

Queering the Muse

Identity and Desire in the Photography of Lissa Rivera



Queering the Muse



Queering the Muse

Identity and Desire in the Photography of Lissa Rivera

FEBRUARY 11 – APRIL 16, 2022

Ellery Coleman • Emma Latham • Bethany Petrunak
Peter Philips • Frances Taylor • Ellie Werner

THE TROUT GALLERY

THE ART MUSEUM OF DICKINSON COLLEGE

Table of Contents

6 **Introduction: Queering the Muse**

Elizabeth Lee

Essays

8 *Metamorphosis of the Body: Transformation as a Metaphor
for Genderqueerness*

Bethany Petrunak

15 *Rethinking Masculinity and Femininity in the Nude Form*

Ellie Werner

21 *Marlene Dietrich as Influential Gender Icon*

Emma Latham

27 *Masquerade and Metamorphosis: Surrealist Influences*

Ellery Coleman

34 *Negotiating Subversion and Performing Gender Identity
in Contemporary Photography*

Peter Philips

42 *(Ad)ressing Identity: A Visual Subversion of Binary Gender
and the Popular Aesthetics of Desire*

Frances Taylor

49 **Catalogue**

107 **Acknowledgments**

Introduction: Queering the Muse

The works of art in this exhibition are the product of a collaboration between the contemporary photographer Lissa Rivera and her genderqueer romantic partner, BJ Lillis, who is also her creative muse. The majority of photographs are from the *Beautiful Boy* series and feature Lillis partially or fully nude, or wearing some form of women's clothing, such as a negligee, a bathing suit, or a full-length gown. Lillis was in college when he began dressing in women's clothes, which he wore openly around campus as a student. Yet while working in New York City after graduation, he found his opportunities for this form of self-expression narrow. He soon discovered an ally in Rivera at the Museum of the City of New York, where both he and Rivera worked between 2012 and 2016. Their partnership began when Rivera offered to photograph Lillis in her apartment dressed in women's clothes. As these photography sessions continued, and their relationship turned romantic, the work became more public. Since 2015, the photographs in *Beautiful Boy* have circulated nationally and internationally through solo and group exhibitions, a range of art world publications, and a slew of print and online media outlets. A Google search on the project brings up hundreds of results.

This publicity compounds a phenomenon embedded in the medium of photography. As Rivera observes, "the camera transposes the private realm into public space, converting a private moment into public performance."¹ "Performance" is the operative word here. While it may be tempting to see the photographs in *Beautiful Boy* as a documentation of the relationship between Rivera and Lillis, it is important not to confuse "public performance" with lived experience. Both Rivera and Lillis note that what they create through photography is a carefully crafted fantasy world rather than a reality

they actually inhabit. Each photo shoot marks the culmination of a process in which the setting, costumes, and props have been thoroughly researched and carefully selected. Once they have settled on a location, Rivera and Lillis take up residence at a given site for hours or even days as they stage different poses under varied lighting conditions with different props and costumes. The resulting photographs invite viewers to consider, for instance, what it means when a genderqueer body assumes the guise of a traditional female nude from the history of art. Or when the same body appears in a tuxedo, mimicking a famous Hollywood actress known for her gender-bending cross-dressed roles.

For Lillis, embodying these different identities has helped to clarify his relationship to gender, allowing him to understand it less as something predetermined and "real" than as "something that I do." As he explains, "My gender can constantly change and evolve, and it is totally coherent and consistent to explore many different ways of presenting gender. It really freed me to relax and be myself and be in my own body without worrying about how it all fit together, just going with it and trying to do things that feel good or look beautiful or are exciting to me."² This sense of playful experimentation—and the notion of "doing" gender—has been theorized by queer theorist Judith Butler, who understands gender as a set of learned behaviors perpetuated through repetitive acts. To put it simply, Butler helps us to see that we will continue to understand "female" as a person who embodies predictable traits—such as gentle, nurturing, and emotional—only as long as individuals who present themselves as feminine continue to follow this unofficial script of behavior. Over time, these associations with femininity have become so ingrained in cultural consciousness that they may start to

seem entirely natural, but Butler points out that these identities only *appear* to have substance because they are the “stylized repetition of acts through time” that are continuously reenacted.³ The radical possibility she puts forward is that these gender roles can also be performed in significantly different ways. That is, “feminine” could look quite different if women acted in a way that challenged social expectation—which is essentially what we get in looking at Rivera’s photographs of Lillis.

As Rivera has explained, “The fantasy of dressing up transforms the experience of being photographed into one that fuses identity creation with image creation. By blurring the borders of masculinity and femininity, the photographs tap into deep-seated narratives about gender, desire, freedom, and cultural taboo.”⁴ There are two points worth highlighting here. The first is the connection between “identity creation” and “image creation.” Who we are depends quite literally on how we see ourselves. Visual culture—whether painting, film, photography, video, or the latest social media platform—generates a set of possibilities, but the limitations of media become the blind spots beyond which it is hard to picture identity. The powerful point Rivera is making is that to create new images that expand the visual world is to expand the possibilities of “identity creation.” This is a critically important task when it comes to marginalized identities, including the genderqueer body, which historically has been all but absent from visual culture and, in particular, art history. Despite the fact that gender-fluid bodies have become more visible in popular culture in recent years, they are often pictured following certain conventions and tropes that can harden into their own stereotypes. This leads to Rivera’s second point: by blurring the gender binary

that continues to define and constrain identity, her photographs are evidence of the breakdown of a dualistic system. In each image, Lillis embodies a figure with aspects of both femininity and masculinity, but never exclusively one or the other. Through Rivera’s photographs, we glimpse the vast, rich, middle ground that exists between these two poles of existence.

Rivera is not the first artist to consider how photography can be used as a tool to construct an alternate identity. In the 1920s, Marcel Duchamp was photographed by Man Ray in the guise of his famous female alter ego, Rose Sélavy. In the same decade, the queer Surrealist photographer Claude Cahun began documenting her cross-dressing experiments through a series of probing self-portraits, some of which are described by Ellery Coleman in her essay. More recently, Cindy Sherman has built a career around the performance of identity, appearing and reappearing dressed in the roles women have played for decades in film and the mass media, as Peter Philips explores in his analysis. More than any other contemporary artist, Sherman, through hundreds of different guises, has made it clear how gender is constructed through a series of repetitive acts. The Japanese photographer Yasumasa Morimura has made a project of restaging canonical Western works of art by stepping in to play the role of Judith, Mona Lisa, or Olympia, replacing familiar (often female) figures with the body of an Asian man. Rivera’s photography is part of this history, yet her work remains distinctive. As the essays in this catalogue demonstrate, her interest in the genderqueer body at once challenges the social conventions embedded in a long history of art and visual culture, while at the same time it revels in the beauty and glamour of that history, creating a powerful body of work in the process.

Elizabeth Lee

Associate Professor of Art History

1. “Lissa Rivera: Beautiful Boy,” aCurator blog, June 2015, <https://acurator.com/blog/2015/06/lissa-rivera-beautiful-boy.html>.

2. “Where Are You Now, Beautiful Boy?” The Reservoir: Conversations on Photography, March 2018, <https://thereservoir.net/Lissa-Rivera-in-conversation-with-BJ-Lillis>.

3. Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (1988): 520.

4. “Lissa Rivera.”

Metamorphosis of the Body: Transformation as a Metaphor for Genderqueerness

Bethany Petrunak

The idealization and aesthetics of the body in Greek and Roman sculpture has been and continues to be an inspiration for many artists. The Classical past has always been a fascination for the Western viewer; for some it is the start of the art history canon, or, at the very least, the beginning of art as the modern viewer recognizes it. At least since the nineteenth century, queer artists have turned to Classical art with an interest in depictions of the body that would have been considered at the time typically effeminate or homoerotic. Lissa Rivera names the late nineteenth-century photographer F. Holland Day as one of her influences: Day fused queer art with Classical and mythological allusions to try and raise the status of photography as a fine art. His classically inspired photographs feature androgynous youths posed nude outdoors, evoking Greek and Roman statues of gods and other mythological creatures. His work is heavily charged with homoeroticism and forges connections between the effeminate gay man of the nineteenth century and the idealized, beautiful nude models from antiquity. The models are transformed from their contemporary identities to mythological deities and creatures of antiquity with a homosocial aura surrounding them, and thus provide a queer lens for examining ancient Greek and Roman art. Rivera brings this relationship with the Classical past established by Day into contemporary times by using

her photography to make visible issues of gender and sexuality that were previously underexplored in art.

Rivera does so with her genderqueer partner, BJ Lillis, who falls outside the traditional expectations of the muse in art history because this role is typically reserved for women, and because he blurs the lines between what has been considered man and woman. For example, in *Venus* (2015), the viewer is presented with conflicting signifiers when trying to understand Lillis's gender (fig. 1). His barrel-curved hair, makeup, and pose are read as typically feminine. However, the body hair, the broad chest, and the hint at genitalia lean more toward a masculine identity. Depending on how the viewer approaches the image and on their own preconceived ideas of gender, the image of Lillis's body may be perceived as in a state of transformation. With these seemingly conflicting gender indicators, how is Lillis's identity meant to be perceived? With the backdrop of the strict gender binary, which is a social construction that has only existed for the last few centuries, examining Rivera's photography from the point of view of antiquity allows a more expansive and complex approach to reading gender in her work while also showing the ways in which her photography is embedded in the history of art.

In addition to *Venus*, the work titled *Metamorphosis* (2015) has an explicit connection to Greco-Roman art (fig. 2). Both photographs have titles that can be connected to stories and mythology of antiquity, and the poses themselves mimic statuary of the period. In these photographs, Lillis is transformed into a youthful Roman deity whose nature and body are transmutable—a fact that in the ancient world did not allude to queerness, although in the twenty-first century the two have become closely intertwined. Legends of deities able to change their form and sex in the ancient world have an appeal in contemporary times for those in the queer community who do not identify with their bodies. Rivera explores the nature of transformation as a mechanism of queer expression in her art through photographs that look to ancient Greece and Rome for metaphors of genderqueerness as a transformative bodily performance. Although Rivera's project *Beautiful Boy* began as a personal exploration of gender and identity for both her and her muse, it may be seen as something more: studying her work as queer art and connecting it to ancient art gives the photographs grounding in art history. At the same time, it calls attention to art history and the place of the nonbinary body in the canon of art.

Queer Bodies in the Classical World

Although queer people have always existed, there is a notable lack of naming these bodies as such in the history of art, a discipline that has been dominated by a patriarchal, cisgender lens. One strategy artists have historically used to depict ambiguous bodies without threatening the patriarchal structure has been to render them as otherworldly entities such as gods and other deities, mythological creatures, and heavenly bodies. Doing so creates a mythical aura surrounding them, promoting the idea that queerness and ambiguity are not qualities that belong only to humans but to other types of beings. It is important to note that to contemporary viewers, these mythological creatures are seen as fictional, but in the ancient world they were very real. Therefore, when I say “otherworldly” I am referring to creatures who are fundamentally not human but hold a higher status, one that may even be divine. This tendency means that queer bodies can lose a sense of being “real” in the societies in which they exist and, in turn, may be dismissed as mythical and unrealistic. It is also worth noting here that when using the term “genderqueer” in the context of this paper, I am referring to any body that falls



Fig. 1.

Lissa Rivera. *Venus*, 2015. Archival pigment print, 30 x 20 in. (76.2 x 50.8 cm). Photograph courtesy of the artist and ClampArt, New York.



Fig. 2.

Lissa Rivera. *Metamorphosis*, 2015. Archival pigment print, 30 x 20 in. (76.2 x 50.8 cm). Photograph courtesy of the artist and ClampArt, New York.

outside the traditional binary of male versus female, including—but not limited to—intersex, androgynous, and trans bodies. The taboo surrounding such bodies and the lack of images in the history of art make the few that exist all the more curious and important to study.

During the Greek Hellenistic and Roman periods, sculpture depicting hermaphrodite bodies, typically with breasts and male genitalia, became popular.¹ To understand male and female sculpture from those cultures, it is imperative to examine gender roles and social expectations around the body. Greek society had a clear hierarchal structure that related to gender, age, and profession. At the very top of this order was the free adult man. Women, regardless of their age or body type, were seen as indeterminate, or “other.” Meanwhile, servants, slaves, barbarians, and the disabled existed even further below them.² Ideas regarding gender variation also applied to sexuality. The harsh dichotomy between heterosexuality and homosexuality that has permeated Western society since the Victorian era did not exist in antiquity. There were instances in which homosexual behavior was warranted and acceptable—with an adult male mentor and a youthful boy, for instance—and others where it was not.³

While we might assume that men enjoyed their high status by virtue of their anatomy—the penis—not all adult men fell into this category. What made these adult men the ideal was their comportment and how they performed certain traits, some of which could be controlled and manipulated. For the Greeks, these traits had to do with gender, which was independent from sex: their bodies were

defined as masculine or feminine based on characteristics such as voice, movement, and stance. It was the summary of these traits that determined one’s gender. Idealized masculinity was therefore much more a performance of these characteristics than a manner of anatomical sex.⁴ How these traits were performed determined what made an individual man or woman, or something in between—the most obvious combination of masculine and feminine being the hermaphrodite.

The Hermaphrodite

The Art Museum of Princeton University is home to a marble sculpture of a hermaphrodite believed to be from the Hellenistic period (fig. 3). The nude figure leans against a tree support with a drape hanging around the body just below the hips. The fabric mimics the full hips and feminine breasts of the body’s curves. In addition to having a soft, feminine body, the figure also wears a hairstyle associated with women. The masculine qualities of the figure are the strong, rigid torso, which features some muscle definition, as well as the penis. There is an aura of ambiguity in this figure because of this mix of masculine and feminine traits. It does not fit into the adult male ideal of Greece, but neither is it completely female. It exemplifies the idea of gender as a spectrum that existed in ancient Greece and that can be read in the works of Lissa Rivera.

This ancient example helps us to see how the genderqueer body in Rivera’s photography can be understood in both masculine and



Fig. 3.
Statuette of Hermaphrodite, 2nd century BCE. White marble, 58 1/16 x 10 13/16 x 5 3/16 in. (149.1 x 27.5 x 13.2 cm). Princeton University Art Museum, Princeton, New Jersey. Photo: Princeton University Art Museum / Art Resource, NY

feminine terms. *Venus* depicts Lillis in a pose similar to that of the hermaphrodite statue at Princeton, creating an S shape from his shoulder to the opposing hip. Viewing the works together, the hermaphrodite statue embodies a more masculine stance with open shoulders and the body on full display, whereas Lillis is seen close up and in a more passive manner with his arms pulled to his chest and his hands resting on his face. (Passivity was and is in many ways still associated with femininity.) Part of Lillis's male genitalia fall below the bottom edge of the photograph, though what is shown adds to his male attributes, along with his broad chest and strong arms. This combination, along with Rivera's title, *Venus*, which clearly links the work to the Classical past, brings this contemporary photograph into conversation with pieces like the hermaphrodite statue at Princeton and draws attention to the possibility of queerness in ancient times, while also causing viewers to reflect on queer representation in the present.

Regardless of Lillis's biological sex and his genitalia, his performance of gender is what makes him genderqueer. The photographs of Lillis wearing dresses, feminine undergarments, and heels combined with a piece such as *Male Impersonator* (2015), in which he sports more masculine clothing, create a metamorphosis that is akin to the way deities in ancient Greece shifted form and even sex. These historical references that Rivera uses in her work create an interesting tension in how Lillis is perceived and connect mythological subjects with the queer history that artists are creating in the twenty-first century.

The word *hermaphrodite* comes from the god Hermaphroditus, the child of Hermes and Aphrodite, who is depicted with the presence of both female and male sex organs.⁵ The sculpture from Princeton is assumed to be a rendering of the god Hermaphroditus, though it is unclear whether this identity is given to every hermaphrodite statue from antiquity or if there are traits that link it directly to the Greek god. The Ashmolean Museum at the University of Oxford also has a sculpture titled *Marble Statue of Hermaphroditus* (first century CE), though it is damaged and only the torso and thighs remain.⁶ It is strange that it bears the name of the deity, as there appears to be no indication of the figure's identity besides the male genitals and female breasts. Such works beg the questions, Why was this art created and for whom? Under what circumstances would a sculpture like this be created? Male statues from ancient Greece such as *Doryphoros* and *Discobolos* exemplify and celebrate ideal beauty, as well as the beauty of mathematical proportions. The only well-known example of a genderqueer body from antiquity is Hermaphroditus, which in the sculptures discussed above is neither an example of ideal beauty nor of perfect mathematical proportion. Scholars are unsure what prompted such works to be created.

Nonetheless, we do at least have the visual evidence of the works themselves. In another example, *Hermaphrodite*, a seventeenth-century sculpture based on a Roman copy of a Hellenistic Greek sculpture, the hermaphrodite is lounging nude with fabric pulled between the legs to reveal the figure's form (fig. 4). The initial encounter is from the back, where the body appears feminine with a swelling of



Figs. 4 and 5.
Giovanni Francesco Susini.
Hermaphrodite, 1639.
Bronze, 4 $\frac{9}{16}$ x 17 x 7 $\frac{1}{4}$ in.
(11.7 x 43.2 x 18.4 cm).
The Metropolitan Museum
of Art, New York. Left: front
view. Right: rear view.
Photo: © The Metropolitan
Museum of Art / Art
Resource, NY

the hips and a softness to the figure along with the suggestion of a breast. This hermaphrodite thus takes on a passive, and therefore feminine, appearance during sleep. Additionally, the figure has small, more delicate facial features and a feminine hairstyle. However, when the viewer walks around to the front of the sculpture, there is an erect penis visible (fig. 5). From a Greek perspective, this hermaphrodite would have been considered masculine despite these ambiguous signs as long as he was the penetrator and in the dominant position during sexual activity.⁷

Rivera's photograph *Experiment with Gels* (2015) has an allure similar to that of the bronze *Hermaphrodite*. Lillis is shown nude with his back to the viewer, a flower in his hair, and a gel manicure (fig. 6). Reading this image from a contemporary view of gender, we would assume this is a photograph of a woman. *Experiment with Gels*, like the first view of *Hermaphrodite* (fig. 4), is viewed from behind. As previously noted, the bronze *Hermaphrodite* works on the principle of surprise by creating an alluring feminine figure from one side, only to shock the viewer with the presence of an erect penis on the other. By virtue of the photographic medium, viewers cannot explore *Experiment with Gels* in the round. Nor is Rivera's work, in this example and elsewhere in the exhibition, built around surprise, as is the bronze *Hermaphrodite*. Instead, the artist prefers to put viewers in dialogue with themselves. She poses the question in *Experiment with Gels* of how to reconcile the initial eroticism surrounding the body with the model's genderqueer identity. From the range of photographs in *Queering the Muse*, Rivera shows Lillis in a variety of different poses, costumes, and settings,

recasting his body in different lights, showcasing the transmutability of gender and queerness. Using the concept of gender in antiquity, the feminine traits presented by Lillis seem to lean more toward the feminine than the masculine. However, as Rivera shows, this line of thinking does not hold much weight in twenty-first-century Western culture, where gender has been so long associated with biological sex and understood as binary.

