Queering the Muse
Identity and Desire in the Photography of Lissa Rivera
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February 11–April 16, 2022

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

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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 compulsively 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 tweed suit, 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 it is totally coherent and consistent to explore many different ways of presenting gender. It really freed me to relax and be myself and do in my own body without worrying about how it all fits 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 learnable behaviors permeated 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 boundaries of masculinity and femininity, the photographs tap into deep-seated narratives about gender, desire, freedom, and cultural taboos.”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 1970s, Marcel Duchamp was photographed by Man Ray in the guise of his famous female alter ego, Rosa Selavy. 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 Blythe 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 Yamasu 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 reveals in the beauty and glamour of that history, creating a powerful body of work in the process.

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4. “Lissa Rivera.”

Introduction: Queering the Muse
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 photography 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 the status of photography as a fine art. 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. Rivera brings this relationship with the mythological deities and creatures of antiquity with a homosocial connection between the effeminate gay man of the nineteenth century and the idealized, beautiful nude models from antiquity. 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 queerness 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 nubile body in the canon 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 the statuaries 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 queerness 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 nubile body in the canon of art.

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 that 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...
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 flow 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. 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 hierarchical 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. Ideas regarding gender variation also applied to sexual identity. 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 youth—but we are often left to our imaginations.

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. 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 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 clothes 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. 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 Morble Statue of Hermaphrodite (first century CE), though it is damaged and only the torso and thighs remain. 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 question, 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 Discobolus 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, Hermaphroditus, 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...
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identity. From the range of photographs in how to reconcile the artist prefers to put viewers in dialogue with themselves. She by virtue of the photograph of 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 photograph of Lillis, like the first view of Hermaphrodite (fig. 4), is viewed 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 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—-who unashamedly shows off his queer body as though it were a Greek or Roman sculpture.

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. 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. 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. In Venus, Lillis embodies the youthful Apollo with his slim figure and long, curly 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—-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. In Antonius or Baccus (170–178 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 avoided, 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 Barton calls “sexy boys.” 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 ANTONIUS OR BACCUS. ALLUROUS BEYOND GENDER ASSOCIATIONS, LILLIS HOLD HIS BODY IN SLIGHT CONTRAPPOSTO AND A CLOSED STANCE (FIG. 9). RATHER THAN THE HEROIC AND ANGULAR MOVEMENT OF GREEK SCULPTURES OF ATHLETES, THE SLIGHT ANGLE OF HIS HIP CREATORS A FLUID SENSE OF MOTION THROUGHOUT THE FORM. LIKE THE “SEXY BOYS,” THE SOFTNESS OF LILLIS’S FORM AND HIS DOWNCAST EYES CREATE A PASSIVE FIGURE. RIVERA’S WORK DEVIRES FROM THESE ANDROGYNOUS STATUES IN THAT THERE IS NO MYTHOLOGICAL SCENE BEING PLAYED OUT, AND HER MUSE IS NOT INTENDED TO BE 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
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; 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 collaboratives 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 valued and revered. 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.

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. 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 closer 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 women was the ability to create freely, while women, who had less mobility and power, were the objects of male attention.


8. To be clear: Greek statues 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 Vertus “transgender.” However, the Western viewer typically associates her exclusively with a female identity, and thus differs from deities like Hermaphroditus.


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 centers 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. 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. 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 nude male 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 its image of beauty and perfection according to the Greeks. Doryphoros, which means “spear bearer,” is a male nude athlete holding a spear. This sculptural work is considered a perfect example of the ideal male body, with a well-proportioned body and muscular arms and legs. The male nude has been valued for its aesthetic qualities, and it has been the subject of many paintings and sculptures throughout history.

The female nude, on the other hand, has been more traditionally associated with themes of sexuality, sensuality, and desire. However, the female body has also been used as a tool to challenge societal norms and to explore themes of power, control, and agency. In the past, women were often depicted as passive objects, and their bodies were used to reinforce patriarchal values. However, in recent years, there has been a growing recognition of the agency and agency of women, and their bodies have been used to challenge traditional gender roles and power dynamics.

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 nude. 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. In this painting, the viewer is invited to the woman and her reflection, creating a sense of intimacy and seduction.

Riversa’s work is a reaction to the traditional representation of the female nude in art history. By using the female body as a subject, Rivera challenges the dominant narratives of beauty and desirability. Her work explores the tension between the public and private, the inner and outer, and the ideal and the real. By depicting the female body in a variety of poses and settings, Rivera invites the viewer to re-examine the traditional male gaze and to consider the power dynamics at play in the representation of the human body.

At the same time, we cannot rely on the history of the male nude in art to explain Lillis’s presence, 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 what we see is different from what we find once we reflect on the conventions of the female nude in art.

