, but they’re starting to come around,” Max tells me with a grin.

Sherril Dodds is a professor and chair of the Dance Department at Temple University who is a dance scholar. She has done an enormous amount of research in neo-burlesque by not only choreographing and studying the art form, but also performing burlesque strip tease in order to understand how the art form can take on traditional gender roles and promote change. In her article *Embodied Transformations in Neo-Burlesque Striptease*, Dodds “suggest[s] that contemporary neo-burlesque performance also mobilizes embodied transformations that complicate questions of female spectacle and power” (78). Much like the brand of performance Max promotes in his own work, Dodds reports that the neo-burlesque movement creates a shift as it relates to the “reconfiguration of the idealized female body”. As the art form embraces varied body types and performance viewpoints it takes on the previous burlesque environment that centered on “perceived objectification” (77) of the female body. Neo-burlesque uses this previous idea of burlesque and turns it on its head by creating performances that challenge the idea that female body should be sites for an objectified gaze.

Dodds describes one of her performances, “Desperate Housewives,” in her article. In the performance piece Dodds takes on the ideal role of traditional housewife by donning the semi-sexualized wife and mother uniform (housewife drag): cardigan, gasses, pencil skirt, heels paired with dishwashing gloves. As the music plays, “What’ll We Do With the Baby-O” she and a group of similarly dressed women step to the front of the stage, grab up yellow hazardous waste bags, reaching in, they pull out plastic baby dolls by their ankles and just after handing the “grubby specimens” off to unsuspecting male audience members they proceed to strip down to tassels and knickers brandishing feather boas instead of dust mops and pelvic gyrations in the place of baby swaddling (75). In this manner, much like Max attests, Dodd’s demonstrates that burlesque in the form of neo-burlesque has become a form of empowerment. I’m likening Dodds work here to Max’s not only for the fact that it takes on the idea of gender trouble as expressed in Max’s work, but also seems that Dodds has tapped into the elements of spectacle and campy-commentary that drag queens have embraced for a long time. Dodds even takes on a stage name, Scarlett Korova, much like a drag performer would, in order to create a safe space to experiment and perform while keeping her daytime identity in tact—like any post-modern feminist super hero would.

Curious to know, I ask Max how his transition female to male plays out in performing gender—since he’s a male performing as a drag king, how does this reality affect his viewpoint on his own performance and how is that reflected on stage. Max tells me he loves this question, smiling he takes a moment to ponder it and then starts out, “So the definition of drag is changing,” he tells me. “It used to be that drag was

posing as opposing genders—the problem with that is that drag actually comes from—are you familiar with the balls?” “You mean *Paris is Burning*?” I say to him. Max nods. I know immediately what social conversation he is evoking. To put his answer into in some context before proceeding: the 1990 documentary of *Paris is Burning* highlighted the ball culture of New York City. In addition to investigating the house system of drag, already mentioned in the Kryztal Vaporz section of this piece, the documentary also brought forth the idea that drag in some form can be a site for socio-economic discourse and therefore broaden the idea of the gendered idea of drag. According to Dorian Corey (one of the main drag performers interviewed in the movie), the ball culture of NYC rallied against inequality by creating a venue for its participants to put on the garments and take on the posture of persona not attainable in real life—called drag. (The term realness which the participants of the film seem to have coined and has become ingrained in the drag lexicon is the ability to mimic realistically something you are not in real life.) While the film feels like a wonderful celebration of drag I also find it to be soberly tragic. In the section of the film entitled “Executive Realness”, the intense struggle of the mostly gay black men of the late 1980s to survive and thrive is highlighted. In this section Corey states:

In real life you can't get a job as an executive unless you have the educational background and the opportunity. The fact that you are not an executive is merely for the fact of the social standing of life. That is just the pure thing. Black people have a hard time getting anywhere and those that do are usually straight.

Corey's quote plays alongside footage of a ball where black men are dressed to the nines in suits and ties. They are debonair. They joyously and with fierce concentration act the part of executives as they are judged by a panel to win an award

for who can pull off the look and the attitude the best. For the drag performers in *Paris is Burning* drag was not only gender play, but it was also socio-economic play. They created performances that not only opened up the idea of what gender could and should be but also commented on social and racial inequality in the participants' attempt to find equal standing through fantasy and performance.