Transmutability of Forms

The Greco-Roman associations within Rivera's work extend beyond outwardly genderqueer bodies to include what would be considered "cisgender" deities as well.⁸ In Rivera's *Venus*, as the title suggests, the artist is evoking the goddess of love and beauty, known in Greek mythology as Aphrodite. While it may be hard for the contemporary viewer to imagine the goddess of love and beauty with a penis, there are many depictions of gods and deities from ancient Greece shown as androgynous or genderqueer. Apollo, a god associated with the arts, medicine, and the sun is often depicted as a cisgender man. However, there are instances in which he wears women's clothing, such as in the cult statue at Apollo Patroos.⁹ There the statue wears a peplos, a garment typically worn by women in the Archaic through Hellenistic periods. Elsewhere, he is often depicted with a clean-shaven face and a youthful body, looking more like a soft male body than a rigid idealized man. This point is particularly clear when Apollo is compared to sculptures of gods such as Zeus and Poseidon, who were depicted as large, adult men with full beards.



Fig. 6.
Lissa Rivera. *Experiment with Gels*, 2015. Archival pigment print, 30 x 20 in. (76.2 x 50.8 cm). Photograph courtesy of the artist and ClampArt, New York.

In *Venus*, Lillis embodies the youthful Apollo with his slim figure and long, curled hair. Bright lighting emphasizes the paleness of his skin, which almost looks like marble, while the white drapery in the background with its contrasting folds brings to mind the fabric on nude sculptures such as the ancient Roman *Apollo Belvedere* (first century CE). The smooth, white planes of Apollo's body in this famous sculpture are realized in the photograph of Lillis, giving him godlike qualities and a sense of importance, though the illusion is disrupted by the prominence of pubic hair at the bottom of the image. Whereas hair is artfully depicted on the heads of Greek and Roman statues, hair elsewhere is largely left out or given little attention. This disconnect from ancient sculpture in Rivera's photographs reminds viewers they are not looking at a mythical, abstract deity but at a real person—one who unashamedly shows off his queer body as though it were a Greek or Roman sculpture.

In the Roman Imperial period, Bacchus was also subject to feminine transformation under the male gaze.¹⁰ In *Antinous as Bacchus* (130–138 CE), the body is boyish in that it lacks muscle definition, while the pose itself adds graceful curves to the body, making him appear more effeminate (fig. 7). His head is also cast downward, eyes avoidant, a sign of passivity and femininity, while his facial features are also soft and delicate, not hard and defined. This clear break from what was expected of Roman men and masculinity appears once again in a mythological context, suggesting this is something not of this world, making it a safe site for the projection of desire and eroticism. This statue is a part of a group of similar works

from Rome that the scholar Elizabeth Bartman calls “sexy boys.”¹¹ They are sculptures of mythological male subjects that break from the traditional expectations of masculinity with soft, androgynous bodies and sexual appeal—not unlike the photographs of Lillis in *Queering the Muse*.

Rivera's *Nude with Poppy* (2017) features Lillis in a pose similar to that of *Antinous as Bacchus*. Although less contorted than Antinous, Lillis holds his body in slight contrapposto and a closed stance (fig. 8). Rather than the heroic and angular movement of Greek sculptures of athletes, the slight angle of his hips creates a fluid sense of motion throughout the form. Like the “sexy boys,” the softness of Lillis's form and his downcast head create a passive figure. Rivera's work diverges from these androgynous sculptures in that there is no mythological scene being played out, and her muse is not meant to embody a deity.

Lillis evokes Bacchus in a work already discussed, *Metamorphosis* (fig. 2). In this nude photograph, he is seated against a rich blue background with his hair curled and held up by a crown of flowers. The headpiece is a direct connection to the Roman god Bacchus, who throughout the history of art has often been depicted with a crown of flowers and leaves connecting him to nature and its ever-changing wildness. This untamed and unknown side of nature associated with Bacchus might be interpreted as analogous to queerness. The changing and shifting aspects of the body, from masculine to feminine, can also be observed in *Metamorphosis*. Lillis's bright skin immediately draws attention to itself, along with his



Fig. 7.
Statue of Antinous as Bacchus, 130–138 CE.
 Pentelic marble, h. 45 in. (115 cm). Via Modena, Centrale Montemartini Roman, 130–138 Musei Capitolini, Rome. Photo: Zeno Colatoni / Musei in Comune Roma.

Fig. 8.
 Lissa Rivera. *Nude with Poppy*, 2017. Archival pigment print, 45 x 30 in. (114.3 x 76.2 cm). Photograph courtesy of the artist and ClampArt, New York.

flat chest, which is likely to be associated with masculinity. However, as the viewer explores the rest of the image, Lillis becomes less of a typical man as he transforms into a feminine figure with his hair tied up in flowers and his heavy makeup. While he poses nude in the photograph, his legs and arms are crossed, thereby obscuring his genitals and leaving his gender ambiguous. The image can also be seen as a reverse transformation, in which he is first identified as feminine in his facial presentation and subsequently reads as masculine as the viewer glimpses his chest. Rivera purposely creates a photograph that resides in this in-between, ambiguous state.

Reading Rivera's work in the context of genderqueer bodies from Classical antiquity also presents a challenge because Lillis is not playing a character. He is not cross-dressing in order to be seen in a certain role, but instead he is using fashion and popular culture, along with art history, to explore his own relationship with gender identity. Therefore, there is a limit to how much we can connect Rivera's photographs to mythological stories and the Classical world. This partly has to do with the fact of the medium: photography has a strange relationship to truth and the "real" that distinguishes it from sculpture and painting. Rivera's choice of photography as a medium grounds Lillis's experience in reality as a genderqueer person. That is, there is an "in the flesh" encounter between the photographer and her muse: Rivera stages elaborate settings with costumes and

props that Lillis willingly inhabits. From this point of view, their collaborations can be seen as documents of an exchange between two people invested individually and as a pair in queer belonging and community. This situates their work in a clearly contemporary—not ancient—context.

Yet by referencing the art historical canon as far back as antiquity, Lissa Rivera, together with BJ Lillis, creates a foundation for a new way of looking at the history of art, one that is inclusive of queer experiences. Gender-nonconforming bodies are often left out of the discussion of art history due to the fact that they are seen as outliers compared to the works that support a strict gender binary, which in a patriarchal society is the art that is most idealized and valued. Rivera calls these assumptions into question by drawing a clear connection between the ancient past and the present to show that the history of art has always included queer bodies and has therefore always been queer. Through a variety of styles and references, Rivera edits the story that has often been told and brings queer narratives into the foreground—and into focus. We can see through her work that the art of antiquity, which is highly revered by Western culture both inside and outside the art world, records different kinds of nudes and partially exposed bodies to celebrate and admire. Her art allows us to see that in antiquity, as now, gender is best understood as a spectrum of possibilities and experiences.

-
1. Simon Wilson, "Short History of Western Erotic Art," in *Erotic Art of the West* (New York: G. P. Putnam's, 1973), 13.
 2. Mireille M. Lee, *Body, Dress, and Identity in Ancient Greece* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 42.
 3. James Saslow, *Pictures and Passions: A History of Homosexuality in the Visual Arts* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1999), 15.
 4. David M. Halperin, John J. Winkler, and Froma I. Zeitlin, eds., *Before Sexuality: The Construction of Erotic Experience in the Ancient Greek World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 390.
 5. Antonio Beccadelli, *The Hermaphrodite*, ed. and trans. Holt N. Parker (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), xxii.
 6. "Marble Statue of Hermaphroditus," University of Oxford, <https://www.glam.ox.ac.uk/outinoxford-ash-hermaphroditus>.
 7. Jennifer Trimble, "Beyond Surprise: Looking Again at the Sleeping Hermaphrodite in the Palazzo Massimo," in *Roman Artists, Patrons, and Public Consumption: Familiar Works Reconsidered*, ed. Brenda Longfellow and Ellen Perry (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017), 24.
 8. To be clear, Greek deities were not seen as human, and they often transformed into animals and changed their gender, so it is not entirely accurate to call deities like Venus "cisgender." However, the Western viewer typically associates her exclusively with a female identity, and thus different from deities like Hermaphroditus.
 9. Linda Jones Roccas, "Back-Mantle and Peplos: The Special Costume of Greek Maidens in 4th-Century Funerary and Votive Reliefs," *Hesperia: The Journal of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens* 69, no. 2 (2000): 240.
 10. Elizabeth Bartman, "Eros's Flame: Images of Sexy Boys in Roman Ideal Sculpture," *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome, Supplementary Volumes* 1 (2002), 258.
 11. Bartman, "Eros's Flame," 253.

Rethinking Masculinity and Femininity in the Nude Form

Ellie Werner

If it is normal to see paintings of women's bodies as the territory across which artists claim their modernity and compete for leadership of the avant-garde, can we expect to rediscover paintings by women in which they battled with their sexuality in the representation of the male nude? Of course not; the very suggestion seems ludicrous.

Griselda Pollock¹

Lissa Rivera's *Boudoir* (2015) depicts her muse and partner, BJ Lillis, reclining in an abundance of green fabric (fig. 1). One arm leans against a satin pillow, and the other rests lightly on his leg. He wears only a robe and sheer green tights. The robe is left open to reveal a sliver of skin from his chest all the way down to his waist. His curled hair falls around his face, while a coral-colored gloved hand reaches into the frame to smooth his hair with a brush. The bright color of the gloved hand pops against the virescent environment and is impossible to ignore. The same is true for the color of Lillis's lipstick and eyeshadow, which match the glove's bright hue. Furthermore, the luminescent green of the drapery contrasts with his pale skin, drawing the viewer's eye to what is left exposed. Lillis stares at the viewer, his eyes steady under thick brows.

Boudoir is part of Rivera's series *Beautiful Boy*, a collaboration between the artist and Lillis. Photography has given them a space to challenge and redefine feminine and masculine tropes, codes of dress, and beauty as they operate in contemporary culture. Rivera draws inspiration from the history of film, painting, and photography to open up conversations about the ways female and male bodies

are perceived, while simultaneously drawing attention to these roles in the history of art and, in particular, to the concept of the muse.

Part of what makes Rivera's work so intriguing is the way she presents her genderqueer partner as her muse. Lillis does not conform to societal pressures to present himself as solely masculine or solely feminine. By combining clothes, poses, and makeup traditionally identified as feminine with his masculine features, Rivera creates images that may appear familiar at first glance but are completely original under close observation. In the history of art, the muse is traditionally female and the artist is traditionally male. In this scenario, the muse is typically played by the artist's lovers, friends, and models, who do not simply pose but motivate the artist to create great works. The muse became a passive female figure, an object of desire to be manipulated on the canvas by the artist. Women have assumed this role because historically they have been seen as domestic figures and caregivers with limited access to the public sphere, which was controlled by men. Part of the privilege extended to men was the ability to create freely, while women, who had less mobility and power, were the objects of male attention.

What is often referred to in art history as the “gaze” is the assumption that the female body is there to be sexualized and objectified for the pleasure of the male viewer. In other words, the male artist controls the way the woman is perceived and observed. In *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger famously wrote that “men act and women appear,” reinforcing the idea of women as passive objects and men as active participants. Berger argues that women are focused on the way they are looked at by men, therefore turning themselves into objects to be viewed.² The quote at the beginning of this essay by the feminist art historian Griselda Pollock draws upon the idea that there are no conventions in art for the reverse scenario of women painting men. In other words, the dynamic only works one way: the male artist possesses disproportionate power over the body of the woman, his muse. These positions are so deeply rooted that it is difficult to deconstruct what has been considered traditional for centuries. Although it is a threat to this tradition to imagine a female artist depicting a male nude in a passive pose, this is a challenge Rivera sets up for her viewers—perhaps with unexpected results.

The power dynamics of gender are concentrated in the female nude, which has long been identified as an icon of art in Western culture. In *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity, and Sexuality*, Lynda Nead argues that through various forms of representation women are held up “against cultural ideals” to fit into an aesthetic mold.³ This aesthetic mold involves choices relating to dress and how a

woman otherwise appears and presents herself. She can self-regulate, meaning she has control over what she wears and how she looks, though only if it fits within certain expectations. While these expectations evolve and change over time, they are still conditioned by men and their version of the ideal. The same has been true of the female nude, which has long been conditioned by a male-dominated art world and has been important for male artists in establishing their authority. Carol Duncan, in “Virility and Domination in Early Twentieth-Century Vanguard Painting,” states that “when an artist had some new or major artistic statement to make, when he wanted to authenticate to himself or others his identity as an artist, or when he wanted to get back to the ‘basics’ he turned to the nude.” Duncan is referencing modern artists such as Picasso and Matisse, artists who depicted female nudes in their paintings and supported the argument that “the notion that the wellsprings of authentic art are fed by the streams of male libidinous energy.”⁴ From this understanding, the female nude can seem like a fixed entity, produced by a patriarchal culture.

The male nude has also been important in the history of art, and in antiquity it was considered the ideal. The body of the young male athlete in Classical art was depicted as strong and muscular, an image of beauty and perfection according to the Greeks. Polykleitos created one of the best-known sculptures of an athlete, referred to as the Doryphoros (fifth century BCE), which has been praised for showing how beauty can be expressed through the mathematical



Fig. 1.
Lissa Rivera. *Boudoir*, 2015.
Archival pigment print,
20 x 30 in. (50.8 x 76.2 cm).
Photograph courtesy of the
artist and ClampArt, New York.

measurement of proportion.⁵ Margaret Walters further observes about these athletic figures, “The Greek male took a deep and narcissistic interest in his own body—in displaying, perfecting and testing it.”⁶ Greek men took pride in their bodies because it helped them to win events in contests, a central part of social life. The female body, in contrast, was looked at as weak and was not celebrated like the male nude. Weakness was always to be suppressed out of fear of defeat or being physically inadequate.

All of this is helpful to keep in mind when looking at a work such as *Boudoir*. Rivera is clearly referencing the history of the female nude in art, but the body featured is genderqueer. She therefore challenges viewers to check their assumptions, since what we see is different from what we find once we reflect on the conventions of how this tradition works. At the same time, we cannot rely on the history of the male nude in art to explain Lillis’s presence, since male nudes were typically athletes with muscular bodies and ideal proportions. Rivera has not attempted to turn Lillis into this kind of figure. What she presents instead is a body with some characteristics of both male and female, but what she essentially offers is a new approach: the semi-nude genderqueer body in art.

Rivera aligns her work with examples from art history and stops short of crossing a line into pornography. Although many of the photographs in *Beautiful Boy* depict Lillis in states of undress or semi-nudity, there is not a single work that exposes his genitals. Melody Davis has pointed

to the challenge of the male nude when it comes to the medium of photography. Subjects that might work well in painting or sculpture do not translate well to photography. As Davis puts it, “heroic action or defeat that sanction the male nude as spectacle tend[s] to look ridiculous when photographed.” Gestures, or “heroic action” as Davis calls it, look unnatural or staged. Even more to the point, photography is a mimetic medium.⁷ Although photographs can easily be manipulated, we tend to assume in looking at a photograph that there is a direct connection between the person with the camera and the subject being depicted. Photography also captures details that a painter or sculptor might choose to edit out, and this becomes a challenge when depicting a male nude. With too much of the body exposed, images of the nude male can easily tip into the realm of pornography. Rivera has been careful to stay on one side of this boundary.

One way she does this is by connecting her work to art history, which helps to locate the conventions Rivera intends to expose and question concerning the male gaze. *Boudoir* draws upon tropes from paintings such as Diego Velázquez’s *Rokeby Venus* (1647–51), which depicts Venus reclining with her back toward the viewer, looking into a mirror held up by Cupid (fig. 2). A curtain with deep folds and dark-colored fabric sets up a contrast between the setting and the nude’s pale white body. There has been debate as to whom Venus looks in her mirror, whether it is herself or the viewer. Regardless, Velázquez creates the image to allow the male viewer to gaze and indulge in his fantasies and to assert his power through his “justified” gaze.⁸



Fig. 2.
Diego Velázquez. *Rokeby Venus*, 1647–51.
Oil on canvas, 48 x 49¾ in.
(122 x 177 cm). National
Gallery, London. Photo: ©
National Gallery, London / Art
Resource, NY

The *Rokeby Venus* was known as a painting of perfection, an ideal representation of the nude form—that is, until it was damaged when a woman attempted to destroy the painting on March 10, 1914. On that day in the National Gallery in London, Mary Richardson, a suffragist, attacked the painting with an ax as a political statement. She wanted to draw attention to the treatment of Emily Pankhurst, an imprisoned political activist, by damaging an artwork rather than an actual person. Her goal was to generate publicity and attack a painting that stood as the male ideal of a passive and objectified woman. Pankhurst represented the opposite, a woman of morals and political militancy. In choosing the *Rokeby Venus*, Richardson not only drew attention to the work but to the treatment of women. As she put it, “I tried to destroy the picture of the most beautiful woman in mythological history as a protest against the Government destroying Mrs. Pankhurst, who is the most beautiful character in modern history.”⁹ Richardson claimed that it was an eye for an eye, as the *Rokeby Venus* was protected because it was an image that embodied the patriarchal ideal of female beauty, while Pankhurst, a real person, was mistreated for being a feminist. The action therefore exposed the authorities for valuing a painting more than a human being. The event altered the significance of the painting, turning it into a feminist symbol. Rivera takes up this subject of the female nude but for different reasons and for new audiences.

In *Boudoir* it is impossible to ignore the model's presence as Lillis draws the viewer into the scene where his body is on display: Rivera is asking what it means to replace a female nude with a partially

clothed queer body. In the *Rokeby Venus*, we can still wonder whether the nude is gazing at us or herself. In *Boudoir*, there is no such ambiguity: Lillis is clearly looking at the viewer. However, the viewer is left with questions about the choices Rivera has made in deciding what parts of the body to reveal. In the *Rokeby Venus*, and with so many other examples like it, there is a premium placed on the display of female flesh. By comparison, much of Lillis's body has been concealed by clothing. Unlike the traditional female nude, it is less exposed. The difference between the two works of art involves a difference of power and control. In Velázquez's painting, Venus does not have control over the gaze because she was created by a male artist. Rivera, on the other hand, has given her model agency with the ability to directly meet the viewer's gaze and a power that is implied by the fact that the body is more discreetly clothed. Moreover, while Rivera is drawing on a history of the female nude, we should remember that this type of art has not featured gender-queer models. Therefore, while the objectification of the female nude in art is a problem that feminist analysis has tried to address, displaying the genderqueer body is a new and different undertaking. As the title of Rivera's series *Beautiful Boy* suggests, she wants to put this body center stage and celebrate its beauty.