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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 what we see is different from what we find once we reflect on the conventions of the female nude in art.

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In Rivera’s works, she explores the theme of gender fluidity and the representation of the body. In Beautiful Boy, she presents a body with some characteristics of both male and female, creating 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.” Sculptures, or “heroic action” as Davis calls it, look unnatural or staged. Even more to the point, photography is a mimetic medium.

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 nude. 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. In this painting, the viewer is invited to the woman and her reflection, creating a sense of intimacy and seduction.

Riversa’s work is a reaction to the traditional representation of the female nude in art history. By using the female body as a subject, Rivera challenges the dominant narratives of beauty and desirability. Her work explores the tension between the public and private, the inner and outer, and the ideal and the real. By depicting the female body in a variety of poses and settings, Rivera invites the viewer to re-examine the traditional male gaze and to consider the power dynamics at play in the representation of the human body.

At the same time, we cannot rely on the history of the male nude in art to explain Lillis’s presence, since what we see is different from what we find once we reflect on the conventions of the female nude in art.

Fig. 1.
Image courtesy of the Estate of Rivera. Oil on canvas, 48 x 49¾ in. (122 x 121.2 cm). National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Gift of the Friends of the National Gallery of Art. 96.7-15.

Fig. 2.
Oil on canvas, 48 x 49¾ in. (122 x 121.2 cm). National Gallery of Art, London. Photo: © National Gallery, London / Art Resource, NY.

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.” Greek men took pride in their bodies because it helped them to win events in contests, a central part of social life. The male 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.
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 Ms. Pankhurst, who is the most beautiful character in modern history.” 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 being. The event showed that this type of art has not featured gender-queer figures before. Therefore, 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, we should remember that this type of art has not featured gender-queer figures before. Therefore, 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.

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, we should remember that this type of art has not featured gender-queer models.

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 arm hair, and his ribs are slightly visible under his skin. His knees bend and turn away, while 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. Additionally, there is a sense of exoticism conveyed by the props in the painting: a feathered hat, 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 Oriental or Eastern aspects and envisioned what a Turkish woman might have looked like. 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. 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...
Ellie Werner


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.

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 talk [to] them that they relate to the work in a deep or personal way, or that it has helped them feel more comfortable with their femininity.” 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.


7. Quoted in Jon Feinstein, “What Does It Mean to Be Confident, Gender-Bending Icon.” 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 Beautiful Boy and, ultimately, the series Beautiful Boy as a collection that challenges gender and sexual identity.

Emma Latham

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

Lissa Rivera

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 B.J. 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.

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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.” 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 to track 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.” 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 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. 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 prepares 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 French woman. 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...
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 persisted at Amy's masculine costume became embraced by her beauty, although it is mostly hidden by her suit, as well as her signature bowler hat. At the end of the song, she received 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 action 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 modesty is often illustrated by a flower that starts as a seed and blooms into something beautiful. Another example of femininity represented by the image 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 kissing her 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 be expected to react to a kiss between two men. In fact, Dietrich stated in an interview, as she often insisted on making her own wardrobe choices, that the androgynous wardrobe she dressed in for the character she played in the movie “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.

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Marlene Dietrich as Influential Gender Icon

Men and women outside this clique, the Sewing Circle women were the most interesting. So why is this worth mentioning? If one thinks back to the beginning of the film, Rivera seems to be doing much the same 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 comfortably situated in the gender roles that have been expected of me, I find that the labels and expectations of gender that society assigns are too rigid. I think in other ways I am 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.”

Path cultivated in stereotyp-ic feminine items, such as jewelry, make-up, 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 experienced, but reversed, since Dietrich was cross-dress-ing as a man in woman’s clothing.

In Male Impersonator, Lillis is shown in a half-length portrait, wearing a skirt and blouse, with a flower in her hair, with the table and chairs on the opposite side. 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. Cap-tioned under a still from this scene, humanities professor Gaylen Studdet writes, “This is a man, a woman, or both? In donning male attire, Dietrich transforms the spectacle of female representation into a ritualized act of out-fitting identity. Her gestures do not soften her masculine costume. In fact, Dietrich, standing in the opposite way, her body is emphasized in a more obvious fashion. This pose, however, is not just a physical display. Rather, Dietrich’s choice of clothing and attire is a way of depicting her androgynous identity. Dietrich’s clothing choices serve to question the traditional roles and expectations of gender.

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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.