Under this definition and what Max is getting at is this: drag at its core is anything we put on ourselves in order to become something else. Max says, "you'll hear people say 'well, that wasn't masculine enough to be drag,' and I'm like 'look, I don't care, you could get out there in a tutu and be fem as hell and if you're calling that your drag then that's your drag. All drag is valid. I do know some cis males who identify as drag kings and they also will wear crazy makeup—so it's just like preference.'" This myriad of possibilities that Max and *Paris is Burning* describe can help, I think, the larger part of society embrace the idea of drag. The fact is, by these definitions, we have all dressed up in drag at some time in the past in order to—impress someone, get the job, like a band, fit in with a crowd, evoke another gender, or even fight for a country.

"I love that the definition of drag is changing because limiting it to just the two genders is insane," Max continues, "so, to answer your question, no I don't think it's me dressing up as a certain gender, but it's really about creating an exaggerated expression of gender. When I'm in drag I'm a more exaggerated form of myself." Furthermore Max says of gender and society, "We now know that gender exists on a spectrum. I mean in some cultures there are eight." What he is referring to is the myriad of genders recognized in sacred Jewish text of law and ceremony, the Talmud,

that “describes half a dozen categories that are between male and female, such as *saris* or *ailonit*—non-reproductive versions of the male or female body, respectively –and categories that refer to ambiguous or indeterminate gender” (jta.org). While many of these categories seem to speak to defining a person’s physical sex organs, there are other cultures who take into account an individual’s expressed gender, accepting that difference by creating a distinct category for a non-binary person--most notably the Samoan culture that recognizes a third gender identity--the fa’afafine. “In a Samoan cultural context, fa’afafine are defined as androphilic males (i.e., biological males who are sexually attracted [to adult males]) who are effeminate or transgendered and occupy an ‘alternative’ gender role category [in the Samoan society]” (Vasey, VanderLaan, Gothreau, Bartlett 1).

The discussion of gender is a complex one, but it is also a freeing one. The ideas Max puts forth in his discussion on the topic are supported by scholars like Judith Butler who says gender is a construct beyond sex that is acquired through the repetitive acts of performing an expression of gender again and again on a daily basis (Butler 519). I think as a culture we are realizing the wide spectrum on which we exist as we deal with sexuality, gender, expressed gender and how our relationship to society, consumerism, faith, government, and creative expression interact together. We are seeing that these interactions are an open and free conversation, on-going and malleable, and cannot be catalogued, boxed in or confined to a binary viewpoint any longer. This conversation spectrum should be the site for discourse and change.

The painting I did of Max, I hope, captures his exaggerated expression of gender via his debonair styling. I chose a dramatically lit photograph of him wearing

the same tuxedo which was the costume for his performed “Body Party” described in the introduction to this section taken by photographer Celesta Danger. The tux suit makes him feel powerful and sexy. I approached the painting with a little fear. This was the last one I did in the series, thankfully, and I had created a process of painting that allowed me to take on the challenges of painting a real-looking face free from the colorful makeup of the queens that I had painted previously. I wanted Max to look like Max. I wanted his skin tones to be true and natural—challenging as I’ve said with UV paint as a whole. I didn’t include any added elements to the background of the painting—only a simple red backdrop exists; I wanted it to be an honest portrayal of Max. His handsome timeless elegance is the story being told and I wanted that to be the feature of this work. In the end this is the painting I am most proud of in the series. I was able to take on a difficult medium and create, I think a very naturalistic portrait which evokes Max’s style as well as captures likeness. Max was the perfect bookend to this project and a wonderful addition to this series of paintings.