In *White Carpet Odalisque, Family Home* (2015), Rivera has captured Lillis completely nude, lying on a white carpet, his bottom half facing away and his top half stretching and twisting toward the viewer (fig. 3). His arms are raised to reveal his armpit hair, and his ribs are slightly visible under his skin. His knees bend and turn away, while



Fig. 3.

Lissa Rivera. *White Carpet Odalisque, Family Home*, 2015. Archival pigment print, 12 x 18 in. (30.48 x 45.72 cm). Photograph courtesy of the artist and ClampArt, New York.

his toes point toward a white telephone with a cord in the upper left corner. The stark whiteness and bareness of the photograph make it impossible for the viewer to focus on anything other than Lillis and the telephone. In certain respects, the photograph evokes a nineteenth-century nude portrait by Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, *Grande Odalisque* (1814), which serves as another example of a female nude in art history (fig. 4). Ingres's painting depicts a reclining female nude who is a concubine. Her back is turned while she gazes over her shoulder at the viewer. Her head is small, and her limbs are elongated to play up her idealized feminine beauty. Further ignoring anatomical accuracy, the artist depicts her back with too many vertebrae, and her right arm is much longer than her left. Her pose is seductive but unnatural, as she would not have been able to hold her pose for an extended period. Women, as Griselda Pollock argues, are not truly visible in representation but rather stand as objects and signs of femininity created by men, which is clear in this example.¹⁰ Additionally, there is a sense of exoticism conveyed by the props in the painting: a feathered fan, a turban headdress, and a hookah on the right side of the painting. Ingres created the woman depicted by using his imagination and male desire. He was inspired by the so-called Orient or Eastern aspects and envisioned what a Turkish woman might have looked like.¹¹ The painting reflects a nineteenth-century interest in foreign cultures combined with a Western tendency to project fantasy onto what is mysterious and not well-known.

Rivera takes up this tradition and “queers” it by putting her gender-fluid romantic partner and muse in the place of this concubine.



Fig. 4.
Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres. *Grande Odalisque*, 1814. Oil on canvas, 35 x 64 in. (88.9 x 162.56 cm). Louvre, Paris. Photo: Scala / Art Resource, NY.

Instead of Turkey, we find ourselves in a retro American living room with its plush white carpet and phone. The layering of textures in Ingres's painting is replaced here with a layering of shades of white. It is another form of fantasy in that Lillis is Rivera's object of desire, but the collaborative nature of her work with Lillis makes it completely different from a painting such as *Grande Odalisque* and the traditional artist/muse relationship in art more generally. Rivera is showing Lillis how he wants to be seen and how they both want the genderqueer body to be understood as a form of beauty.

Rivera continually toys with familiar feminine imagery and tropes that reference the history of art. The visual cues she includes are commonly used not only in painting but also in film and mass-media culture. The repetitive nature of these tropes reveals how gender is perpetually presented and re-presented. Rivera's work inevitably challenges these tropes by bringing the genderqueer body to bear on their assumptions. In one final example, *Experiment with Gels* (2015), Lillis sits with his back facing the viewer and his face turned away (fig. 5). What the viewer can see is the back of a nude upper body, long hair with a flower in it, red nails with a ring on one finger, and thin arms and legs. Everything about the image would suggest this is a female form. Rivera commented in an interview that with this photograph she was interested in the idea of mistaken identity, “particularly around the cultural idea that trans women or individuals who pass as women are going to ‘trap’ heterosexuals into feeling a desire that they're not comfortable with. This idea, which is deeply offensive on many levels, is also very fascinating, and reveals



Fig. 5.
Lissa Rivera. *Experiment with Gels*, 2015. Archival pigment print, 30 x 20 in. (76.2 x 50.8 cm). Photograph courtesy of the artist and ClampArt, New York.

a lot about the instability or vulnerability of gender roles.”¹² Rivera acknowledges that the viewer may feel uncomfortable when looking at one of her images because the feelings do not align with traditional forms and rules of desire. However, her work is so compelling because it shows that gender is actually fluid, and it can be represented through various attributes and visual characteristics that are neither permanent or fixed.

Lillis has learned through his collaboration with Rivera that viewers respond differently to him as a muse than they would to a female subject. In an interview, he mentioned that it has been interesting to meet people who present themselves as men but “who tell [him] that they relate to the work in a deep or personal way, or that it has helped them feel more comfortable with their feminine side.”¹³ At the same time, Rivera has mentioned how individuals would come up to her and ask if Lillis was comfortable being her model and what he does for a living. Rivera feels that these questions would

not be asked if she were the model, because she is a cisgender woman and fulfills the traditional image of the muse. But when Rivera replaces her model with Lillis, she directs the viewer to think about gender, and his role creates a different avenue to explore. The viewer’s response is important to Rivera because she wants people to ask questions about femininity, sexuality, and the way gender works in society. As she puts it, “Women are able to wear pants and play sports without it seeming absurd, so why can’t men wear dresses? Why is this seen as weak, when it is in fact brave?”¹⁴ The history of the muse and traditional forms of identifying male and female forms have been ingrained into the history of art relating to gender representation. Rivera works against the traditional representations of the body and inserts her own vision. She ultimately exposes the power relationship and the gendered gaze created by a male-dominated society throughout art history by introducing a genderqueer body that breaks down the established binary.

1. Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference: Feminism, Femininity and the Histories of Art* (London: Routledge, 1988), 54.

2. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin, 1972), 47.

3. Lynda Nead, *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity, and Sexuality* (London: Routledge, 1992), 10.

4. Carol Duncan, “Feminism and Art History: Virility and Domination in Early Twentieth-Century Vanguard Painting,” in *Feminism and Art History: Questioning the Litany*, eds. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (New York: Harper and Row, 1982), 306.

5. Margaret Walters, *The Nude Male: A New Perspective* (New York: Paddington, 1978), 45.

6. Walters, *The Nude Male*, 37–38.

7. Melody D. Davis, *The Male Nude in Contemporary Photography* (Philadelphia: Temple University, 1991), 13.

8. Peter Cherry, “Velazquez and the Nude,” in *Velazquez’s Fables: Mythology and Sacred History in the Golden Age*, ed. Javier Portus (Madrid: Museo Nacional de Prado, 2007), 241.

9. Quoted in Nead, *The Female Nude*, 36.

10. Pollock, *Vision and Difference*, 55.

11. Cherry, “Velazquez and the Nude,” 241.

12. Quoted in Jon Feinstein, “What Does It Mean to Photograph Someone from Behind?,” May 10, 2016, Humble Arts Foundation, <http://hafny.org/blog/2016/5/what-does-it-mean-to-photograph-someone-from-behind>.

13. Quoted in Josue Brocca, “Autobiography of Fantasies,” *Cultura Colectiva*, July 1, 2017, repr. <https://clapart.com/2017/07/lissa-rivera-autobiography-of-fantasies-cultura-colectiva/>.

14. Quoted in Brocca, “Autobiography of Fantasies.”

Marlene Dietrich as Influential Gender Icon

Emma Latham

You can't deny the power of a glamorous image . . . to show femininity as strength.

Lissa Rivera ¹

The discourses of film and feminism go hand in hand with the work of photographer Lissa Rivera. Her series *Beautiful Boy* comprises photographs of her genderqueer partner, BJ Lillis, wearing glamorous costumes in often lavish settings. She is also shown working as a set designer, as the many backgrounds and locations change throughout the collection. Her photograph *Male Impersonator* (2015) draws direct inspiration from Hollywood legend Marlene Dietrich (fig. 1). Dietrich predominantly worked as an actress during the 1930s and 1940s. Off-screen, she was known to dress in both men's and women's clothing, as she was openly bisexual. As avid film enthusiasts, both Rivera and Lillis were influenced by Dietrich's roles on-screen, especially the ones in which she worked with German director Josef von Sternberg. They admired her self-invention as a confident, gender-bending icon. *Male Impersonator* is an important image from *Beautiful Boy* because it not only draws from the legacy of one queer persona, but from the whole legacy of LGBTQ+ history. In the twenty-first century, there are significantly more examples of queer celebrities from whom artists can glean inspiration—take Caitlyn Jenner or Laverne Cox, for instance, who are both members of the transgender community. The fact that Rivera utilizes an actress who was most prominent almost a century ago as her main source of inspiration speaks volumes to the legacy that Dietrich left behind as an icon for gay culture.

In order to understand the significance of Rivera's photography for what femininity can look like in the twenty-first century, it is necessary to analyze the ways in which this concept has since been transformed. I will do this by analyzing the essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" by film scholar Laura Mulvey. Her argument for what she refers to as "the male gaze" establishes how the combination of the three gazes in film—those of the audience, the camera, and the male character—produces a psychoanalytical reading of the gaze directed at females in film. Also, I will analyze the life and legacy of the bisexual star Marlene Dietrich, who had a direct impact on both Rivera and Lillis. Finally, I will interpret *Male Impersonator* and discuss its relation to Dietrich (fig. 2). Through this analysis, I will show that thanks to Dietrich's outwardly bisexual persona, she became a critical figure for Lissa Rivera, providing inspiration for photographs such as *Male Impersonator* and, ultimately, the series *Beautiful Boy* as a collection that challenges gender and sexual identity.

Laura Mulvey wrote "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" in 1975. Throughout the essay, she references Sigmund Freud and uses some of his psychoanalytic terminology to describe the ways in which females are gazed upon by males in films. To begin, she presents Freud's analysis on scopophilia. Scopophilia is voyeurism

“in the sense of looking and being looked at and enjoying [it].”² In other words, scopophilia, according to Freud, involves a pleasure in seeing from a purely objectifying standpoint as well as a pleasure in being seen. Mulvey then goes on to argue that scopophilia can be used to describe the relationship between audience and actors: the audience is a group of people who look and enjoy, while the actors also look and take pleasure in being seen. There is a mutual benefit shared by these groups in what Mulvey refers to as the “gaze.”

The camera assumes the role of the gaze when it comes to film. Specifically, Mulvey references a genre of cinema called film noir, which heavily utilizes the camera as an instrument of voyeurism. Emerging from the post-WWII period, film noir is one of the most popular and famous film genres of all time. Some of the main tropes include a female character as a femme fatale, who is bent on the male character’s destruction while at the same time he is seduced by her beauty. In filmic terms, the camera and the types of angles and camera movement serve as yet another type of “looker”—a

term Mulvey coins—upon the female. For instance, a popular cinematic technique in film noir, known as a low angle, is to point the camera at a woman’s legs and slowly pan up so that the audience and the male character can gaze at her long, seductive legs and her figure. Another popular camera movement utilized in this genre is tracking a woman as she walks alone, usually through a busy area in which there are plenty of men who gawk at her. Once again, the audience, the camera, and—shortly to be argued—the male protagonist are the ones who gaze, and more importantly, they are the voyeurs of the female.

In her last point on the subject of the male gaze, Mulvey discusses how in film the woman is merely an image, and the man is the bearer of the look of the image. There are several reasons for this phenomenon. Firstly, Mulvey claims, “The male figure cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification.”³ In fact, she further argues that female characters themselves do not matter; rather it is what they can do *for* the male characters—literally or figuratively. In reference

Fig. 1.
Lissa Rivera. *Male Impersonator*,
2015. Archival pigment print,
20 x 20 in. (50.8 x 50.8 cm).
Photograph courtesy of the artist
and ClampArt, New York.



to film noir, the only purpose of the femme fatale is to serve the male protagonist as a sexually dangerous counterpart whom he can enjoy. In fact, Mulvey claims that the femme fatale stereotype can be applied to any female character in film because each is the object upon which the audience, camera, and male character gaze. This is a psychoanalytical foundation from which one can understand how female objectification operates in any given film. However, this dominant male gaze does not exclude other models of how voyeurism operates in film.

Marlene Dietrich is a perfect example. A German-American actress, Dietrich was most famous during the 1930s and 1940s. Before coming to the United States to work in Hollywood cinema, she was already well liked in her home country due to her work in dance, theater, and television.⁴ Director Josef von Sternberg kept a close eye on Dietrich, admiring her work. Eventually, the two would create half a dozen films that would launch her into stardom in the United States.

It was her second film directed by von Sternberg, *Morocco* (1930), that brought about Dietrich's international success. It tells the tale of two lovers—Gary Cooper, who plays the Legionnaire Tom Brown, and Marlene Dietrich, who plays the cabaret singer Amy Jolly—during the Rif War (1921–26) in Morocco. Early on in the film, Amy is backstage getting dressed in a top hat and tuxedo, accompanied by a bowtie. While she preps herself, the host nervously babbles about how there is a full house, and the stakes of her anticipated performance are revealed: if Amy does well on stage, she will have the option to stay in Morocco, as she is a traveling Frenchwoman. While it is uncertain why Amy would choose to dress in men's clothing, one could argue that perhaps she wanted to shock the crowd, especially because she is under pressure to perform well and appeal to her audience. By wearing a man's suit, she breaks gender expectations, which causes an immediate uproar; when she first appears on stage, the audience—composed of both men and women—instantly boos her when they see how she is dressed, but she can only smile as she continues to smoke. Tom takes an interest



Fig. 2.
Eugene Robert Richee, *Marlene Dietrich* (for the film *Morocco*), 1930. Gelatin silver print. Photo: © Copyright of the Estate E.R. Richee/Album/Art Resource, NY.

in her at once and is able to get the crowd to cheer as Amy gets ready to sing. During her performance, the previous audience members disgusted at Amy's masculine costume become entranced by her beauty, although it is mostly hidden by her suit, as well as her talent. At the end of the song, she receives enormous applause. Before retiring backstage, she stops at a random table occupied by a couple. The woman's hair is adorned with a flower—presumably given to her by the man she is with—and Amy takes it, inhales it, and then kisses the woman. This act causes the audience to erupt into laughter.

One could argue that the flower represents common metaphors used to symbolize certain aspects of femininity. For instance, a woman's fertility is often represented by a flower that starts as a seed and blooms into something beautiful. Another example of femininity represented by the imagery of flowers is the phrase “to deflower,” which is often used to describe the act of a man taking a woman's virginity. In this part of the scene, Dietrich “deflowers” the woman by literally taking her flower and then kissing her without consent. Although kissing is not in the same realm as sexual intercourse, one could argue that the removal of the woman's flower in this scene symbolizes the act of taking her sexually. In this case, however, instead of the traditional concept of a man deflowering a woman, another woman does it. Following this scene in the movie, everyone claps and cheers.

During the film's time period, a homosexual kiss between two women would not be met with applause in the same way that an audience might clap after watching a heterosexual kiss in a movie. That being said, however, there is another reason why a room full of people would clap and cheer after two women just kissed, and that reason is the heterosexual male gaze, which fetishizes lesbianism. Filmmaker Andrea Weiss, author of *Vampires and Violets: Lesbians in Film*, writes on the subject, “Hollywood marketed the suggestion of lesbianism, not because it intentionally sought to address lesbian audiences, but because it sought to address male voyeuristic interest.”⁵ Weiss makes clear in this quote that in film the physical act of a kiss between two lesbian women actually drives the heterosexual male desire and gaze, instead of diminishing it as one might initially imagine. Although neither Amy nor the woman she kisses are lesbians, the fact still remains that their homosexual kiss arouses a positive response from the male heterosexual audience.

As mentioned earlier, the scene in which Dietrich wears men's clothing initially causes the crowd to boo. However, the audience eventually warms up to the outfit and enjoys her performance. This

particular wardrobe choice was a strategic and intentional decision by Dietrich herself, as she often insisted on making her own costumes for her movie roles by using clothes that she already owned, including the famous tuxedo and top hat from *Morocco*.⁶ By wearing a man's suit, Dietrich breaks gender expectations. On top of this, because her entire body is covered, the audience—especially the heterosexual male audience—has no frame of reference as to what she looks like underneath, so they are left to guess, which makes the performance that much more erotic and objectifying. Captioned under a still from this scene, humanities professor Gaylyn Studlar writes: “Is this a man, a woman, or both? In donning male attire, Dietrich transforms the spectacle of female representation into a ritualized acting out of bisexual identification. Her gestures do not soften her masculine costuming to recuperate femininity; on the contrary she appears unequivocally butch.”⁷ As mentioned above, it was not the director, von Sternberg, who made these wardrobe choices but Dietrich herself, as she wanted to control how she appeared on- and off-screen.⁸ According to Weiss, “the more masculinely she dressed, the more exciting [to men] her feminine appeal became.”⁹ As this statement highlights, even a male-dressed female appeals to the male heterosexual gaze, which further contributes to Mulvey's argument that the male heterosexual gaze dominates in film. Even a woman in men's clothing adds to a film's heterosexual appeal, rather than negating it, as one might initially assume. The same phenomenon under altered circumstances still holds true today.

Off-screen Dietrich also wore stereotypically masculine attire such as pants and suits. It was not just in motion pictures that she donned this androgynous wardrobe. In fact, Dietrich stated in a 1960 interview with the *Observer*: “I dress for the image. Not for myself, not for the public, not for fashion, not for men. If I dressed for myself I wouldn't bother at all. Clothes bore me. I'd wear jeans. I adore jeans. I get them in a public store—men's, of course; I can't wear women's trousers. But I dress for the profession.”¹⁰ In this quote from Dietrich herself, she candidly shares that even in her private life, she does not dress for herself, but rather for the image. German literary critic Elisabeth Bronfen is writing about Dietrich when she notes that “as a subject, she is an image for her audience” and accepts this fact “by responding to the gaze of the projected Other.”¹¹ By this, Bronfen means that celebrities can create a persona or “image” that fits the desires of their fans, which is what creates a successful Hollywood star.¹² By extension, the “image” that Dietrich says she dresses for also applies to her dressing for “the profession,” which in her case is acting. Dietrich also describes the specific types of clothes she would prefer to wear. For her, the choice is jeans. Not just any jeans, though—they have to be from the men's department, not the women's because she “can't wear [them].” This is a powerful statement to make, to be so openly opposed to an article of clothing that

is supposed to meet the needs of her gender. With that one comment, Dietrich completely disregards what society claims to be the only suitable kind of jeans for a woman to wear. In fact, Dietrich was one of the first few female Hollywood stars to regularly wear men's pants in a gender-bending statement.¹³

Dietrich's androgynous dressing in her personal life during the peak of her career in the 1930s is illustrated by what film and media arts professor Nora M. Alter refers to as "a defense strategy within a patriarchal society." As she explains, "Dietrich's crossdressing is not indicative of a flattering emulation of the 'superior' male. Instead, it serves to demonstrate the fluidity of sexual identity even as it parodies male phallic narcissism."¹⁴ Essentially, Alter is saying that Dietrich is making a bold statement by choosing to represent herself in the public eye as a gender-bending icon by way of her clothes. This is not to say that she chose cross-dressing because she wanted to make a feminist statement, showing that as a woman she too could wear a man's suit; it was more about expressing the fluidity of her gender. Alter's phrase of imitating "male phallic narcissism" supports the argument that even as a female dressed in male clothing, Dietrich is still desirable to the heterosexual male gaze, yet her gender fluidity is also a parody of male narcissism. She is undermining male authority while also claiming more space for herself in terms of gender. Dietrich is making light of male self-assurance.