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 admiration for the famed Surrealist photographer Man Ray, in particular, and even wrote her college-entrance essay on him. Although her work lacks strong artistic 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 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.”2 As Rivera describes it, “although I am photographing my romantic partner, [the photographs] are often performing projections of my own persona.”3 She acknowledges that in this series she was often “placing all my personal struggles [and] exploration of my own desires onto Lillis, and the project is so deeply collaborative that she projects her own desires onto Lillis, and the project is so deeply collaborative that she 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-choosing by Leonor Fini (1907–1996), two parallels that reinforce the function of Rivera’s works as surrealist self-portraiture.

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Chadwick describes three modes used by women Surrealist artists to self-offer, 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. 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.’” This use of masquerade in Surrealism applied even to the concept of femininity in this photograph through the use of clothing, symbolic images and cultural ‘props,’” there is a conscious enactment of femininity. Working almost a century before Rivera, Cahun also 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’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 “burning of gender distinctions [and] lesbian adventure.”

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.” 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 Ellis Weinman in this volume, which veil the nude body in aesthetic ideals and often emphasize the figure’s femininity.
masquerade and metamorphosis: surrealist influences
Ellery Coleman

Seductive expressions often associated with the female nude in art. Traditional eroticizing male gaze through her androgynous buzzed hair. Allusion to "closeted" homosexuality. Thus, she undermines the reality encased within a wardrobe, perhaps in itself a tongue-in-cheek 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 flirted 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 bisexual and disavowed the term lesbian. 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 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.'" 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 is self-identified with cats and saw them as free beings—free from gender norms and social constructs." Parallel with Fini's costumery—faux, Perspex, 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." We can see this in Spirit of the Rose (2015), in which Lillis is draped in roses with tangled and unkempt hair, with almost unhealthy 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 dishonored but externalized being. Just as Fini viewed each costume as a performance, Rivera notes that Lillis "inhabits each costume" and gives it meaning. The image has a spiritual quality, and there is a sense that Lillis is acting as someone other than herself.

A central theme in Fini's work is metamorphosis and transformation. This is evident from the costumery 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." Costumery, especially combined with photography, allowed her...
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 headpiece 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 Symbol X (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 painting. 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 “motifs for dressing up the image as the opposite of Metamorphosis in that Lillis is fully clothed, but otherwise the idea of feminine performance is still present as is transformation.”22 Chadwick thus understands Fini’s work in terms of “agency and transformation.” As she describes Fini, “The unruly women of the male Surrealist imagination . . . are recreated through women’s eyes as self-possessed and capable of creating new narratives of the self.”23 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.

1. Lissa Rivera in discussion with the author, November 11, 2021.
2. Davis, “Interview.”
3. Lissa Rivera in discussion with the author, November 11, 2021.
4. Davis, “Interview.”
5. Lissa Rivera in discussion with the author, November 11, 2021.
6. Davis, “Interview.”
Photography in Contemporary Gender Identity
Performing Negotiating

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. 9). 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.”

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 of gender binary. American cultural mind-sets associate pink with girls and blue with boys. The juxtaposition of these gender symbols 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 and sexual identity in their photographic process, “to take action in accordance with the requirements of or to function or accomplish something as expected.” 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 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.” 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. 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.” 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...
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 the lens gives a new meaning to the Shakespearean line “all the world’s a stage.”

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* (1988) 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 cagedgendered identities that possess the “appearance of substance.” Butler stresses that the only means to counteract this system is through “subversive performances of various kinds.” 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. 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.

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. 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.

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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 Respis describes this series, it “reads like an encyclopedic roster of female roles inspired by 1950s and 1980s Hollywood, film noir, B movies, and European art-house films.” 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. Respis 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.”

Untitled Film Still #6 is one of the many images in the series that exhibits Sherman’s satirizing of female types (fig. 3). The image parodies a reclining nude — a center spread tamer than something you would see in *Playboy* magazine. The viewer peers at an underdressed 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 spoilt 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. 4). 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 revels in 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 feminity is a performance of types. Lissa Rivera takes up similar tropes but subverts mass-mediated female beauty through a queer 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...
that negates actresses such as Rita Hayward or Brigitte Bardot. Much like in Sherman’s images from Untitled Film Stills, Rivera has Lilis has a familiar image but perform it differently, creating an identity that is beautiful and desirable from Lilis'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 Lilis from an overhead vantage point similar to that in Sherman’s Film Stills #6; but the subject's relationship to the scene has changed. Lilis 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, Lilis 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 standards of feminine beauty. As a result, Rivera challenges and reconstructs repeating 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 Lilis in the position of what she sees as a powerful new feminism. As a result, Rivera challenges and restructures 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 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. In communicating her message, she aims to be direct. Opie’s portrait subjects, herself included, are tattooed, LGBT+–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). 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.”

