

REVEAL

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by

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis is dedicated to the phenomenal drag queens that shared their stories, images, and inspiration. These are the pioneers that dared to meander outside the norm to forge the path for others: Twiggy Morgan, Cocoa Price, Jasmine Baker, Cricket, Big Momma, Ginger Manchester and so many others.

First, I would like to thank Janice Lessman-Moss for sharing her knowledge and insights. This would not have been possible without you. You elevate everyone you encounter, and it has been an honor to work with you and experience all you do for the textile community. My panel: Andrew Kuebeck and Linda Ohrn-McDaniel you have been instrumental in guiding this body of work and endlessly supportive in your critiques.

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REVEAL

The work in my thesis exhibition “Reveal,” focuses on a particular aspect of the visual perception of gender and how we present ourselves to others, using the art of drag and the transformative qualities that drag entails. The most prominent indicators of identity change are revealed through hair, makeup, and dress, predominantly the gown. This special attire plays a significant role in the etymology of the term drag as it harkens back to 17th century London where men wearing women’s dresses would “drag” on the ground.¹ It became better known in 20th century American society where vaudeville’s quirky entertainment included the first known drag queen, Julian Eltinge. The reference to the word queen is reflective of elevated femininity and extravagance that a queen encompasses.²

“We are all born naked, and the rest is drag.” States RuPaul Andre Charles, a prominent contemporary drag queen that has been beneficial in propelling drag into an accepted art form in current culture.³ Dressing up in drag usually refers to when an individual dresses in the traditional clothing of the opposite gender. In the context of my thesis, I am referencing men dressing in women’s clothing. While dress is the main focal point there is also an entertainment or performative aspect to showcase this transformation with the integration of lip-synching and dance.

¹ Deron, Bernadette. “From Shakespeare To the Stonewall: The History of Drag Through 33 Images.” All That’s Interesting. December 15, 2018. <https://allthatsinteresting.com/history-of-drag-queens>.

² Keehnen, Owen. “Julian Eltinge.” Legacy Project Chicago. Accessed January 22, 2021. <http://legacyprojectchicago.org/person/julian-eltिंगe>.

³ Charles, RuPaul Andre, “What is Drag? A Primer on Drag Queens in Popular Culture-2021,” MasterClass, November 8, 2020. <https://www.masterclass.com/articles/a-primer-on-drag-queens-popular-culture#quiz-0>.

Inspiration

The inspiration for this body of work stems from the 1970's gay bar scene in Cleveland. I was introduced to this history when someone presented me with some vintage silk screen frames that depict gay bars and drag queens from that era. Subsequent research and interviews with participants that were part of the scene have revealed additional depth about this unique situation. During that time, gathering in these night clubs was secretive and little is documented about the places and people. This exhibition will attempt to introduce viewers to the spirit of that time through an installation of sculptural forms and images. Panels of life size digitally printed photographs of drag queens will be suspended on the gallery walls to establish the ambiance of a drag show in the late 1970's. The sheer fabric of the panels will capture the ephemeral nature of the time and strike a balance of nostalgia and connection. Printing the portraits on fabric also allows the viewer to become more physically engaged with personages from that era. They become part of this forgotten community, albeit as observers informed by a different perspective. The original silkscreen images of advertisements that included names of clubs and performing artists will also be incorporated, as part of the fabric constructions that serve as coverings for illuminated constructions. These lighted sculptures are intended to enhance the ambiance and instill a nightclub atmosphere. A colorful glow emanates from forms that conjure associations with the gowns that were so prominently part of the drag scene.

The work is meant to bring recognition to the places that do not exist anymore and honor those individuals who paved the way and established safe spaces for socializing and self-expression. It focuses on our innate sense of identity and inclusion through a contemporary lens. This is an environment where like-minded individuals convened to celebrate beauty, glamour, and each person's sense of femininity.

Research

After delving deep into the internet for images and content about venues and drag culture in Cleveland, I found very few articles that acknowledged the existence of these people and places. This further reinforced my commitment to preserving the few images and stories that enrapture this period. To elaborate on the content, I would have to rely more on oral history.