There is one final point from Marlene Dietrich's life that is worth examining. As noted earlier, Dietrich was bisexual.¹⁵ In fact, she had many affairs throughout her life with both men and women, including friends, celebrities, costars, and major Hollywood producers.¹⁶ She had these affairs despite the fact that she was married, and her husband knew about them. However, it was not only Dietrich who participated in these affairs. According to a *New York Times* article from 2001, Dietrich was part of "The Sewing Circle," a group of Hollywood women who identified as bisexual, lesbian, or other non-heterosexual identities.¹⁷ The article goes on to say that Dietrich was part of this close-knit group and had sexual relations with some of the women. So why is this worth mentioning? If one thinks back to the performance from *Morocco* with her bisexuality now contextualized, one can only imagine that it was not just men who enjoyed her performance. In light of the Sewing Circle, it seems there were women who enjoyed it as well. Although there were other queer women outside this clique, the Sewing Circle women were the most prominent from this era in Hollywood.

Through evidence in interviews, biographies, and scholarly analysis, this essay has demonstrated how the personal and public image of Marlene Dietrich complements and adds to the history of what today we call gender fluidity. At heart, Dietrich was a woman who wore

men's clothing to express her own comfort in her identity, which by extension made her more sexually appealing to the heterosexual male gaze that Laura Mulvey wrote about in her essay. In turn, this is what makes Dietrich an appealing figure for Lissa Rivera, whose work is about questioning the gender dichotomy and its definitions. Rivera photographs her genderqueer partner, BJ Lillis, in stereotypically feminine items such as jewelry, makeup, and dresses so that he can experiment with different aspects of what it means to appear female. Essentially, this is the same concept that Dietrich experimented with in her life, but reversed, since Dietrich was cross-dressing as a woman in men's clothing.

In *Male Impersonator*, Lillis is shown in a half-length portrait, wearing a black suit jacket with a flower pinned to his lapel. His curly hair is tucked under a top hat and he wears a bright shade of red lipstick—a color that is echoed in the red velvet backdrop. Lillis's body dominates more than half of the photograph, and the remaining upper space is occupied by the sheer verticality of his top hat. Behind him, creases in the red velvet backdrop create subtle V folds, yet the figure and his clothing remain the focus of the photograph. It is impossible not to draw parallels between *Male Impersonator* and the still of Marlene Dietrich from *Morocco* in which she wears a similar suit and top hat. As mentioned before, Dietrich pioneered the taboo subject of gender fluidity in the 1930s by wearing clothes geared toward the opposite sex. In *Male Impersonator*, Lillis does the same thing but with a twist. He began to experiment with wearing women's clothing in college, but ironically in *Male Impersonator* he becomes a man who dresses as a woman known for "impersonating" a man.

Rivera as well has always felt uncomfortable with the expectations associated with her assigned gender identity. In a short video, she explains, "Even though I am a cisgender woman and I appear to be comfortable in my gender visually, I think in other ways I'm androgynous." Through photography, her role and that of Lillis change. As she puts it, "It's so interesting how BJ becomes me and I become BJ and we become someone else simultaneously through the work."¹⁸ Even though she is not the subject of these photographs, Rivera still gleans the same emotionally freeing benefits that BJ does because as the artist she is so intimately connected to the work and all the choices involved in selecting particular clothing, the color scheme, the composition, and more. If one thinks about Rivera's project in relation to Marlene Dietrich, it becomes clear that Dietrich accomplished what Rivera is striving for: she showed femininity as a strength by portraying in real life all the things a woman can be—including wearing men's clothing—at a time when society told her she could not. Rivera seems to be doing much the same but with the tables turned. Lillis is the object of our gaze but the lines are

blurred: he is a genderqueer person dressed dramatically in clothes and makeup that highlight his gender fluidity. He is channeling Dietrich while also taking her gender play further. The viewer of Rivera's photos occupies the male gaze outside the frame, but this stance is complicated since the figure identifies as neither masculine nor feminine. In the openly bisexual persona of Marlene Dietrich, both

Lissa Rivera and BJ Lillis have a powerful model from the history of film for exploring their different experiences with femininity and gender. Despite the fact that Dietrich was popular almost a century ago, her status as a gay cultural icon in film has meant that even today her example continues to inspire art that pushes at the limits of gender and sexual identity.

-
1. Gita Blak, Mark Walton, and Mathew McCarthy, "Lissa Rivera: Beautiful Boy," *Vimeo*, 2016, <https://vimeo.com/202672401>.
 2. Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975), in *Film Manifestos and Global Cinema Cultures: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Scott MacKenzie, 1st ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 352.
 3. Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure," 365.
 4. Gerd Gemünden and Mary R. Desjardins, *Dietrich Icon* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 7.
 5. Andrea Weiss, *Vampires and Violets: Lesbians in the Cinema* (London: Pandora, 2000), 32–33.
 6. Rebecca Kennison, "Clothes Make the (WO) Man," *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 6, no. 2 (2002): 151–52.
 7. Gaylyn Studlar, *In the Realm of Pleasure: Von Sternberg, Dietrich, and the Masochistic Aesthetic* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 71.
 8. David Freeman, "Closet Hollywood: A Gossip Columnist Discloses Some Secrets about Movie Idols," *New York Times*, January 7, 2001.
 9. Weiss, *Vampires and Violets*, 32–33.
 10. Quoted in "From the Observer Archive, 6 March 1960: Marlene Dietrich's Wardrobe Secrets," *The Guardian*, March 4, 2012, accessed December 8, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2012/mar/05/archive-marlene-dietrich-wardrobe-secrets>.
 11. Elisabeth Brofen, "Seductive Departures of Marlene Dietrich: Exile and Stardom in *The Blue Angel*," in *Dietrich Icon*, 128.
 12. Joseph Garncarz, "Playing Garbo: How Marlene Dietrich Conquered Hollywood," in *Dietrich Icon*, 104.
 13. Linda Hall, "Images of Women and Power," *Pacific Historical Review* 77, no. 1 (2008): 8.
 14. Nora M. Alter, "The Legs of Marlene Dietrich," in *Dietrich Icon*, 66.
 15. Kennison, "Clothes Make the (WO)Man," 6.
 16. Maria Riva, *Marlene Dietrich* (New York: Ballantine, 1994), 344.
 17. Freeman, "Closet Hollywood."
 18. BJ Lillis and Lissa Rivera, "Lissa Rivera Mini Doc," *Vimeo*, 2018, <https://vimeo.com/303821956>.

Masquerade and Metamorphosis: Surrealist Influences

Ellery Coleman

In her interviews, Lissa Rivera repeatedly cites Surrealist artists as a strong influence on her works and her development as an artist. Rivera grew up with an adoration for the famed Surrealist photographer Man Ray, in particular, and even wrote her college-entrance essay on him. Although her work lacks strong aesthetic parallels with his, Man Ray still tends to be the first artist from the movement whom she lists as an influence. Almost more than in his art, Rivera was interested in the “radical people he captured, who were open about their sexuality,” who experimented with different lifestyles.¹ Rivera found a collaborator for such experimentation in her own life with her genderqueer partner, BJ Lillis. Throughout her photography, it is clear that Rivera has been influenced by Surrealist concepts of fantasy, desire, and sexuality, some of which may have been inspired by Man Ray and his “radical” circle of friends.

Rivera’s closest ties to Surrealism, however, come through women artists associated with the movement. Art historian Whitney Chadwick explains that women Surrealists tended to share an interest in fantasy with their male counterparts, though they also possessed “a self-consciousness about social constructions of femininity as surface and image.”² This included the intentional representation of body and self, and an understanding of the conscious masquerade of femininity. Rivera does not often appear in her own work, but she states explicitly and repeatedly that she projects her own desires onto Lillis, and the project is so deeply collaborative that self-representation is pertinent to discussion and explanation of the works. The construction of femininity and gender as a performance,

enacted by Lillis as her genderqueer model and life partner, is essential to Rivera’s work. The series *Beautiful Boy* and *Silence of Spaces* contain strong references to the Surrealist concepts of self-representation and femininity as masquerade evident in the photography of Claude Cahun (1894–1954), and in the performance of gender and self-othering by Leonor Fini (1907–1996), two parallels that reinforce the function of Rivera’s works as surrealist self-portraiture.

Rivera openly describes her work with Lillis as a joint exploration of fantasy and desire. The *Beautiful Boy* project, she explains, was “a canvas to project our desires. At times the images even become self-portraits.”³ As Rivera describes it, “although I am photographing my romantic partner, [the photographs] are often performing projections of my own persona.”⁴ She acknowledges that in this series she was often “placing all my personal struggles [and] exploration on BJ,” so that even if she was not physically present in these works she was still very much part of them.⁵ In the later series *Silence of Spaces*, she challenged herself to appear alongside Lillis, though this was both a logistical challenge — acting dually as photographer and sitter in those instances — but even more so an emotional and artistic challenge “to face myself as well.”⁶

Having established that her images of Lillis sometimes “become self-portraits,” and are a joint projection of their femininity and personas, we can return to Chadwick’s assertion that women artists used self-portraiture and self-representation to undermine male Surrealists’ use of the female body as an eroticized medium and as a

sexualized object. Chadwick describes three modes used by women Surrealist artists: self-othering, self-as-body, and self-as-masquerade. The first and last are relevant to an analysis of Rivera and Cahun as two queer artists photographing genderqueer subjects.

To begin with Rivera's use of the self-as-masquerade, it is necessary to first understand how Chadwick utilizes the term. Influenced by Joan Riviere's 1929 essay, "Womanliness as a Masquerade," Chadwick sees femininity as a performative masquerade that women employ to occupy a space of power within a patriarchal society. For Riviere, there was no difference: "womanliness" and "masquerade" were one and the same.⁷ This was a radical proposition even for the Roaring Twenties. Chadwick takes the concept into the realm of Surrealism to argue that Surrealist women consciously used masquerade as a strategy for challenging the rational world. She explains that "disguise and masquerade functioned as weapons in Surrealism's assault on foundations of the 'real.'"⁸ This use of masquerade in Surrealism applied even to the masculine-dominated circles of Surrealism; however, women added the element of performative femininity—an aspect that Rivera borrows in her work.

Rivera's *Transference (Green Classroom)* (2018) from the *Silence of Spaces* is a good example (fig. 1). The image is one of few in the

series where Rivera is also pictured, making it a self-portrait, not only in the sense that Rivera projects herself onto Lillis, but also as a literal self-portrait. In this photograph, Lillis enacts an artistic performance of femininity: his long hair, which Rivera delicately holds, almost measuring it against her forearm, as well as Lillis's bright red lipstick, are two traditional indicators of feminine sensuality. There are several other signs of femininity in the green dress Lillis wears, which reveals his long, thin legs, accentuated by green heels. Lillis is perched delicately on the edge of the chair with his arms folded demurely in his lap. The masquerade mask Lillis wears—and a second mask lying next to him in the chair, perhaps recently worn by Rivera—are clear echoes of some Surrealist portrait photography. Rivera, too, may be interpreted as engaging in a feminine performance. As is revealed by her exposed hip and side, she is not actually wearing the dress she holds over her body. Rivera acknowledges in interviews and lectures that as a child she often felt that she was performing femininity, dressing herself in the clothes girls were expected to wear.⁹ The way she holds Lillis's hair in this image is a show of affection but also suggests she is inspecting a lock of his long hair, a symbol of traditional femininity. Much like the Surrealists in their approach to "self-presentation through carefully chosen symbolic images and cultural 'props,'" there is a conscious enactment of femininity in this photograph through the use of clothing, make-up, and accessories, revealing the self-as-masquerade.¹⁰



Fig. 1. Lissa Rivera. *Transference (Green Classroom)*, 2018. Archival pigment print, 30 x 20 in. (76.2 x 50.8 cm). Photograph courtesy of the artist and ClampArt, New York.

This mode of self-as-masquerade was explored at length by Surrealist photographer Claude Cahun, especially within her self-portraiture. Working almost a century before Rivera, Cahun also used her camera to examine the construction of gender identity and fantasy through clothing, costume, and the theatricality of sets. Cahun, born Lucy Schwob, lived in Paris with her partner, Suzanne Malherbe, in the 1920s and moved in artistic and Surrealist circles, publishing literary works and making collaborative collages as well as photographic self-portraits into the 1930s. Cahun and Malherbe both were acquaintances of André Breton, co-founder of the Surrealist movement. In late 1937, Cahun and Malherbe moved to the island of Jersey in France and used collage, artwork, and writings to create anti-Nazi propaganda and pamphlets and to subvert the Nazi occupation of the island.

Cahun at the time identified as lesbian though she cross-dressed in her daily life as well as in her artworks: in today's terms, she might call herself a nonbinary or genderqueer individual. Cahun's partner, Malherbe, also assumed a masculine name and persona, Marcel Moore, and would also likely be identified as genderqueer by modern understanding. Of primary artistic relevance to Rivera is Cahun's self-portrait photography, which functions as an exploration of her own gender identity with an emphasis on androgyny, although compared to Lillies her performance is more one of masculinity than

femininity. Cahun's early photography takes place in the historical context of the 1920s New Woman revolution, which originated in cosmopolitan European cities among financially and sexually liberated women. In this environment, Cahun would have likely been exposed to Joan Riviere's "Womanliness as a Masquerade" essay and the Surrealist culture of masquerade. The Paris branch of the Surrealist movement, in particular, was associated with the "blurring of gender distinctions [and] lesbian adventure."¹¹

Writing on Cahun's works, art historian Abigail Solomon-Godeau notes that her "consistent play with the instability of identity, its frequent deployment of masquerade, its penchant for masks and mirrors, is startlingly close to the terms of contemporary feminist thinking about identity, gender, and sexual difference."¹² Cahun utilized the mask as a somewhat literal metaphor for hiding, disguising an aspect of her identity as a nonbinary individual or certainly as someone not heteronormative. In *Self-Portrait (kneeling, naked, with mask)* (1928), Cahun wears a black masquerade mask with illuminated eyelids and cheeks (fig. 2). She is fully nude but covers her breasts with her arms, and her legs obscure her genitalia. Cahun presents her nude body but makes it inaccessible to the viewer. It does not follow the canon of reclining female nudes in art history, as discussed by Ellie Werner in this volume, which veil the nude body in aesthetic ideals and often emphasize the figure's



Fig. 2. Claude Cahun.
Self Portrait (kneeling, naked, with mask), 1928. Gelatin silver print, 4.64 x 3.46 in. (11.8 x 8.8 cm).
Claude Cahun Collection, Jersey Heritage Collections. Photo: Courtesy of the Jersey Heritage Collections.

modesty. This tradition avoids depicting pubic hair, which is revealed in Cahun's photograph. In a slightly earlier work, *Self Portrait (in robe with masks attached)* (1928), Cahun wears a cloak decorated with masquerade masks and a full facial mask, almost entirely concealing her face and body (fig. 3). With both self-portraits, we can see there are parallels to Rivera's portraits of Lillis, such as her use of costumes or accessories that contrast with her assigned gender in that they are notably androgynous or satirizing femininity.

Cahun's self-portraits are also about desire and how she wants to be seen. Often in Surrealism more broadly, the male artist desired and eroticized the female muse. However, scholar E. F. Pustarfi explains that in Cahun's self-portraits she "denotes creative desire while establishing models of desire that exist outside the heterosexual norm."¹³ Presenting herself in the way she would like to be desired is an evident departure from societal heteronormativity and expectations of femininity. For instance, in *Self-Portrait (kneeling, naked, with mask)* and *Self Portrait (in cupboard)* (1932; fig. 4), Cahun's androgynous features are exposed and she is inaccessible in some way, either blocking and protecting herself with her limbs or literally encased within a wardrobe, perhaps in itself a tongue-in-cheek allusion to "closeted" homosexuality. Thus, she undermines the traditional eroticizing male gaze through her androgynous buzzed hairstyle, the presentation of body hair, and the relative lack of coy, seductive expressions often associated with the female nude in art.

Another Surrealist artist Rivera admires is Leonor Fini (1907–1996), who was born in Argentina and raised in Italy. Rivera actually curated the first US-based museum exhibition of Fini's work at the Museum of Sex in New York City in 2018. Besides visual similarities like meticulous attention to costume and an attraction to androgynous characteristics, Fini and Rivera share a conceptual understanding of gender as performance, and an interest in representations of metamorphosis and transformation. Both artists also explore desire and illustrate Chadwick's notion of self-othering in their work.

Fini was known during her lifetime for her dislike of the gender binary and the constraint of being labeled a woman artist. She flouted traditional expectations of femininity and married only briefly but then divorced. Interested in Freud's explanation of the development of sexuality, which deems patriarchal socialization key to the realization of gender identity, Fini considered herself a bisexual but disavowed the term lesbian.¹⁴ She would be considered polyamorous by today's standards as she cohabitated with two of her partners simultaneously. As she summed up her philosophy, "I am for a world of non-differentiated or little differentiated sexes."¹⁵

From an early age, Fini embodied different gendered identities. Her mother often dressed her as a boy because Fini's vindictive, estranged father attempted to have her kidnapped from her mother, so cross-dressing Fini made her not only less recognizable but also



Fig. 3.
Claude Cahun. *Self Portrait (in robe with masks attached)*, 1928. Gelatin silver print, 4.72 x 3.70 in. (12 x 9.4 cm). Claude Cahun Collection, Jersey Heritage Collections. Photo: Courtesy of the Jersey Heritage Collections.



Fig. 4.
Claude Cahun. *Self Portrait (in cupboard)*, 1932. Gelatin silver print, 4.40 x 3.34 in. (11.2 x 8.5 cm). Claude Cahun Collection, Jersey Heritage Collections. Photo: Courtesy of the Jersey Heritage Collections.

safer.¹⁶ From this childhood experience, combined with Fini's later academic interest in Freud, she came to understand that gender is inherently unstable and exists as a performance. Fini was theatrical, and gender expression was an additional facet of her general tendency to treat life as a never-ending show.