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.” 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 necessitates what is attractive and beautiful. By re-creating Lilis as a nineteenth-century female nude or a Greek goddess in her work, Rivera intends for Lilis to take on that artistic identity within the context of her photography.

Whereas Rivera is interested in putting Lilis in the place of the great beauties in art, Opie’s references to art history assume a more practical moralistic 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. 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
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 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’ expectations.

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 Question the Muse, the specific works discussed here—Pink Room, 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 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.”23 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.

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 viewer and that resonate with the framework laid out by Judith Butler.24 Despite the differences in their approaches, all three artists are clear that they do not “intend [their and Lillis’s photograph] 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.

5. William Shakespeare. As You Like It (Melbourne: Summer, 2000), 46. The phrase is drawn from a stage monologue by the character Jaques. The quote in its original meaning uses the word stage as a metaphor to refer to the stages in one’s life.
16. It is worth noting that Sherman’s career began in the early 1970s well before Butler’s essay was published, and, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Opie reportedly was unfamiliar with Butler’s works published during the earlier years of her academic career.
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. 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.” As a product of popular culture, those “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.” Clothes, in another 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 (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. 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 bulb lights that sit on a nightstand covered with teal fabric and jewels. His neck and shoulders are unclothed, while his hair falls below his collar-bone. 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.” 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. 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.” 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.
arguments that “beauty transformations are used to help women look more womanly and, therefore, more acceptable.” 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 “dying” 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 act. As Lillis reflects in the series Beautiful Boy, “This project really freed me to understand that gender is not necessarily totally coherent and consistent to explore many different ways of presenting gender.”

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 while at the same time maintaining a degree of glamorous artifice that the suit's social connection to power and agency while at the same time maintaining a degree of glamorous femininity. Suits at the time carried a potential social threat: suits were serious, strong, and aggressive, while women were frivolous, delicate, and submissive. 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 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. In the twentieth century, women like Marlene Dietrich whose suits at the time carried a potential social threat: until the 1930s, women could be arrested for this form of male impersonation. 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 female fatale. By reclaiming the 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.

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 Claire Crenin states, the act of cross-dressing “re-mystifies and de-familiarizes femininity,” thus revealing the potentially subversive aspect of “male impersonating.” Indeed, Crenin 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.” 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.” In other words, referencing the historical conventions of beauty and desirability is an act of reclamation for Lillis and
Rivera, neither of whom subscribe to the limitations of heteronormative experience. However, Rivera’s project is not just an individual act of redefinition; 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, Tree suggested that the photographer was trying to capture "women who at once had achieved the highest echelon 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." Through a carefully crafted aesthetic, Rivera, in collaboration with Lillis, creates a spoiled rich child “desperate in her native habitat." 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. 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 Boom 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 manured 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.” 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 photographs. 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.

Photograph by Diane Arbus, Penelope Tree in her Living Room (1962). Arbus grew up in a wealthy home during the Depression; she maintained a manicured appearance of beauty. Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, for instance, 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 Boom 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:

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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.

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 1, 2015
Archival pigment print
30 x 30 in. (76.2 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 1, 2015. Archival pigment print, 30 x 20 in. (76.2 x 50.8 cm).
Study in Red and Blue, from the series Beautiful Boy. Copper I, 2015. Archival pigment print, 30 x 20 in. (76.2 x 50.8 cm).
Study in Red and White, from the series Beautiful Boy: Chapter I, 2015. Archival pigment print, 30 x 20 in. (76.2 x 50.8 cm).
Eggleston Hall from the series
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
American Gays, Chapter I, 2016.
Archival pigment print, 30 x 20 in.
(76.2 x 50.8 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
Archival pigment print.
30 x 46 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).
Archival pigment print, 20 x 30 in.
(50.8 x 76.2 cm)
Green Pegnoir, 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 II, 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.
30 x 35 in. (76.2 x 88.9 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,
30 x 36 in. (76.2 x 91.4 cm)
Transference (Green Classroom) from the series, The Silence of Spaces, 2018.
Archival pigment print.
30 x 30 in. (76.2 x 76.2 cm).
Pink Attic, from the series The Silence of Spaces, 2017.
Archival pigment print.
30 x 30 in. (76.2 x 76.2 cm).
Nude with Poppy, from the series The Silence of Spaces, 2017.
Archival pigment print.
46 x 36 in. (114.3 x 76.2 cm).
Uniform, from the series
The Silence of Spaces, 2017
Archival pigment print
30 x 36 in. (76.2 x 91.4 cm)
Attic Dormitory (Walking), from the series The Silence of Spaces, 2017.
Archival pigment on paper, 22 5/8 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.
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 decide on how the show should be presented, including the organization, 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 benefited 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 Philip Easonlight, 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

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.