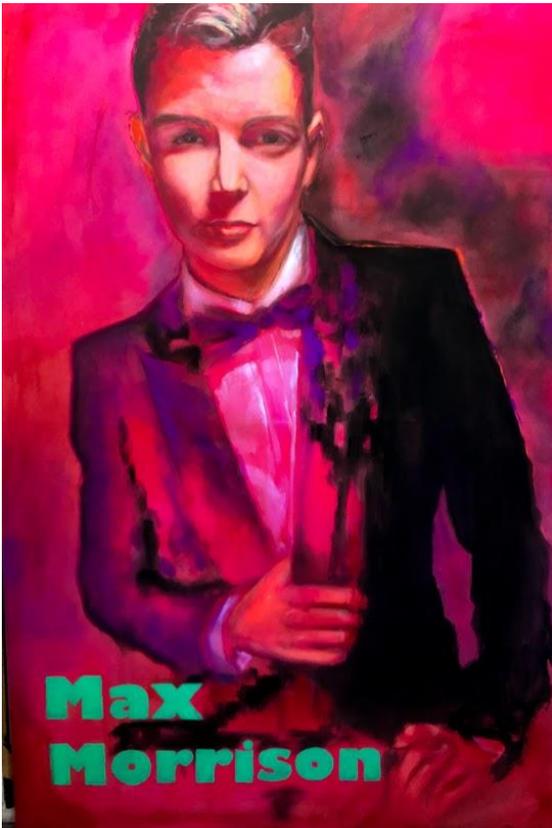


Figure 22: Finished Max Morrison portrait under normal light conditions.

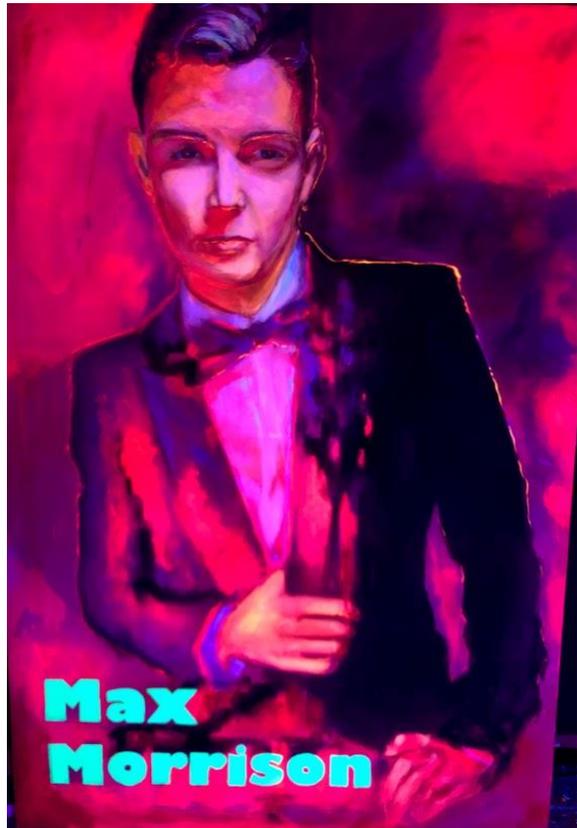


Figure 23: Finished Max Morrison portrait under ultraviolet light conditions.

CONCLUSION: CLOSING THE CIRCUIT

When I got up on stage the night I presented this body of visual work to the public at the “Portraying Drag” event , I started to say, “Welcome to my thesis” and then I hesitated. I looked at the sizable room which featured the five poster-sized paintings I created for the exhibit and the local drag superstar performers I spent months interviewing ---and then I quickly back-pedaled and realized aloud-- “this is wrong--this isn’t MY thesis, because this show isn’t about me---this is OUR thesis.” In that moment I realized that my goal in researching these performers and creating this work wasn’t to highlight myself, but to fashion a showcase of amazingly talented drag performers in order to discover their personal stories, learn about their viewpoints and investigate how style and personal history make up their drag personas to inform their look and create performance. In the end I was grateful to present this work and these performers to an audience who might not have otherwise seen them. I realized that in that moment we were all experiencing a collaborative celebration of drag.