The main source of substance was elicited from Twiggy's husband Mark. Twiggy is a prominent drag queen and owned one of the most well-known and accepting establishments in the 1970's called Twiggy's Place. After I described the treasure trove of silk screens to Mark, he stated that the image of the shape of his lips was on one of the screens in my collection and he was able to further elaborate on what the screens existed for. In the late 1970's and before, the art of drag was not discussed or celebrated. Often you had to know someone or walk down a dark alley to enter well-hidden drag establishments. Twiggy and her venue, Twiggy's Place, provided a place for like-minded individuals to get together and to celebrate drag life, providing opportunities for performance. Her response to the negative cultural perception was to print the names of clubs and images of drag queens on t-shirts. These were sold or given away as prizes. This visibility helped establish and set the trajectory of acceptance and notoriety. The first prints celebrated and showcased around a dozen drag queens. In time more screens were created to print advertisements of drag venues around the city.

Although official documentation was scarce, social media provided a beneficial platform to connect with Cleveland drag queens from that era. The discovery of the Facebook group "Cleveland Drag Archives and Gay History Past and Future" was a turning point for this research. It is a treasure trove of images, stories, of those who performed at the local clubs.

Members of this group were excited to share their stories with me and often gave me direct contact information to the pioneers of that era.

Provenance and Prominent Figures

Twiggy's Place, a club formerly in what is now recognized as the warehouse district of Cleveland was the most inviting establishments during that time. The name of the club as well as Twiggy herself were depicted on many of the silk screens. She was a pioneer and sought to create a haven for self-expression.

The photographs in this exhibition are of individuals who visited Twiggy's Place. Whether posed or impromptu, each tells a unique story. Some of the photographs depict live drag shows.⁴ There are also small, posed portraits of individual drag queens.⁵ These images present a curated look at the glamour and set the stage for the pride and desire to preserve the beauty of the timeless drag queen. In my presentation, I used a consistent color palette in the photographic reproductions. The colors from the image reflect the passage of time through a soft warm glow in the color harmony.

The pictures come alive through the mannerisms and sentiments conveyed by the individuals who took them and appear in them. Each of the photographs is reproduced on silk organza in multiples of three. Layering the photographs on top of each other is done to create a metaphor for our perception of ourselves. The first layer represents-who we are, the second is who we think we are, and the third is how others see us. By utilizing the transparency of the layers, a slight shift of the image invites more thorough looking at the different perspectives as

⁴ Figures 1 and 7

⁵ Figures 5 and 6

the viewer moves through the installation. The pieces move slightly if a breeze is emitted by the viewer and further enhances the interaction. At times, the face appears happy or sad depending on the movement or the drape of the fabric. The viewer can project their own personal narrative on what they see.

Using three layers is also meant to represent the past, present, and future. Each piece becomes a triptych, each component a part of a timeline. The photographs are suspended on the wall and positioned at various heights depending on the scale of the image. The smaller pieces are meant to create a sense of intimacy with the viewer. They are displayed slightly above eye level giving them an elevated appearance. The larger pieces present life scaled individuals as if they are performing on the stage. Each piece is positioned to create optimal visual effect. The layers are placed varying distances apart to translate the information and elicit a holographic and multidimensional effect. They depict moments from the past but being printed on a transparent flowing substrate seems to activate the image bringing it into the present time.

The photograph entitled Glinda depicts the great Erica Martinez and her love for the Wizard of Oz. She is wearing a gown that was large, opulent, and used 150 yards of silk organza. It was so enormous that she had to rent a U-Haul to get it to the show and even to put it on necessitated a complex procedure. A harness was constructed to elevate her above the dress to get inside the garment. Once she was dressed, fitting through a doorway was quite challenging and had to be done sideways and carefully. Nonetheless, the dress shocked everyone and is still discussed and reminisced about in the drag community to this day. The only image that remains

of her wearing this special gown is out of focus and has been digitally textile printed on silk organza fabric to assure that this unique experience will remain alive in the archives.⁶

Jasmine Baker is captured in a large-scale photograph looking over her shoulder wearing a pink gown with multiple pleats and layers.⁷ At just about human scale this image reveals a sense of depth of the struggles she experienced. Her eyes penetrate deep into the viewer and show her in a moment of reflection, in contrast to other images of her dancing and laughing.