Fini lived her performance through a multiplicity of identities, finding refuge in the gender ambiguity of characters, animals, and mythology. Costume, especially combined with photography, allowed her flexibility of expression because of the transformative quality of costume and the ability to metamorphose into another creature. At various balls, Fini dressed as an owl, a cat, a star in the night sky, Persephone (goddess of the underworld), a bird, and a goddess with a fox-skull headdress. The costume was always more important than the event itself as it allowed her to live outside patriarchal structures as something other than herself. Fini ruminated, "I have always loved and lived my own theatre. . . . To dress up, to cross-dress, is an act of creativity. . . . I only looked in mirrors and after an hour or two, having gazed long enough at my reflection, I would say to my friends: 'Enough, let's go.'"¹⁷ Like Cahun, Fini explored androgyny and self-othering through costume by embodying characters that were gender ambiguous. Her dislike for the gender binary drew her toward human-animal hybrids (fig. 5). In her work on Fini, Rivera describes the artist's fascination with cats in terms of their freedom from social mores. Rivera explains, "Fini

self-identified with cats and saw them as free beings—free from gender norms and social constructs."¹⁸

Parallel with Fini's costumes—feline, Persephone, goddess—Rivera depicts Lillis as a multiplicity of characters, including a Renaissance nude, Marlene Dietrich, and Priscilla Presley. In such roles, Lillis experiences self-othering in spaces where women, in Chadwick's analysis, "were believed to have exercised spiritual and psychic powers later repressed."¹⁹ We can see this in *Spirit of the Rose* (2015), in which Lillis is draped in roses with tangled and unkempt hair, with almost unhealthily pale skin, and only partially clothed in a gold tasseled garment open at the side and torn at the back (fig. 6). The costume is perhaps that of a goddess, but it reads as the feminine performance of an intentionally disheveled but ethereal being. Just as Fini viewed each costume as a performance, Rivera notes that Lillis "inhabits each costume" and gives it meaning.²⁰ The image has a spiritual quality, and there is a sense that Lillis is acting as someone other than himself.

A central theme in Fini's work is metamorphosis and transformation. This is evident from the costumes discussed above. Notably, Fini was not searching for a complete disguise, but rather was using costume as a method of creative expression and transformation, "producing characters that illuminated facets of her identity."²¹ Costume, especially combined with photography, allowed her



Fig. 5.
André Ostier. *Leonor Fini*,
1951. Gelatin silver print,
7.5 x 7.1 in. (19.05 x 18.03
cm). The Museum of Fine
Arts, Houston. Museum
purchase funded by Mr.
and Mrs. Harry B. Gordon,
80.22. Photo: © Museum of
Fine Arts Houston / Albert
Sanchez.

Fig. 6.
Lissa Rivera. *Spirit of the
Rose*, 2015. Archival
pigment print, 30 x 20 in.
(76.2 x 50.8 cm). Photo-
graph courtesy of the artist
and ClampArt, New York.

flexibility of expression through the ability to metamorphose into another creature. Chadwick thus understands Fini's work in terms of "agency and transformation." As she describes Fini, "The unruly woman of the male Surrealist imagination . . . is recreated through women's eyes as self-possessed and capable of creating new narratives of the self."²² Chadwick sees transformation as a specifically Surrealist enactment of femininity. It is the multiplicity and repetition of these different transformed beings that assert the agency and power of the artist to transform, and the fluidity of their subjects—Fini and Lillis—to be dramatically changed.

The role of metamorphosis in Rivera's work stands out in a piece literally called *Metamorphosis* (2015; fig. 7). In this seated half-portrait, Lillis wears a headdress of flowers, which appear to be silk and thus not real, and he is otherwise nude. However, through the flowers of the headdress, the reference to nature implies blooming, bringing the process of transformation to mind. Through make-up and a flower headdress, Lillis is changed into a different being, though perhaps not as mythical or nature oriented as Fini. *Metamorphosis* is also a theme in Rivera's *Portrait with Symbols II* (2015; fig. 8). The image is the opposite of *Metamorphosis* in that Lillis is fully clothed, but otherwise the idea of feminine performance is still present as is transformation. Yet again, the headpiece is dominant in

the image as is the velvet dress, which attracts the viewer's eye and contrasts with the same bright red lips. In addition, the title points to the two creatures on the wallpaper behind Lillis, the bird and the butterfly. The butterfly is the animal most scientifically synonymous with biological metamorphosis throughout its stages of life, though here we have a fully grown and metamorphosed butterfly. Lillis is in practically the same pose as in *Metamorphosis*, with one arm crossed in front holding his other arm, though of course in this case he is clothed. The thick fabric of the dress and the amount of fabric, covering all but hands and face, could be reminiscent of a chrysalis.

The colors of Lillis's headpiece are played out on the wall behind him in the parrot. For Fini, birds were a frequent motif given their association with transformation through flight. In addition, Fini saw wings as a symbol of metamorphosis in her bird and owl costumes as well as in her paintings of winged goddesses. The headpiece itself is significant not only for the color and curvilinear similarities it bears to a bird's wings, but also because Fini found a particular feminine power in hats. Hats were a necessary part of feminine clothing during the decades when Fini was working in the mid-twentieth century. Art historian Rachel Grew identifies hats as a repeated element in Fini's later paintings: they appear as "motif[s] for dressing up and transformation."²³ As Fini herself put it, "I believe that [large



Fig. 7.
Lissa Rivera. *Metamorphosis*,
2015. Archival pigment print,
30 x 20 in. (76.2 x 50.8 cm).
Photograph courtesy of the artist
and ClampArt, New York.



Fig. 8.
Lissa Rivera. *Portrait with Symbols II*, 2015. Archival pigment print,
30 x 20 in. (76.2 x 50.8 cm).
Photograph courtesy of the artist
and ClampArt, New York.

hats] are attributes or emblems which take up the flame, the halo, the crown.”²⁴ We can thus read Lillis’s crown of bird’s wings as a Fini-esque symbol of metamorphosis.

Lissa Rivera borrows conceptually as well as literally from the history of Surrealist artists, especially from the artists Claude Cahun and Leonor Fini. In both *Beautiful Boy* and *Silence of Spaces*, we see connections to Chadwick’s concepts of self-othering and

self-as-masquerade, evident in the self-portraits of Cahun and reflected in Rivera’s *Transference*. Cahun and Rivera similarly depict queer desire in the way they wish to be desired—or project desire—onto a reflection of their subjects, whether Cahun or Lillis. In the costumes, performance of gender, and the multiplicity of identity around the Surrealist costumes of Leonor Fini, Rivera has found an important inspiration for her own work, particularly in *Metamorphosis* and *Portrait with Symbols II*.

-
1. Lissa Rivera in discussion with the author, November 11, 2021.
 2. Dawn Ades, “An Infinite Play of Empty Mirrors: Women, Surrealism, and Self-Representation,” in Whitney Chadwick, *Mirror Images: Women, Surrealism, and Self-Representation* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), 6.
 3. Lissa Rivera, “Beautiful Boy, Chapter 1,” <http://www.lissarivera.com/beautiful-boy-chapter-i/>.
 4. Scarlett Davis, “An Interview with Lissa Rivera,” *Museé Magazine*, October 8, 2018, <https://museemagazine.com/features/2018/10/4/interview-with-lissa-rivera>.
 5. Lissa Rivera in discussion with the author, November 11, 2021.
 6. Lissa Rivera in discussion with the author, November 11, 2021.
 7. Chadwick, *Mirror Images*, 23.
 8. Chadwick, *Mirror Images*, 23.
 9. Lissa Rivera and BJ Lillis, “Where Are You Now, Beautiful Boy?,” *The Reservoir: Conversations on Photography*, <https://thereservoir.net/Lissa-Rivera-in-conversation-with-BJ-Lillis>.
 10. Chadwick, *Mirror Images*, 28.
 11. Shelley Rice and Lynn Gumpert, *Inverted Odysseys: Claude Cahun, Maya Deren, and Cindy Sherman* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 115.
 12. Rice and Gumpert, *Inverted Odysseys*, 114.
 13. E. F. Pustarfi, “Constructed Realities: Claude Cahun’s Created World in *Aveux Non Avenus*,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 67, no. 5 (2020): 700.
 14. Peter Webb, *Sphinx: The Life and Art of Leonor Fini* (New York: Vendome, 2009), 99.
 15. Quoted in Webb, *Sphinx*, 99.
 16. Rachael Grew, “Leonor Fini and Dressing Up: An Act of Creativity,” *Woman’s Art Journal* 40, no. 1 (2019): 14.
 17. Quoted in Webb, *Sphinx*, 121.
 18. Davis, “Interview.”
 19. Chadwick, *Mirror Images*, 13.
 20. Davis, “Interview.”
 21. Grew, “Leonor Fini,” 13.
 22. Chadwick, *Mirror Images*, 11.
 23. Grew, “Leonor Fini,” 13.
 24. Quoted in Grew, “Leonor Fini,” 17.

Negotiating Subversion and Performing Gender Identity in Contemporary Photography

Peter Philips

The photographs from the series *Beautiful Boy* act as a window into a deeply personal and highly crafted world curated by Lissa Rivera and inhabited by her partner, BJ Lillis. In *Pink Bedroom (For Priscilla)* (2017), for instance, Rivera invites the viewer to peer into a garishly ornate pink bedroom where Lillis is lying on a neatly made pink bed (fig. 1). Lillis wears a baby-blue mesh gown with a matching veil attached to a hairband. He appears sad and detached, perhaps because he has been left completely alone in this space. He turns his gaze away from the viewer and directs it toward the carpet to stare at nothing; he is lost in thought. The title of the photograph shows Rivera drawing a connection between Lillis and the wife of singer Elvis Presley, Priscilla Beaulieu Presley. Rivera has talked about her intention behind this work: “When she first came into the public eye, [Priscilla] was like a caged bird—the perfect symbol of female innocence and beauty in the eyes of the most desirable man, Elvis Presley. I felt that Priscilla was an icon of the 1960s. The story goes that she lost all her mystique [to Elvis] after she became a mother. I wanted to explore this fantasy of femininity, seemingly idealised by Elvis—a vision that was very sexualised, yet very virginal, and meant to be of the domestic realm.”¹

Rivera discusses how this pop-culture figure inspired her to comment on the condition of women. To look at *Pink Bedroom (For Priscilla)* just through the lens of cisgender social commentary aimed at women, however, ignores the deeper implications related to Lillis’s genderqueer identity. The room is drenched entirely in pink accoutrements, but Lillis is wearing a baby-blue dress. The relationship between pink and blue in this image presents a visual statement on the gender binary. American cultural mind-sets associate pink with girls and blue with boys. The juxtaposition of these colors on the body of a genderqueer individual, who identifies as neither male nor female, brings a confusion of gendered symbols into the image. Rivera leaves the viewer with these dual gender identifiers, which may be interpreted as contradictory if viewed within a strict gender-binary dynamic. Through color, Rivera complicates gender identity and invites her audience to question their own cultural biases. Lillis’s genderqueer identity is central to one of the main themes in Rivera’s work: breaking down and deconstructing gender.

In addition, Rivera’s work engages with the intersection between gender identity and performance by drawing from older genres of

painting and sculpture in art as well as familiar images of female beauty found in American pop culture. By placing Lillis in the role of an American celebrity, and thus a traditional feminine object of beauty and consumption, Rivera demonstrates that such roles can be inhabited by genderqueer bodies. That is, she uses her photography to expand the language of beauty in art and popular culture, and to show how gender can be performed and worn by a genderqueer subject. This process of manufacturing and performing identity in photography is not unique to Rivera. Performance is a continuing theme in contemporary photography, including in the work of the artists Cindy Sherman (b. 1954) and Catherine Opie (b. 1961), who both draw from sources similar to those of Rivera and who also complicate gender and sexual identity in their photography. By examining Rivera's work alongside the related work of Sherman and Opie, we can develop a clearer understanding of the subtle ways she unpacks gender and queers art history. Further, this analysis highlights the altered performance of mass-mediated representations of femininity as a subversive means to break down and reconstruct gender identity in photography.

Before continuing, it is important to examine what it means to perform as it relates to contemporary photographic production. The word *perform* means "to portray a role or demonstrate a skill

before an audience" or "to present a dramatic or musical work or other entertainment before an audience."² The concept of performance is evident in Rivera's work through the carefully chosen vintage clothing worn by Lillis and the cinematic settings in which he is shown. In preparation for each shoot, Rivera conducts in-depth research to find the perfect location to fit the image in her mind. To procure the perfect vintage dresses, she scours the web for used clothing and occasionally even tailor-makes her own dresses.³ Her process is therefore not unlike a movie director who pays attention to every detail in producing the look of a film.

Beyond the idea that an image is controlled and curated by an artist, the word *perform* possesses a secondary meaning vital to understanding Rivera's photographic process, "to take action in accordance with the requirements of" or "to function or accomplish something as expected."⁴ This secondary definition is not entirely divorced from the connotations of the previous definition of the word *perform*, to put on a spectacle before an audience. The idea of something or someone being able "to function . . . as expected" implies that there is a specific social audience—a group of people for whom an individual puts on a show. In our day-to-day lives, humans put on a never-ending performance of our identities in front of an audience of our friends, family, and coworkers, and just about



Fig. 1.
Lissa Rivera. *Pink Bedroom*
(*For Priscilla*), 2017.
Archival pigment print,
30 x 45 in. (76.2 x 114.3 cm).
Photograph courtesy of the
artist and ClampArt, New York.

anyone whom we pass on the street. We dress a certain way, wear our hair in a particular style, and apply other visual markers on our bodies to communicate our identities and appearance to others. Viewing gender performance through this lens gives a new meaning to the Shakespearean line “all the world’s a stage.”⁵

This kind of social performance intersects with gender identity according to a concept put forth by the pioneering queer theorist Judith Butler (b. 1956) in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Butler’s framework was laid out in her monograph *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory* (1989) and forms the theoretical basis for understanding the function of performance in this analysis. In this text, she comments on the correlation of gender as a performance with social temporality. By social temporality, Butler refers to the idea that contemporary society manufactures a specific yet mutable binary—male and female—to uphold hegemonic systems of power. Butler argues that because of their social function “genders, then, can be neither true nor false, neither real nor apparent,” but are still produced and enacted blindly by society as if they are true. That is, we inhabit a world that works to constantly reinforce and stabilize heteronormative cisgendered identities that possess the “appearance of substance.”⁶ Butler stresses that the only means to counteract this system is through “subversive performances of various kinds.”⁷ She gives further instructions by stating: “If the ground of gender identity is the stylized repetition of acts through time, and not a seemingly seamless identity, then the possibilities of gender transformation are to be found in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the

possibility of a different sort of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style.”⁸ Simply put, Butler explains that an individual altering their presentation of gender is an act of subversion in itself and can help to destabilize the “appearance of substance” when it comes to identity.

As someone who identifies as neither male nor female, Lillis performs this breakdown of the gender binary in Rivera’s photography. Lillis was born and raised to identify as male, but by wearing women’s clothing, he combats the repetitive performance of masculinity and thereby commits a subversive act through an alternative gender expression. Rivera often states that one of her goals as an artist is to deconstruct repetitive images seen in contemporary American culture. She notes that social media has become a platform where female and male images are blasted to users at full volume to covertly reinforce binary gendered identities. Rivera points to Kim Kardashian as a contemporary example of someone whose image has a far-reaching influence in terms of gender identification in popular culture.⁹ If we consider Kardashian as a reference point for contemporary feminine beauty, inserting a genderqueer individual like Lillis—whose appearance and performance of gender does not neatly conform to conventional expressions of femininity—produces an alternative: a queer femininity. This act of counteracting conventions, while at the same time appropriating visual norms, forms the foundation of Rivera’s work. However, there is subtlety and nuance to her process of breaking gender norms, which we can see more clearly by examining her work alongside the photography of Cindy Sherman, whose tactics differ from Rivera’s more restrained approach.

Fig. 2.

Cindy Sherman. *Untitled Still #6*, from the series *Untitled Film Stills*, 1977. Gelatin silver print, 9 7/16 × 6 1/2 in. (24 × 16.5 cm). Museum of Modern Art, New York. Acquired through the generosity of Jo Carole and Ronald S. Lauder in memory of Eugene M. Schwartz. 815.1995.



Fig. 3.

Cindy Sherman. *Untitled Still #25*, from the series *Untitled Film Stills*, 1978. Gelatin silver print, 7 9/16 × 9 7/16 in. (19.2 × 24 cm). Museum of Modern Art, New York. Horace W. Goldsmith Fund through Robert B. Menschel. 834.1995.



Cindy Sherman

Photographer Cindy Sherman made a name for herself in the world of contemporary art starting with her series *Untitled Film Stills* (1977–80), in which she appears as various undefined female characters, wearing different costumes and poses in every work. As the curator Eva Respini describes this series, it “reads like an encyclopedic roster of female roles inspired by 1950 and 1960s Hollywood, film noir, B movies, and European art-house films.”¹⁰ Though none of these images are based on actual films, the cinematic air of the series explains why Sherman titles the series *Untitled Film Stills*. Respini writes further that the reference to film serves to mimic “deeply embedded clichés” of female types from popular culture. As she puts it, Sherman is remanufacturing stereotypes and images people see on the silver screen, repurposing them in her photography, and making them look decidedly “cheap and trashy.”¹¹

Untitled Film Still #6 is one of the many images in the series that exhibits Sherman’s satirizing of female types (fig. 2). The image parodies a reclining nude—a center spread tamer than something you would see in *Playboy* magazine. The viewer peers at an underwear-clad Sherman lying on a bed, propped up in an oblique angle. Despite the erotic overtones of her pose, her facial expression resists any attempts to sexualize and consume her body, as she looks away from the viewer with a dazed and vacant stare. Sherman also rejects being the object of her own gaze, which she communicates by holding a hand mirror that appears face down on the bed. The refusal to look at her own reflection becomes even more ironic

given the fact that she is the one who is taking the picture. Sherman thus presents an image that resembles an erotic picture intended for pleasure, but she subtly denies being turned into a fetishized object by presenting a tongue-in-cheek parody of the pin-up girl. Conforming to Butler’s notion of subversion through repetition, Sherman’s spoofed performance of a female model grounds this series in the deconstruction of conventional femininity.

Elsewhere in the series, Sherman constructs various female identities by simply putting on a wig and wearing a different dress. In *Untitled Film Still #25*, Sherman appears pressed close to the foreground, alongside a pier, in a role every bit as overacted as that in *Film Still #6* (fig. 3). She wears a short, black wig, loosely placed on her head, that looks as though it will fly away at any second. The tonal quality of eyeshadow and lipstick are just as dark as the wig she wears, as if to underscore the artifice that is central to her femininity. Art historians Maria Blanca and Jacks Selistre explain that Sherman reveals the “cheap and trashy” nature of her characters through the persistent manufacturing of new subjects that mimic popular representations of female bodies by making clear that femininity is a performance of types.¹²

Lissa Rivera takes up similar tropes but subverts mass-mediated female beauty through a queered lens. In *Study in Red and Yellow* (2015), for instance, Rivera sets the scene for gender deconstruction by playing with female beauty standards to break down gender codes (fig. 4). *Study in Red and Yellow* references the midcentury pin-up with Lillis in a seductive pose before the camera in a scene



Fig. 4.
Lissa Rivera. *Study in Red and Yellow*,
2015. Archival pigment print,
30 x 20 in. (76.2 x 50.8 cm).
Photograph courtesy of the artist and
ClampArt, New York.

that recalls actresses such as Rita Hayward or Brigitte Bardot. Much like in Sherman's images from *Untitled Film Stills*, Rivera has Lillis recall a familiar image but perform it differently, creating an identity that is beautiful and desirable from Lillis's perspective. The color-coordinated scarlet-red dress, rouged lips, and large spherical red earrings hearken back to an era of classic Hollywood movie stars, but with a twist: this outfit and look is applied to a genderqueer body. In *Study in Red and Yellow*, Rivera invites the viewer to peer down at Lillis from an overhead vantage point similar to that in Sherman's *Film Still #6*, but the subject's relationship to the scene has changed. Lillis averts his eyes to the right, away from the viewer standing directly above him, but not to parody a popular convention associated with female representation. Rather, his calm and poised look suggests that he is both cognizant and welcoming of onlookers who gaze upon him.