The story of why an artist does what they do, how they approach their art and how the body can become a site of semiotic discourse in persona creation and performance is the core nugget of curiosity that led me to create this project. The added bonus of creating the installation along with devising the space to display the work, designing the lighting moments to feature each work and putting together the program of performers that would make the space not just a gallery but a wonderful cabaret-type stage served to close the circuit. The audience became the final ingredient to completing this project. By creating a space for this artwork to live for a night along side the performers who inspired it was immensely rewarding to me.

I created placards for each painting which I hoped gave the audience a hint of each performers' back-story. In putting these together I realized, summarizing the interviews I'd gleaned from each individual, how beautiful and varied these performers are in their own way: Dee Dee Davis' dedication to charity and expressing inner-self through performing as Dolly Parton for 22 years and using her art to generate cash for charity, Simone Riviera who becomes her own brand of Barbie, Kryztal Vaporz who blends drag with spirituality and creates community, Cheeki Kahnt who finds power in giving birth to her own drag persona while embracing what makes her unique and Max Morrison who finds gender and body affirmation in performing drag king burlesque. This project was like my own *Paris is Burning*. This stood as a documentary in a way, recording and understanding who these performers are and why they do what they do. It served to understand how they developed their personas through all of the life elements that have created them as individuals leading up to that moment. They reveal their drag personas to us, living and creating their wonderful work in our very own community on a daily basis. These are true drag super stars and their stories are compelling and inspiring.



Figure 24: Panoramic photograph of 'Portraying Drag' art installation at Sterling Event Center, February 24, 2019. Photo by Aaron Kubacak.



Figure 25: 'Portraying Drag' performers onstage at event. Left to right: Simone Riviera, Kryztal Vaporz, Cheeki Kahnt, Dee Dee Davis, Max Morrison. Photo by Vanessa Lopez.

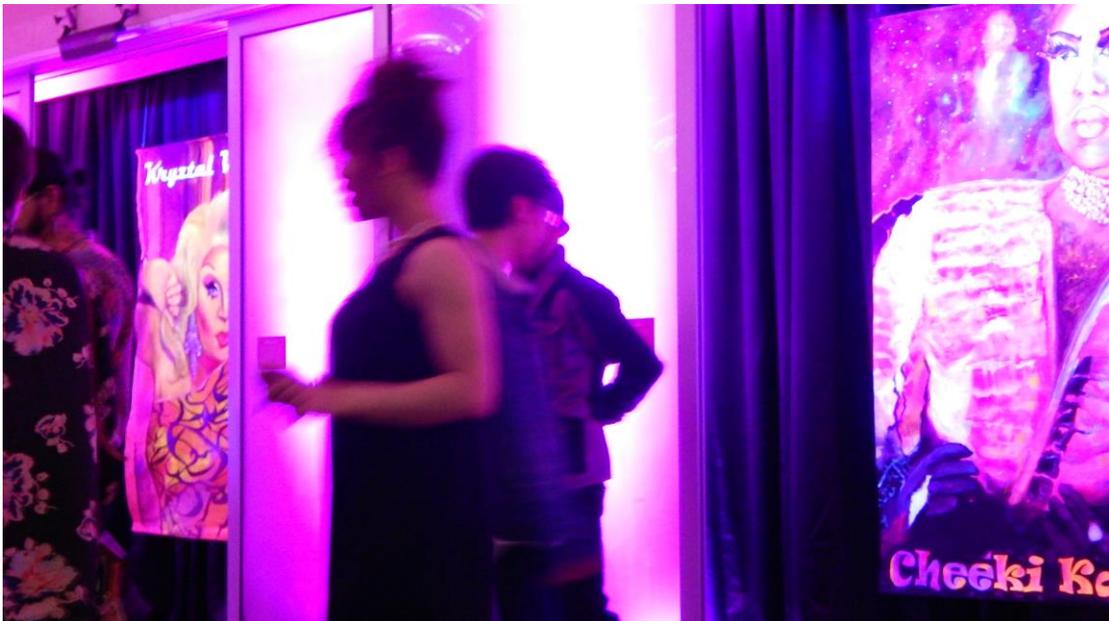


Figure 26: 'Portraying Drag' art event and drag show. Photo by Mary Ann Kubacak.

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