The other large-scale photograph is of Cocoa Price.⁸ This image was chosen because of her stature; she appears almost regal or larger than life. It also presents her singing or lip singing, as part of her performance. The silk organza on which the photograph is printed sways when you come close, it seems to give you a small glimpse of what it was like to be in the audience. She is mid song during one of her appearances at Numbers, one of the many establishments she performed at as a dominant figure on the stage in Cleveland.

Gowns

In drag culture the gown is a very important signifier and a highly coveted garment. It reveals so much about the personality of the person wearing it and provides an opportunity for drama and elegance. The gown was not worn on the way into the venue. Not only was this often impractical, but there was a very real fear of judgement and discrimination from those not sensitive to drag culture. During interviews with Mark and Erica stories of knifings, car bombings, and fear for safety were ever present outside of the venue. Once in the club the drag queens donned their gowns but remained concealed until it was time to take the stage. It is the great reveal of the gown at a timely moment that generates the most audience response. The

⁶ Figure 1

⁷ Figure 2

⁸ Figure 4

marker of success in drag by dressing up in special attire for dramatic impact has not changed but the way to access a gown has.

The drag queens I interviewed stated that in the 1970's and 1980's and prior, men were not allowed to shop for dresses for themselves in women's clothing stores. Dressing rooms were inaccessible to male patrons in these shops. If the interested drag artists were able to successfully find a dress to purchase, they had to take a chance that the size and fit were right. It was difficult to find a suitable garment this way, resulting in a need for custom gowns. Unfortunately, there were few places that would make custom gowns for them and it was done at a high cost. Despite this obstacle the desire to perform drag during that time prevailed.

The significance of the gown is highlighted in my installation by a series of illuminated sculptures.⁹ These soft forms are reminiscent of drag gowns and are inspired by the photographs of Jasmine, Glinda, and Cocoa. The sculptures are layered with fabric and play with the quality of transparency and what is chosen to be shown to the viewer and how it is presented. Each work has a dyed organza fabric insert printed with original imagery from the screens of Twiggy's Place, The Rainbow, and drag queen Sassy B. Jones. These references to actual individuals or night clubs add visual interest and further establish connection to the content. They are tucked under the layers of other fabric and are not easily visible, suggestive of the interest in maintaining this rather secret society.

Installation

The intent of the installation is to create a sense of community and celebrate the positives that were elicited from the drag artists and patron and gatherings. This is done by presenting photographs which puts a face to these pioneers.

⁹ Figure 1 and 9

The use of illuminated sculptures is an abstraction of being at a live drag show. Overall, the room is dark, and the light from these forms attracts your attention. The positioning of the light creates a sense of control in an otherwise chaotic environment. Light itself has many meanings often reflecting wisdom and gateways to other realms. There is also the celebratory aspect of “lighting up.”

Since no alternative light sources were utilized such as overhead or directed light the installation relied heavily on the glow that was emitted from the soft sculpture counterparts to illuminate the photographs the colored light softens its surroundings and gives off a warm glow that allows the photographs to come alive and the viewer to respond to each parallax. A moiré effect is created by the transparency of the silk, and the pieces have a holographic and dimensional quality due to the printing.

Each illuminated sculpture represents the various styles of drag. The look of more traditional drag is captured in the fuchsia “Sassy” whose shape emphasizes a small waist and sleek line. “The Rainbow” soft pink sculpture is inspired by Glinda from the Wizard of Oz and represents the style of drag where the individual mimics a well-known character or celebrity. Lastly, the gold and black piece, “Twiggy’s Place” encompasses the more avant-garde drag that ventures into experimental territory.

Conclusion

This installation is created to promote a hidden part of the history of drag culture in Cleveland. Inspired by silk screens that were once used to print images for t-shirts and club promotions, I went on to introduce myself and interview some of the celebrities depicted by name or image on these artifacts. The stories they told me further informed the presentation and added more layered meaning to the pieces. The gallery is darkened to enhance the mood viewing

of the images and soft sculptures. The intent is for the viewer to feel as though they are walking into an exclusive drag show and mingling among the personages of the era. I used the gowns as general symbols of freedom of expression and photographs to give a specific sense of the quality and community of that time and place.