At the same time, Lillis subverts the convention of the seductive female starlet by revealing his blonde armpit hair, which then takes the photograph in a different direction. Prevailing American cultural tastes reject visible underarm hair as incompatible with idealized standards of feminine beauty. Rivera, however, does not expose Lillis's armpit hair for pure shock value. Its presence makes clear that what lies before the viewer is not the traditional female bombshell. It is a genderqueer body that refuses to conform to the mass-produced images of idealized female models who lack any sign

of body hair. Instead, Rivera portrays Lillis in such a way that the viewer consumes a genderqueer body that has created its own, new standards of beauty based on easily recognizable conventions. This act is key to Butler's argument that performing familiar identities differently is a way of undoing them.

Despite their common use of popular touchstones of female beauty, Rivera's sensibility to gender performance differs greatly from that of Sherman. While Sherman exposes the role of mass-mediated images in constructing and reinforcing gender identity in American culture, she then subverts these conventions with humor. By inserting a queer person into the role of a Hollywood starlet, Rivera too subverts expectations of conventional femininity. However, Rivera does not appropriate visual markers of femininity to form the punchline of a photographic gag. Instead, she appropriates repetitive female types to reimagine Lillis in the position of what she sees as a powerful new femininity. As a result, Rivera challenges and reconstructs repeating images of femininity in American culture with a genderqueer body meant to be beautiful and admired.

Catherine Opie

Another contemporary photographer who works in a related vein is Catherine Opie, though she is an unapologetic butch lesbian and self-identified queer artist. Like Rivera, but unlike Sherman, Opie

Fig. 5.

Catherine Opie. *Mike and Sky*, from the series *Portraits*, 1993. Silver dye bleach print, 19 1/8 x 14 7/8 in. (48.6 x 37.8 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York City. Gift of Joel Wachs in honor of David Dechman and Michel Mercure. 168.2020. Image © Copyright Catherine Opie.



possesses a personal investment in the construction of identity and uses the photographic medium as an active tool to bring awareness to queer themes. She feels compelled to use her photography in what she describes as a “battle for people to look into themselves for the prejudices that keep them from having an open mind” and sees her audience as not only straight but also lacking awareness and potentially hostile to queer themes.¹³ In communicating her message, she aims to be direct. Opie’s portrait subjects, herself included, are tattooed, LGBTQ+-identifying individuals who often defiantly stare straight into the camera with an overt queer presence. *Mike and Sky* (1993), an early photograph from her *Portraits* series, showcases this type of provocation in which the subject demands attention from the viewer (fig. 5).¹⁴ In this bust-length view, Opie’s two tattooed subjects meet the viewer at eye level in an intense gaze that queer theorist Jack Halberstam refers to as a “butch gaze.”¹⁵

This confrontational butch gaze becomes one of the driving characteristics in Opie’s earlier portrait series from the 1990s. In order to appeal to a non-queer audience, Opie references forms of high art to package her subversive messages about queer identities. Opie explains, “Art History gives me the ability to use a very familiar language that people understand when looking at my work and seduce the viewer into considering work that they might not normally want to look at. . . . This device really can draw the viewer in through the perfection of the image.”¹⁶ This appropriation of art historical

references to articulate queer themes puts Opie in dialogue with Rivera, who tackles the issue of rectifying queer erasure in the art historical canon just as she does in popular culture. Rivera uses poses in her photographs that commonly evoke references to Renaissance and French academic painting as well as Classical Greek sculpture. Rivera says that by presenting her genderqueer muse within the lineage of great beauties, she recontextualizes “what is attractive and beautiful.”¹⁷ By re-creating Lillies as a nineteenth-century female nude or a Greek goddess in her work, Rivera intends for Lillies to take on that artistic identity within the context of her photography.

Whereas Rivera is interested in putting Lillies in the place of the great beauties in art, Opie’s references to art history assume a more practical rhetorical role. Opie’s art historical references sardonically evoke arbitrary reverence for artistic production from the past as a driving visual device in her images to introduce subversive queer themes, as seen in *Self-Portrait/Cutting* (1993; fig. 6). Against a patterned and textured backdrop that frames the setting, Opie shows her back facing the camera with a bleeding drawing etched onto her skin. The engraving on her back is rendered as a child-like stick drawing with two women in front of a house underneath a sun. The image references Opie’s perhaps naïve idyllic dream as a lesbian of settling down with another woman.¹⁸ By turning her back to the camera so that we cannot see her face and chest, the viewer is left to parse her back for clues about her gender. In the absence



Fig. 6.
Catherine Opie. *Self-Portrait/Cutting*,
1993. Chromogenic print,
39 ½ x 29 ¼ in. (100.33 x 74.3 cm).
The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los
Angeles. Gift of Michael Mehring. 96.7.
Image © Copyright Catherine Opie.
Photo: © 2022 Museum Associates /
LACMA. Licensed by Art Resource, NY

of gender signifiers on the front of her body that would provide clues to her identity, the inscription of a lesbian fantasy on her back instead is what speaks to her gender and sexuality.¹⁹

About half of Opie's photograph *Self-Portrait/Cutting* consists of a dark green textile that evokes a longstanding convention in European portraits in which such textiles were used as backdrops. Opie explains that the use of such a background "separates the subject from their world," leaving little else in the way of context.²⁰ At the same time, the textile highlights the subject depicted by drawing attention to the figure. In *Self-Portrait/Cutting*, the richly patterned tapestry ironically brings a note of elegance to a portrait that is otherwise focused on the bloody etching that appears on Opie's back. The drapery serves a dual purpose as a means to lure viewers into the image, but also to direct attention onto the queer figure at its center, thereby expanding queer visibility.

Rivera also draws upon the language of art history to visually develop her queer themes as seen in *Metamorphosis* (2015; fig. 7). In this photograph, Lillis appears against a colorful blue tapestry with half of his nude body entirely exposed. It is a tightly cropped image, making Lillis the clear focus of attention. His make-up defines his lips

and highlights the feminine contours of his face, which is framed by a floral crown. Lillis denies the viewer complete access to his body and the ability to determine his sex by gracefully concealing his genitalia with his arms. This composition brings to mind Opie's earlier point about the function of the textile backdrop, which separates Lillis from the outside world but still represents his world by making his body the focus. Opie draws on art historical references to appeal to her audience, and she, like Rivera, enlists historical allusions to integrate queer content into an otherwise predominantly straight canon of art. In *Metamorphosis*, we can see additional examples of this through Lillis's floral crown, which is reminiscent of that worn by Flora in Botticelli's *Primavera* (ca. 1480), while his graceful pose of modesty recalls the Knidian Aphrodite (ca. 4th century BCE), among other works from the history of art.

Conclusion

The different visual languages developed by Rivera, Sherman, and Opie testify to how contemporary photographers respond in varied ways to the performance of gender and sexuality in American culture. Each artist visualizes a unique appropriation of roles, symbols, and performances that render their analysis of identity tangible to the



Fig. 7.

Lissa Rivera. *Metamorphosis*, 2015.
Archival pigment print, 30 x 20 in.
(76.2 x 50.8 cm). Photograph courtesy
of the artist and ClampArt, New York.

viewer and that resonate with the framework laid out by Judith Butler.²¹ Despite the differences in their approaches, all three artists could be said to emerge from the same anxiety and dissatisfaction with contemporary binary systems of identity. Sherman shows how mass-mediated images in American culture construct cisgender identity. By exposing iterations of different female types derived from American visual culture, Sherman undermines the fallacy of gender as possessing truth. Opie, on the other hand, repurposes art historical conventions to provide a point of entry for the viewer to engage with unconventional and often uncomfortable queer themes. Sherman and Opie both take up recognizable forms of visual culture so that their work is accessible and easier to approach, though they ultimately undermine and undo the intent of their sources. Both challenge their viewers' assumptions.

Much like Sherman and Opie, Rivera pulls together and transforms a host of cultural and visual references to produce her statements

on gender identity, though among the three artists, she is the most invested in beauty. Like other images in *Queering the Muse*, the specific works discussed here — *Pink Bedroom*, *Study in Red and Yellow*, and *Metamorphosis* — reveal how Rivera seeks to expand the ways that female beauty is seen and understood. Through her photography, she shows how female identity can be worn by a male-presenting body like Lillis's to become desirable and attractive. In doing so, she subverts assumptions about the ways gender and identity typically come together. Her work interrupts the means by which femininity takes shape through the repetition of performance. Rivera is clear that she does not "intend [her and Lillis's work] to be moralistic or didactic."²² Rather, she wants to subvert through suggestion: suggestion that a divergent genderqueer body can become an attractive, desirable movie star or a precious work of art. In collaboration with Lillis, Rivera reveals that these alternative performances of gender are capable of being subtle, artful, and, most importantly, beautiful.

1. Lissa Rivera, "Lissa Rivera on a Love That Defies All Classification: Story behind the Still," interview, *Huck*, March 8, 2018, <https://www.huckmag.com/art-and-culture/photography-2/beautiful-boy-lissa-rivera/>.
2. *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 6th ed., s.v., "perform."
3. *Beautiful Boy: Adaptation and Image in the Age of Photography*, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rSucEpb7x4&ab_channel=TheTroutGallery, 34:00.
4. *American Heritage Dictionary*.
5. William Shakespeare, *As You Like It* (Minneapolis: Lerner, 2000), 46; the phrase is taken from a longer monologue by the character Jacques. The quote in its original meaning uses the word *stage* as a metaphor to refer to the stages in one's life.
6. Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (1988): 520–21, 528.
7. Butler, "Performative Acts," 531.
8. Butler, "Performative Acts," 520.
9. *Beautiful Boy*, 16, 30.
10. Eva Respini, "Will the Real Cindy Sherman Please Stand Up," in *Cindy Sherman*, ed. Kate Norment and Jason Best (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2012), 18.
11. Respini, "Will the Real Cindy Sherman," 21.
12. Jacks Ricardo Selistre and Rosa María Blanca, "Rupturas identitárias na produção artística de Cindy Sherman e Yasumasa Morimura," *Palindromo* 10, no. 21 (July 31, 2018): 122–23.
13. Elisabeth Lebovici, "Destabilising Gender," *MAKE Magazine*, no. 89 (November 9, 2000): 19.
14. Catherine Opie, Nat Trotman and Russell Ferguson, *Catherine Opie: American Photographer* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2008), 52, 53.
15. Jack Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 277.
16. Opie, *Catherine Opie*, 72.
17. Lissa Rivera, interview by Ashley Kauschinger, *Don't Smile*, 2016, <http://dont-smile.com/articles/lissa-rivera-abridgingdivision>.
18. Opie, *Catherine Opie*, 15.
19. Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, 38, 39.
20. Catherine Opie, as quoted in Cherry Smyth, *Damn Fine Art by New Lesbian Artists* (London: Cassell, 1996), 44, quoted in Trotman, *Catherine Opie*, 53.
21. It is worth noting that Sherman's career began in the late 1970s well before Butler's essay was published; and, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Opie reportedly was unfamiliar with Butler's works published during the earlier years of her academic career.
22. Lissa Rivera, "Meet the Photographer Using Her Partner as a Muse to Challenge Gender Identity," interview by Beatrice Hazelhurst, *Paper*, September 6, 2017, <https://www.papermag.com/meet-the-photographer-using-her-boyfriend-as-a-muse-to-challenge-gende-2438187624.html?rebellitem=3#rebellitem3>.

(Ad)dressing Identity: A Visual Subversion of Binary Gender and the Popular Aesthetics of Desire

Frances Taylor

It is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances. The true mystery of the world is the visible, not the invisible.

Oscar Wilde¹

Dress plays a paramount role in identity development and how identity is communicated. Sociologist Susan Kaiser contends that clothing and appearance function as a language of signifiers that can convey multiple facets of the self, including class, gender, and occupation, among other identities.² This essay relies on fashion scholar Patricia Cunningham's definition of dress as "a mode or fashion of personal attire and costume including style of hair, clothing, and personal adornment."³ As a product of popular culture, these "costumes" are the primary means through which individuals can express how they "fit into either the ideal standard for appropriate behavior or [their] own sense of aesthetics and beauty."⁴ Clothes, in other words, enable individuals to signal their conformity to—or rejection of—social norms related to their identity.

Dress carries particular weight in the creation and performance of gender identity. Individuals may use clothes to embody the "appropriate behavior" of their gender and reaffirm the categories of man and woman. Or they can problematize these categories,

as is the case in *Queering the Muse* for BJ Lillis as a gender-nonconforming individual. Lissa Rivera's photographs negotiate the construction of gender, challenging the limited vision of beauty that is evident throughout popular culture. She does so through a carefully chosen aesthetic language, using bright or otherwise beautiful colors to engage viewers. She also takes inspiration from a wide variety of visual sources, including film, art, and popular culture. Drawing on Rivera's *Mirror with Jewels*, *Male Impersonator*, and *Emerald Living Room I* (all 2015), this essay will trace how individuals make up, or produce, their identities through dress. Rivera presents gender identity as something that can be both constructed and challenged through fashioned appearance. Moreover, she uses dress to contest the very means through which the gender binary is culturally inscribed. It is through clothes that Rivera's genderqueer muse can move among multiple modes of gender expression and conventions of desirability. In addition, in some of her works, Rivera uses space itself to further interrogate what clothing means.

Becoming BJ: Mirroring Desirability, Embodying Femininity

As Simone de Beauvoir's famous refrain goes, one is not born a woman but becomes one.⁵ Beauvoir's suggestion—that gender is not biologically fixed but rather produced—is a central theme of Rivera's images. In *Mirror with Jewels*, Rivera captures Lillis in the process of “becoming” (fig. 1). The photograph features his reflection in a golden vanity mirror framed by two unlit bulbs that sit on a nightstand covered with teal fabric and jewels. His neck and shoulders are unclothed, while his hair falls below his collarbone. Lillis, wearing blush and lipstick, is presumably engaged in the private ritual of “getting ready.” There is a soft glamour to his makeup, yet his reserved expression appears detached from this familiar scene. It almost seems as if Lillis does not recognize himself. Maybe he doesn't: the uneven plane of the mirror distorts part of his face, modifying its representation on the surface. Perhaps Rivera is creating a visual metaphor for the distorted ways we see ourselves—and, in turn, are seen by society—through mirrors and the conventions of femininity.

Mirrors play a fundamental role in the beginning stages of one's psychological development, particularly in the process of forging a distinct sense of self. Psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan described what

he called the “mirror stage” as the integral process through which self-recognition in a mirror is a decisive phase of human development. Lacan argued that as one's sense of self develops over time, the ultimate result is an “essentially libidinal relationship with the body image.”⁶ The mirror, therefore, plays an integral role in the process of self-invention, effectively conflating one's sense of self with bodily appearance. Although Lacan's theory was not written to accommodate those who may not completely relate to the bodies they are born into, Rivera has nonetheless cited Lacan's essay as an influence, suggesting that photography can function like a mirror in her work, allowing Lillis to be “seen” in a way often absent from popular media.⁷ Lacan's mirror stage, in other words, can make space for a queer body to achieve recognition and coherence.

Mirror with Jewels reveals how make-up, jewelry, and hair can be used to cultivate—or contest—gender identity. Susan Kaiser argues that individual self-invention is mediated by the artificial dichotomy of masculine “doing” versus feminine “being.” She compares the dress of football players and cheerleaders to show that the masculine mystique centers around “physical effectiveness,” or the ability to achieve through aggressive action, while women's attention to dress reflects that they are “socialized to expect more rewards for their appearance than for their overt actions or accomplishments.”⁸ In her monograph *Beauty Bound*, psychologist Rita Freedman similarly



Fig. 1.
Lissa Rivera. *Mirror with Jewels*, 2015. Archival pigment print, 20 x 30 in. (50.8 x 76.2 cm). Photograph courtesy of the artist and ClampArt, New York.

argues that “beauty transformations are used to help women look more womanly, and, therefore, more acceptable.”⁹ *Mirror with Jewels* visualizes the painful truth that normative femininity can only be achieved by “putting on” an appearance through artificial means. Yet to be gender-fluid is to reject the dichotomy of repeatedly “doing” or “being” one gender or the other. Rivera’s photograph suggests that gender identity, regardless of where one falls on the spectrum, is itself an action. As Lillis reflects on the series *Beautiful Boy*, “This project really freed me to understand that gender is not necessarily this deep-seated, static identity, but that it is actually something that I do. My gender can constantly change and evolve, and it is totally coherent and consistent to explore many different ways of presenting gender.”¹⁰

As Rivera shows in *Mirror with Jewels*, the process of putting on an appearance testifies to the instability of gender identity itself. It is an action that individuals carry out daily, which also means that individuals possess the means to present their gender differently every day. Although popular conventions of “appropriate” gender presentations influence how individuals present, Rivera suggests that there is power in the act of “getting ready” that gives the individual agency to pursue their own desires instead of simply following societal convention. Lillis’s presence as a queer figure in this photograph

draws attention to the daily process women go through to constitute themselves. For Lillis, having the choice to wear jewelry and make-up allows a certain freedom: not compelled to present as a woman or a man, he can move between different modes, treating femininity as a form of “healthy experimentation.”¹¹

Dressing Desire: Envisioning a Queer Language of Beauty

Popular culture is another “mirror” Rivera uses in developing her art. In *Male Impersonator*, she draws on the history of film to reveal how clothes, gender norms, and the language of beauty can change over time in popular culture (fig. 2). *Male Impersonator* is different from many of the other works in *Queering the Muse* because it reverses the mode of embodiment: here Lillis is shown as a woman in the act of “impersonating” a man. The defining feature of this image is Rivera’s direct reference to Marlene Dietrich. In the 1930s, Dietrich rose to fame by garnering acclaim for roles in which she often wore a man’s clothes while maintaining her conventionally feminine beauty. In movies such as *Blue Angel* (1930) and *The Devil Is a Woman* (1935), Dietrich’s gender-bending appearance sustained thematic negotiations with power, desire, and sexuality (fig. 3). As Emma Latham explains elsewhere in this volume, Rivera’s image

Fig. 2.
Lissa Rivera. *Male Impersonator*,
2015. Archival pigment print,
30 x 20 in. (76.2 x 50.8 cm).
Photograph courtesy of the
artist and ClampArt, New York.



draws directly from Dietrich's appearance in these films: Lillis also wears a formal black suit with a crisp white shirt and top hat. And yet, he is clearly—as the title suggests—a male impersonator with exaggerated make-up and long tresses that are tucked up into his hat as visible markers of femininity.