Figure 1
Thesis Installation Gallery View
Sassy B. Jones, Queen, Cricket, Jasmine, Glinda, and Twiggy's Place
(from left to right)



Figure 2
Jasmine
Layered digitally printed silk organza

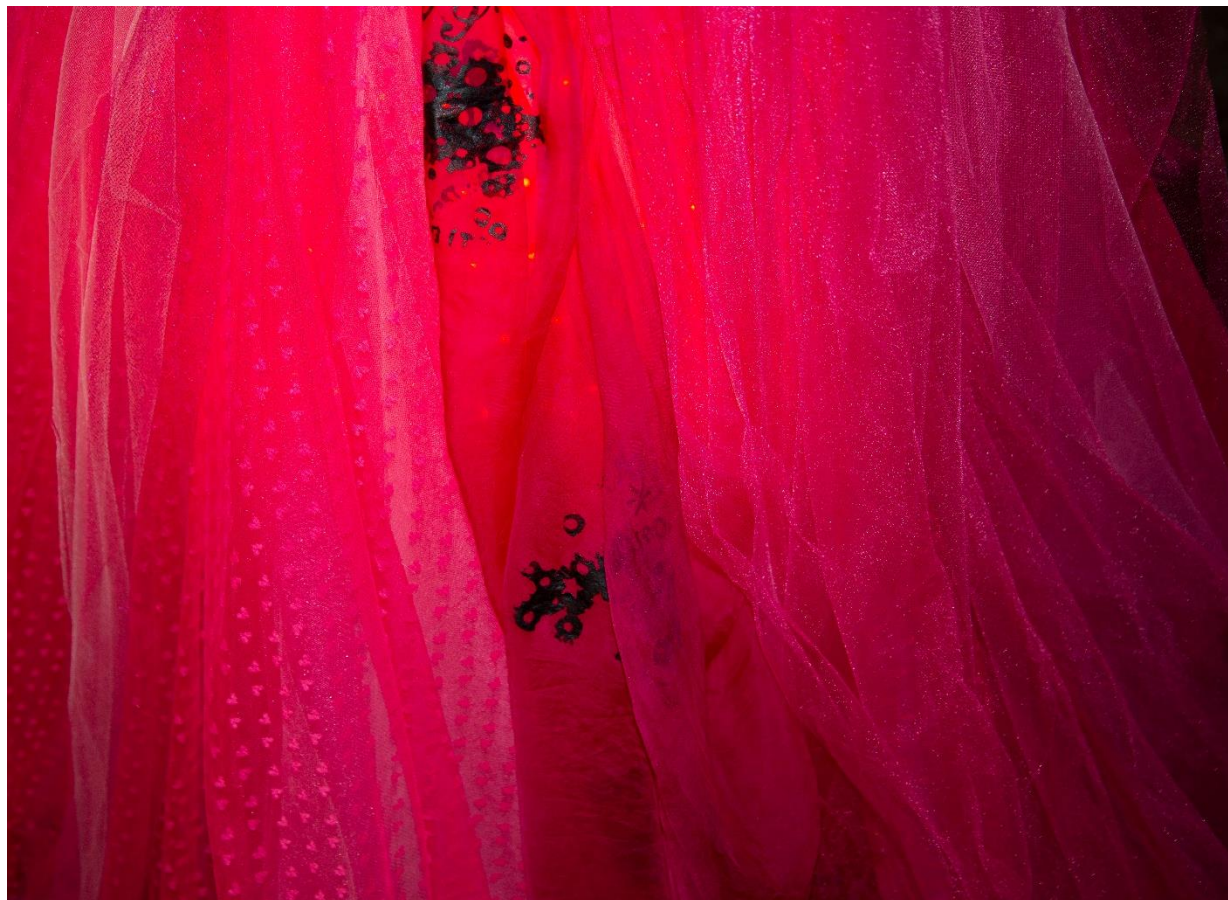


Figure 3
Sassy B. Jones
(detail)



Figure 4
Twiggy's Place and Cocoa
Layered digitally printed silk organza



Figure 5
Ginger Manchester
Layered digitally printed silk organza



Figure 6
Twiggy
Layered digitally printed silk organza



Figure 7
Cricket
Layered digitally printed silk organza



Figure 8
Erica, Big Momma, Sassy B. Jones, Queen, and Cricket
Layered digitally printed silk organza



Figure 9
Rainbow
Layered digitally printed silk organza

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