In the realm of clothing, the male suit has been ubiquitous for centuries. And yet, its social significance has shifted over time. It has enjoyed a special significance in delineating and destabilizing gender identity, making it the perfect choice for Rivera in her collaboration with Lillis. In the nineteenth century, Kaiser argues, the suit's dark color scheme and defined form reinforced gender norms: men were serious, strong, and aggressive, while women were frivolous, delicate, and submissive.¹² In the twentieth century, women like Marlene Dietrich who wore suits problematized this delineation by enabling women to claim the suit's social connection to power and agency while at the same time maintaining a degree of glamorous feminine identity. Suits at the time carried a potential social threat: until the 1950s, women could be arrested for this form of male impersonation.¹³ Despite this—or maybe because of it—Marlene Dietrich became an icon of Hollywood glamour, with her “masculinity” being channeled into a new image of the femme fatale.¹⁴ By recalling this version of Dietrich's image, Rivera effectively queers the politics

of desirability by enabling her partner to simultaneously embody masculine and feminine beauty. Rivera repurposes the visual language of gendered signifiers in order to undo it, demonstrating that binary gender is not as fixed as we assumed.¹⁵

Through Dietrich, Rivera further develops her language of queer beauty. What viewers see here is an act of cross-dressing, as Lillis is presented as a woman in a suit that was originally designed to convey masculinity. As social theorist Ciara Cremin states, the act of cross-dressing “re-mystifies and de-familiarizes femininity,” thus revealing the potentially subversive aspect of “male impersonating.”¹⁶ Indeed, Cremin contends that the act of cross-dressing can pose an effective challenge to a system in which masculine dress is deemed powerful and feminine accessories and dress are “signifiers of oppression.”¹⁷ The cross-dressing seen in *Male Impersonator* is both layered and playful. Rivera's muse was born into the body of a man and socialized as one. Yet, in this image, her partner is shown as a woman impersonating a man. It is through these layers of subversive artifice that *Male Impersonator* takes on its meaning: Rivera states that “by presenting my partner within the lineage of great beauties [like Marlene Dietrich], we are reclaiming our voice in what is attractive and beautiful.”¹⁸ In other words, referencing the historical conventions of beauty and desirability is an act of reclamation for Lillis and



Fig. 3.
Eugene Robert Richee, *Marlene Dietrich* (for the film *Morocco*), 1930. Gelatin silver print. Photo: © Copyright of the Estate E.R. Richee/Album/Art Resource, NY.

Rivera, neither of whom subscribe to the limitations of heteronormative experience. However, Rivera's project is not just an individual act of reclamation: she also imagines a future in which the social meaning of clothes can operate independently of the gender binary. This phenomenon is embodied by Lillis, who inhabits multiple modes.

In another example that builds on the theme of queer beauty, *Emerald Living Room I*, Rivera combines dress and other symbols of femininity in a once stylish but now dated 1970s-era room (figs. 4, 5). Lillis appears in a loose-fitting house dress in a setting with a variety of emerald-toned props, supplying a uniform color scheme to the image. Unlike many of the other photographs in *Queering the Muse*, this shot is not tightly focused on Lillis but instead pictures him within a large, open space. In the foreground, Rivera has placed a massive—yet sparsely decorated—glass coffee table that sits under a three-tiered crystal chandelier. Two couches appear on either side of the table, curling inward and receding into the background of the space. Behind the table, Lillis stands motionless with his hands at his sides. His immobile posture and psychologically charged expression convey resentment and perhaps displeasure, though his expression from this distance is hard to read. Lillis is dwarfed in scale as compared to the windows covered in sheer curtains. Light filters unevenly into the room, supplying a painterly quality to the image and rendering the details of the outside space unintelligible.

The stark contrast between Lillis's tensed presence and the opulence of the vast green living room recall a similarly disjointed photograph by Diane Arbus, *Penelope Tree in her Living Room* (1962). Arbus grew up in a wealthy home during the Depression; she found her privileged upbringing humiliating, stating that she felt like a "princess in some loathsome movie."¹⁹ Biographer William Todd Schultz argues that in her photographs Arbus often projects the shame from her upbringing on to her subjects, a point that comes through in *Penelope Tree*.²⁰ In it, thirteen-year-old Penelope Tree dominates the foreground, standing with her arms crossed in a pleated skirt, a sweater, and penny loafers. Tree looks defiant if not outright angry. Like Lillis in *Emerald Living Room I*, Tree's emotional state exists in contrast to the comfort of her surroundings. There are many signs of her wealth on display in the image: an ornate carpet, a crystal chandelier, embroidered couches, porcelain china and crystal cups, a gilded mirror and a bronze candelabra. Like Arbus, Tree grew up with considerable privilege as the daughter of a Winston Churchill confidant and a socialite. The social status that Tree inherited likely eased her transformation into the highly sought-after "it girl" she became in the 1960s. In retrospect, Tree did not look back fondly on her upbringing, recalling that she was virtually ignored by her parents and left to feel sorry for herself in isolation, like a "poor little rich girl."²¹ When asked about the Arbus image, Tree suggested that the photographer was trying to capture



Fig. 4.
Lissa Rivera. *Emerald Living Room I*, 2015. Archival pigment print, 20 x 30 in. (50.8 x 76.2 cm). Photograph courtesy of the artist and ClampArt, New York.

a spoiled rich child “desperate in her native habitat.”²² It is a sentiment that resonates with Rivera’s depiction of Lillis “trapped” in *Emerald Living Room I*.

Rivera sees these limitations in terms of gender as well as class. Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, for instance, a middle-class woman’s virtue depended not only on her dress, but on maintaining an “aesthetically pleasing home interior,” as Kaiser argues.²³ In this way, the domestic space became a realm in which women could visually reinforce their adherence to gender norms. The relationship between feminine desirability and the domestic realm was further cultivated throughout the Cold War, when the ideal of the nuclear family bound women of the Baby Boomer generation to the domestic realm, effectively reinscribing their primary social function as mothers and wives. Popular television programs like *Leave it to Beaver* and *Father Knows Best* further suggested that the ideal woman was one who resided in the family home and simultaneously maintained a manicured appearance of beauty.

In her juxtaposition of desirable domesticity against personal discomfort, Rivera has explicitly cited Arbus as an influence, noting her ability to capture “women who at once had achieved the highest echelon of femininity and domestic opulence, yet at the same time were kind of prisoners to it.”²⁴ What Rivera seems to be saying is that although

these tangible assets may appear glamorous at first, they still trap individuals in a world where they do not determine the terms of desirability for themselves. In *Emerald Living Room I*, it is almost as though Rivera has rendered Lillis to be the adult version of Penelope Tree, as Lillis seems to exist in a similar world of glamorous femininity. And yet, the opulent quality of this image does not dispel the overwhelming sense of isolation at work throughout this photograph. Lillis appears forlorn, almost angry, in a setting without any visual means of escape. In other photographs, Rivera often depicts Lillis in settings with doors, windows, and hallways, suggesting places for movement and mobility. Here, however, Rivera traps her subject in a domestic realm in which the closed blinds separate him from the outside world. Her muse is literally and psychologically trapped by a world inscribed by the conventions of class and gender. Lillis is practically immobilized by femininity that is not only expressed through dress and make-up but also through domestic space. Rivera and Lillis explain that while these photographs might “ask difficult questions” and “incorporate uncomfortable feelings,” that is not all they communicate. Rivera and Lillis also “really love the visual language of femininity in many of its past and present iterations. We want to revel in it and celebrate it. We are attempting to repopulate the media with new images, using the visual techniques of advertising photography to challenge restrictive gender roles or ideas of what is desirable.”²⁵ Through a carefully crafted aesthetic, Rivera, in collaboration with Lillis, creates a



Fig. 5.
1970's Green Time Capsule
House in Ramona, California.
National Association of Realtors.
August 6, 2021. [https://www.
realtor.com/realestateandhomes-
detail/23645-Country-Villa-Rd_
Ramona_CA_92065_M19985-
28677](https://www.realtor.com/realestateandhomes-detail/23645-Country-Villa-Rd_Ramona_CA_92065_M19985-28677).

world where beauty transcends the gender binary. The act of photographing a vision of beauty in expanded terms is driven by more than personal interest, however, at a time when queer individuals are still engaged in a daily battle for visibility, acceptance, and civil rights. The work of Rivera and Lillis has the potential to sustain a meaningful challenge to popular culture and the limited conceptions of “appropriate” gender presentation by undermining dominant media images and offering up possible alternatives.

Dressing for the Future: Envisioning a World of Boundless Beauty and Queer Visibility

Lissa Rivera’s photography makes evident that gender identity can be translated into the visual realm through dress. The role of clothing

as gendered comes through clearly in her work because Rivera’s muse is genderqueer. Throughout *Queering the Muse*, Lillis wears a wide range of costumes, examples of which have been highlighted in this essay. In *Emerald Living Room I*, we see how the meaning of clothing gains momentum through setting as well. The diversity of clothes, accessories, and spaces in the exhibition allows us to see Lillis through multiple experiences, time periods, modes of gendered existence, and forms of aesthetic beauty. Rivera’s images are informed by numerous histories and a vast array of popular-culture references, but they also represent fantasy worlds that are essentially a composite of desires that she shares with Lillis. In developing these works, they create a realm of beauty that allows them both to transcend the limits of the gender binary, and they encourage us to imagine a more fluid world when it comes to gender, too.

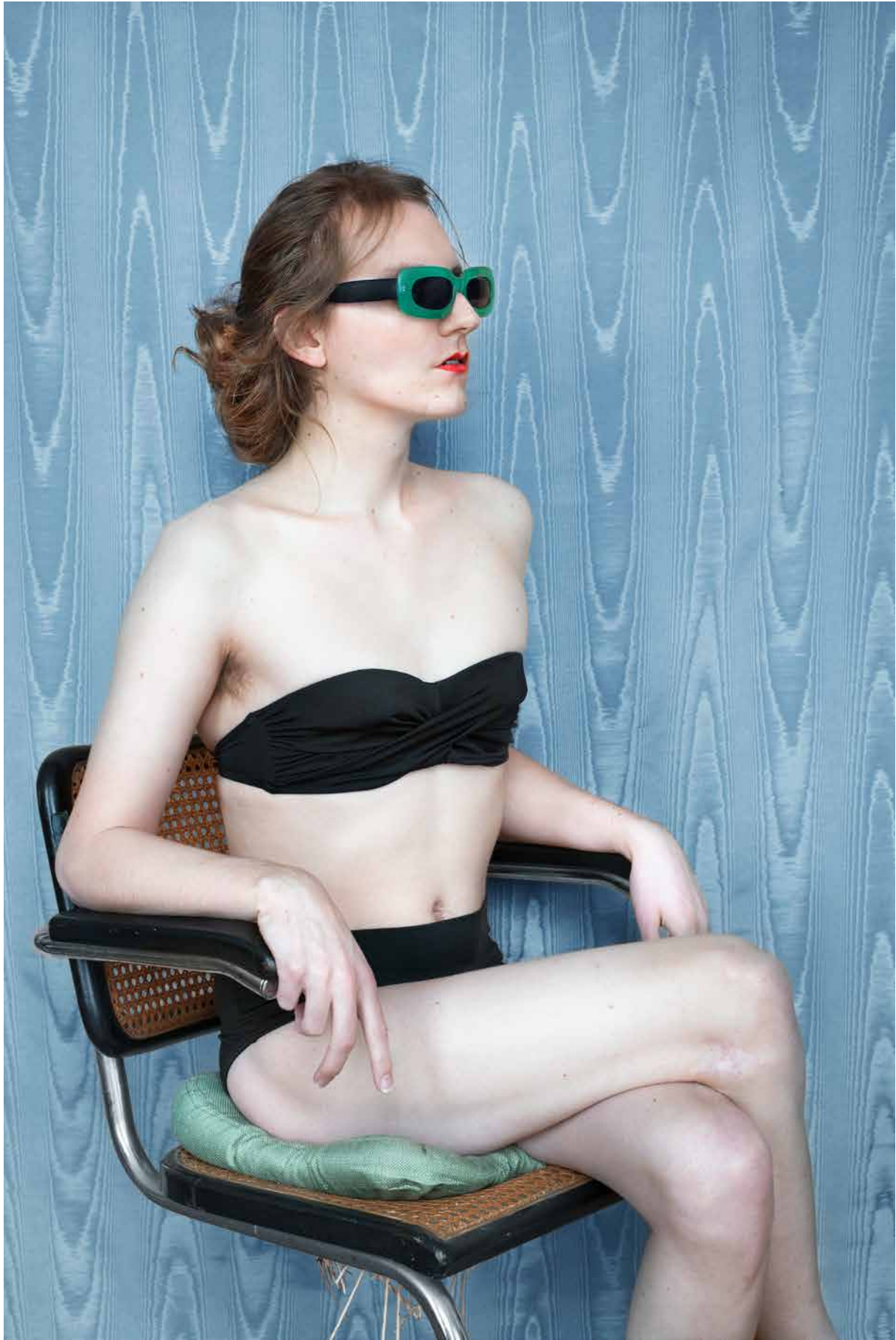
- Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, ed. James Gifford (Victoria, BC: University of Victoria, 2011), 20.
- Susan B Kaiser, preface to *Social Psychology of Clothing: Symbolic Appearances in Context* (New York: Fairchild, 1998), vii.
- Patricia Cunningham, “Understanding Dress and Popular Culture,” in *Dress and Popular Culture*, ed. Cunningham and Susan Voso Lab (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1991), 5.
- Cunningham, “Understanding Dress,” 2.
- Quoted in Judith Butler, “Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir’s *Second Sex*,” *Yale French Studies*, no. 72 (1986): 35.
- Anthony Elliott, *Contemporary Social Theory: An Introduction* (Hoboken, NJ: Routledge, 2014).
- Valeria Giampietro, “Lissa Rivera: Confessions Are Sonnets,” *Metal*, accessed November 27, 2021, <https://metalmagazine.eu/en/post/interview/lissa-rivera-confessions-are-sonnets>.
- Susan B. Kaiser, “Clothing, Appearance, and the Social Construction of Gender,” in *Social Psychology of Clothing*, 89.
- Rita Freedman, “Props and Paint,” in *Beauty Bound* (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1986), 51.
- BJ Lillis in “Lissa Rivera in Conversation with BJ Lillis,” *The Reservoir: Conversations on Photography*, March 2018, <https://thereservoir.net/Lissa-Rivera-in-conversation-with-BJ-Lillis>.
- Lillis in “Lissa Rivera in Conversation.”
- Kaiser, “Clothing, Appearance, and the Social Construction of Gender,” 79.
- Maude Bass-Krueger, “History of the Trouser Suit: How a Once Divisive Fashion Statement Became a Wardrobe Staple,” *Vogue India*, October 2, 2019, <https://www.vogue.in/fashion/content/how-trouser-suits-for-women-became-a-wardrobe-staple-rihanna-julia-roberts-marlene-dietrich>.
- Colin Cremin, “The Aesthetic of Cross-Dressing,” in *Man-Made Woman: The Dialectics of Cross-Dressing*, ed. Jeanne Brady (London: Pluto, 2017), 54.
- “‘Beautiful Boy’ Discusses Gender Through Art at Millbrook Boarding School,” *Art, She Says*, July 10, 2019, <https://artshesays.com/beautiful-boy-discusses-gender-through-art-at-millbrook-boarding-school/>.
- Cremin, “Aesthetics of Cross Dressing,” 54.
- Cremin, “Aesthetics of Cross-Dressing,” 56.
- Quoted in Dan Halm, “Lissa Rivera,” *Visual Arts Journal*, Fall 2018: 27.
- Benjamin Clifford, “Diane Arbus,” Museum of Modern Art, <https://www.moma.org/artists/208>.
- William Todd Schultz, “The Secret,” in *An Emergency in Slow Motion: The Inner Life of Diane Arbus* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 93.
- Schultz, “The Secret,” 93.
- Quoted in Schultz, “The Secret,” 95.
- Kaiser, “Clothing, Appearance, and the Social Construction of Gender,” 80.
- “Lissa Rivera on a Love That Defies All Classification: Story Behind the Still,” *Huck*, March 8, 2018, <https://www.huckmag.com/art-and-culture/photography-2/beautiful-boy-lissa-rivera/>.
- Quoted in Ashley Kauschinger, “Lissa Rivera,” *Don’t Smile*, July 12, 2018, <http://dontsmile.com/articles/lissa-riverabridgingdivision>.

Catalogue

All works by Lissa Rivera

All photographs courtesy of the artist
and ClampArt, New York.

My Swimsuit, from the series
Beautiful Boy: Chapter I, 2015.
Archival pigment print,
30 x 20 in. (76.2 x 50.8 cm) .







White Carpet Odalisque, Family Home, from the series *Beautiful Boy: Chapter I*, 2015. Archival pigment print, 12 x 18 in. (30.48 x 45.72 cm).

Mirror with Jewels, from the series
Beautiful Boy: Chapter I, 2015.
Archival pigment print
20 x 30 in. (50.8 x 76.2 cm).



Venus, from the series *Beautiful Boy*:

Chapter I, 2015.

Archival pigment print.

30 x 20 in. (76.2 x 50.8 cm).



Male Impersonator, from the series
Beautiful Boy: Chapter I, 2015.
Archival pigment print, 30 x 20 in.
(76.2 x 50.8 cm).

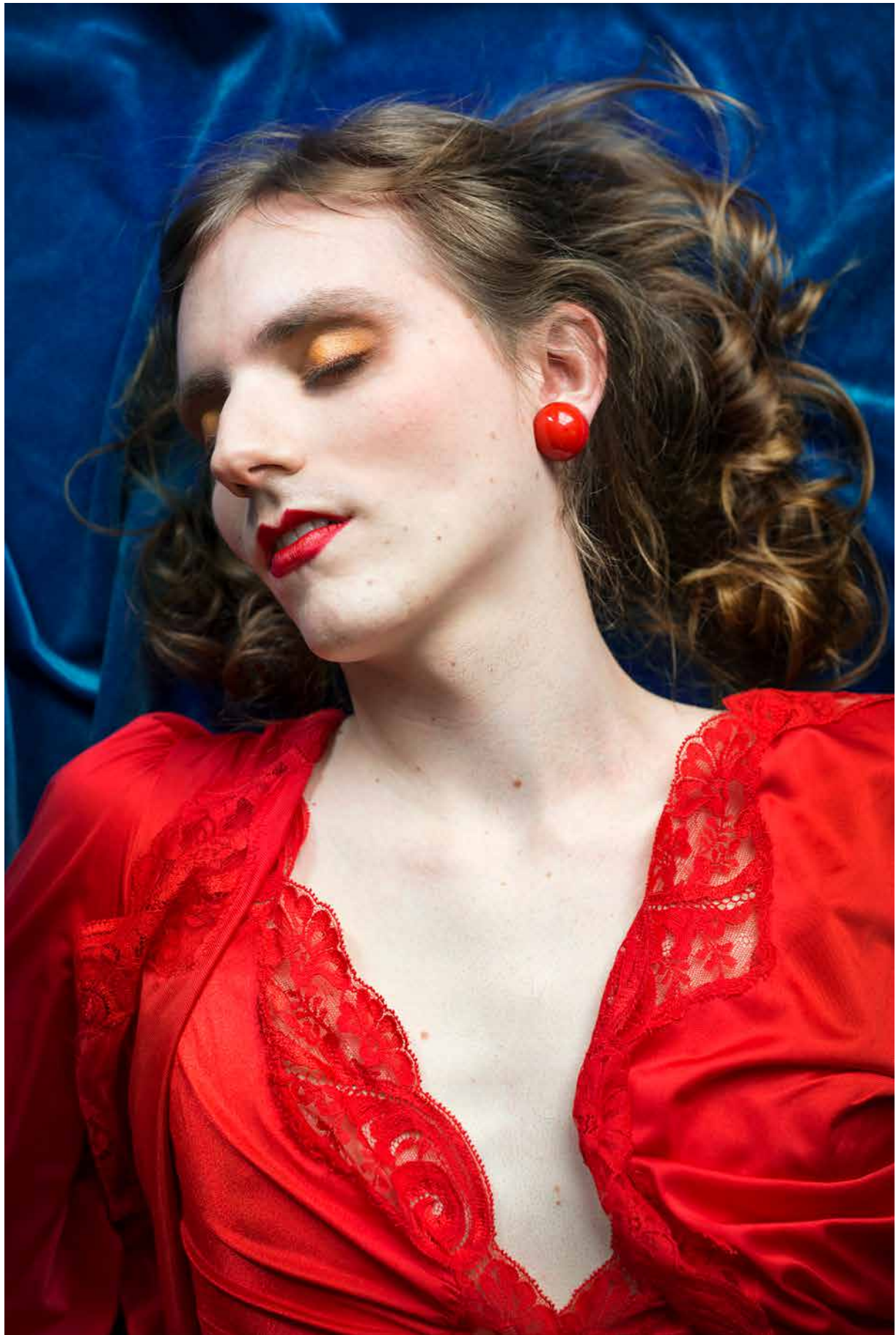


Study in Red and Blue, from the series

Beautiful Boy: Chapter I, 2015.

Archival pigment print, 30 x 20 in.

(76.2 x 50.8 cm).



Study in Red and Yellow, from the series

Beautiful Boy: Chapter I, 2015.

Archival pigment print, 30 x 20 in.

(76.2 x 50.8 cm).



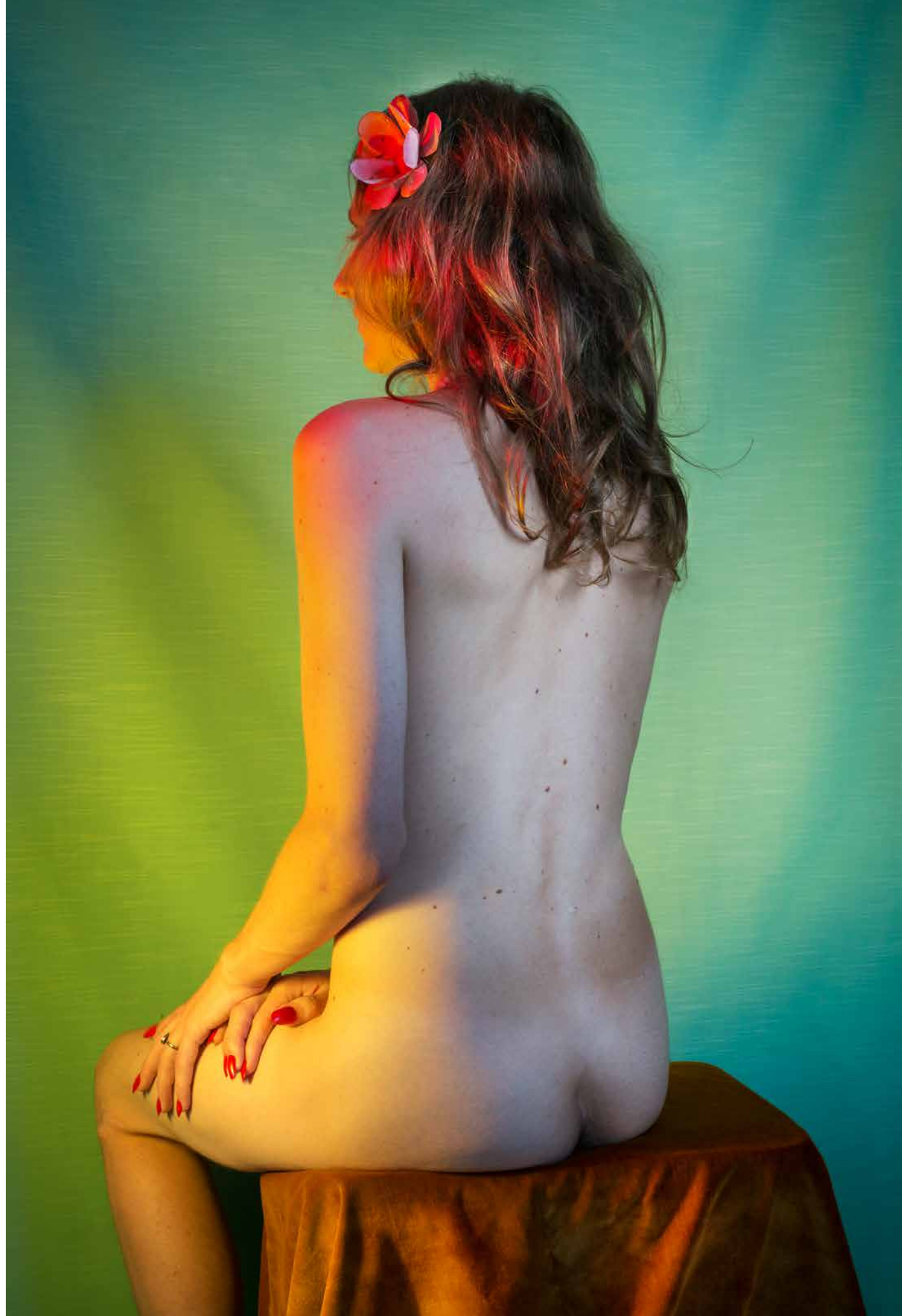
Eggleston Hair, from the series
Beautiful Boy: Chapter I, 2015.
Archival pigment print, 20 x 30 in.
(50.8 x 76.2 cm).



Legs, from the series *Beautiful Boy*:
Chapter I, 2015.
Archival pigment print, 30 x 20 in.
(76.2 x 50.8 cm).



Experiment with Gels, from the series
Beautiful Boy: Chapter I, 2015.
Archival pigment print, 30 x 20 in.
(76.2 x 50.8 cm).







Boudoir, from the series *Beautiful Boy: Chapter I*, 2015. Archival pigment print, 20 x 30 in. (50.8 x 76.2 cm).

Motel, Virginia, from the series
Beautiful Boy: Chapter I, 2015.
Archival pigment print, 20 x 30 in.
(50.8 x 76.2 cm).



Metamorphosis, from the series
Beautiful Boy: Chapter I, 2015.
Archival pigment print, 30 x 20 in.
(76.2 x 50.8 cm).



Portrait with Symbols II, from the
series *Beautiful Boy: Chapter I*, 2015.
Archival pigment print, 30 x 20 in.
(76.2 x 50.8 cm).







Lavender Gown, from the series
Beautiful Boy: Chapter II, 2016.
Archival pigment print, 30 x 45 in.
(76.2 x 114.3 cm).

Blindfold, from the series
Beautiful Boy: Chapter II, 2016.
Archival pigment print,
30 x 45 in. (76.2 x 114.3 cm).







Pink Bedroom (for Priscilla), from the series *Beautiful Boy: Chapter III*, 2017.
Archival pigment print,
30 x 45 in. (76.2 x 114.3 cm).

Blue Room, from the series
Beautiful Boy: Chapter III, 2017.
Archival pigment print, 20 x 30 in.
(50.8 x 76.2 cm).







Green Pignoir, from the series *Beautiful Boy: Chapter III*, 2017. Archival pigment print, 20 x 30 in. (50.8 x 76.2 cm).



Emerald Living Room, from the series
Beautiful Boy: Chapter III, 2017.
Archival pigment print, 30 x 45 in.
(76.2 x 114.3 cm).



Emerald Living Room II, from the
series *Beautiful Boy: Chapter III*, 2017.
Archival pigment print,
20 x 30 in. (50.8 x 76.2 cm).





Golden Lamentation, from the
series *The Silence of Spaces*, 2018.
Archival pigment print,
20 x 30 in. (50.8 x 76.2 cm).



Green Corridor, from the series
The Silence of Spaces, 2017.
Archival pigment print,
20 x 30 in. (50.8 x 76.2 cm).





Transference (Green Classroom), from
the series *The Silence of Spaces*, 2018.
Archival pigment print,
20 x 30 in. (50.8 x 76.2 cm).





Pink Attic, from the series
The Silence of Spaces, 2017.
Archival pigment print,
20 x 30 in. (50.8 x 76.2 cm).





Nude with Poppy, from the series
The Silence of Spaces, 2017.
Archival pigment print,
45 x 30 in. (114.3 x 76.2 cm).



Uniform, from the series
The Silence of Spaces, 2017.
Archival pigment print,
20 x 30 in. (50.8 x 76.2 cm).





Attic Dormitory (Walking), from the series
The Silence of Spaces, 2017.
Archival pigment on paper, 22.5 x 30 in.
(57.1 x 76.2 cm). The Trout Gallery,
Dickinson College, museum purchase
with funds from the Friends of The Trout
Gallery, 2019.5.





Yellow Classroom (Desire), from the series *The Silence of Spaces*, 2017. Archival pigment on paper, 22.5 x 30 in. (57.1 x 76.2 cm). The Trout Gallery, Dickinson College, museum purchase with funds from the Friends of The Trout Gallery, 2019.6.

Acknowledgments

The art history senior seminar at Dickinson provides our majors with a unique opportunity to assume the professional responsibilities of curating an exhibition and publishing an accompanying catalogue. It mirrors the process that takes place in museums across the country as curators select works for an exhibition, research their selections, and write about them through a labor-intensive process of revision; they then decided on how the show should be presented, including the organization, the layout, the use of wall text, and even the color of the walls. What we do at Dickinson is distinguished by the almost impossible timeline: what museums do in a matter of years, we accomplish in the span of a few months, mostly within the narrow window of a fifteen-week semester. The curators deserve special recognition for producing well-researched essays and a thoughtful exhibition design on such short order and for doing so while balancing the many demands on their lives as full-time students.

The success of their efforts, however, ultimately depends on the many contributions of other individuals involved. First and foremost, we want to thank Lissa Rivera and BJ Lillis for their support throughout the process. This is actually the first art history senior-seminar exhibition to focus on the work of a living artist—one who was in fact part of our collaborative team. We are grateful to Lissa and BJ for their graciousness in responding to our questions over email and in meeting with us over Zoom. Lissa also provided high-resolution digital photographs for the catalogue, which itself was a major contribution. We felt lucky to spend a semester looking at her beautiful work, which only became more interesting as we analyzed its many connections to the history of art, film, and popular culture. We are excited to celebrate the exhibition opening with her and BJ and hope they are pleased with the results. We have been fortunate to work with Lissa's gallery, ClampArt, in New York. The Director, Brian Clamp, has been an enthusiastic supporter of

the exhibition from the outset and we appreciate his efforts, along with Associate Director Jackson Siegal, in securing the loans and managing many additional related details. ClampArt made our initial round of research a breeze by linking the considerable press on Rivera to the gallery's website along with other crucial resources. This was a huge help.

We have Phil Unetic of Unetic Design to thank for an elegant and beautiful catalogue. Phil was generous in working with us on the catalogue cover and countless design details. We appreciate his wealth of experience, his thoughtful guidance, and ongoing interest in the project overall. The text benefitted greatly from the expert eyes of our highly skilled copyeditor, Mary Cason, who edited our words into shape. Our work with Phil and Mary was made possible by Phillip Earenfight, Director of the Trout Gallery and Associate Professor of Art History, who also supported our work in countless ways. We particularly appreciate his efforts in the unglamorous task of securing rights and reproductions, and for lending his keen editorial eye to every word of the catalogue. He is the behind-the-scenes manager of many tasks that make the moving parts of this exhibition and catalogue come together. James Bowman, Exhibition Preparator and Gallery Registrar, met with us throughout the semester as our thinking about the show developed. His guidance was invaluable in giving our ideas shape and direction, and we have him to thank for what promises to be a striking exhibition. Heather Flaherty, Curator of Education, will mostly work her magic after opening night. We thank Heather and her team of student assistants in advance for sharing the exhibition with groups from across campus and throughout the community. Finally, we are grateful to Meredith Costopoulos, Jolene Rabena, and Susan Russell in Visitor Services for their thoughtful attention to Trout Gallery guests.

Elizabeth Lee

Associate Professor of Art History

Queering the Muse: Identity and Desire in the Photography of Lissa Rivera

February 11, 2022–April 16, 2022

The Trout Gallery, The Art Museum of Dickinson College

This publication and exhibition were produced in part through the generous support of the Helen Trout Memorial Fund and the Ruth Trout Endowment at Dickinson College.

Published by The Trout Gallery, Dickinson College
Carlisle, Pennsylvania 17013

Copyright © 2022 The Trout Gallery. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without written permission from The Trout Gallery.

Unless otherwise noted, all photographs copyright Lissa Rivera courtesy of ClampArt, New York.

Editor

Phillip Earenfight

Copy editor

Mary Cason, East Trenton, New Jersey

Design

Phillip Unetic: UneticDesign.com, Lawrenceville, New Jersey

Printing

Brilliant Printing, Exton, Pennsylvania

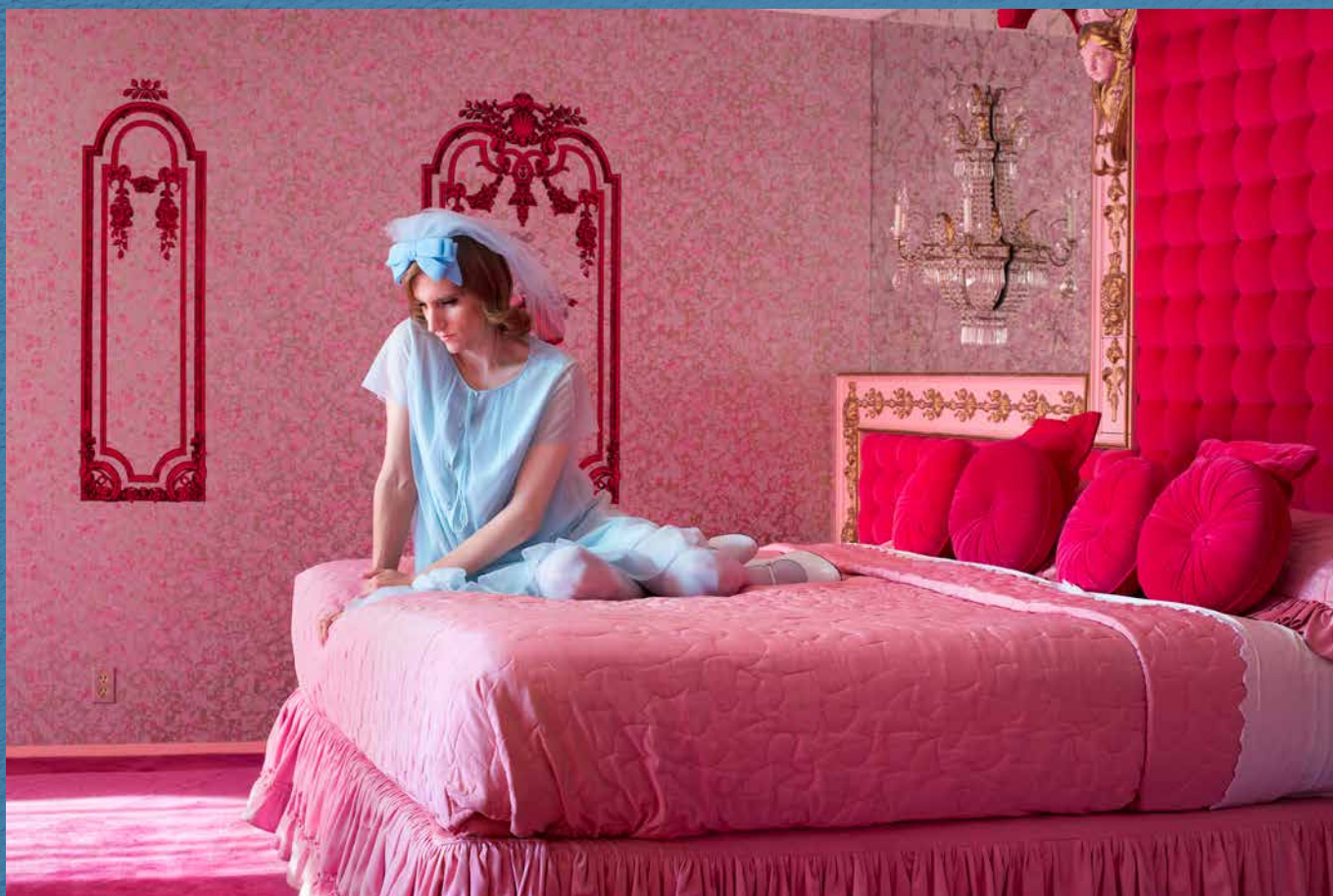
ISBN: 978–1–7366748–2–6

Printed in the United States

Cover: *Lissa Rivera, Nude with Poppy* (detail), 2017. Archival pigment print.
Photograph courtesy of the artist and ClampArt, New York.

Back Cover: *Pink Bedroom (for Priscilla)*, 2017. Archival pigment print.
Photograph courtesy of the artist and ClampArt, New York.

Title page: *Lissa Rivera, Study in Red and Blue*, 2015. Archival pigment print.
Photograph courtesy of the artist and ClampArt, New York.



THE TROUT GALLERY
THE ART MUSEUM OF DICKINSON COLLEGE