

Toni Latour: Queer as Folk

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1- *The Drag King Project:*
Buster Cherry, S3 Bill, 2005

2- *The Drag King Project:*
Buttah, DKU, 2005

TONI LATOUR

QUEER AS FOLK

By Melissa Lam



AN ONTARIO TRANSPLANT BUT NOW WEST COAST LOCAL, VANCOUVER BASED MEDIA ARTIST TONI LATOUR HAS BEEN A BIG FAN OF COMMUNITY PROJECTS SINCE HER EARLY DAYS IN WESTERN ONTARIO. INFLUENCED BY SUCH IDENTITY ARTIST SPECIALISTS AS BARBARA KRUGER, CINDY SHERMAN AND JENNY HOLZER, LATOUR'S FIRST MAJOR SCOPE PROJECT INVOLVED THE DECEPTIVELY NAMED "ALTERNATIVE LIFESTYLE" CULTURE FEATURING QUEERS SQUARELY IN THE CENTRE RATHER THAN THEIR WELL KNOWN PLACE IN MARGINALIZED SOCIETY. IN RESPONSE TO WHETHER THE WEST COAST BURGEONING CULTURE SCENE FIGURED LARGELY IN INSPIRATION FOR HER WORK, LATOUR WRITES: "VANCOUVER WAS THE PLACE WHERE I SAW MY FIRST DRAG KING SHOW — WHERE I WAS SEDUCED BY THE SEXY SUBVERSION OF DRAG KING PERFORMANCES. THE ONLY IMAGES I SAW OF KINGS IN VANCOUVER WERE PEOPLE'S SNAPSHOTS FROM CLUBS, SO I REALLY WANTED TO PRESENT A PROFESSIONAL BODY OF WORK THAT HIGHLIGHTED HOW AMAZING THEY ARE.

The Drag King Project, a collection of still photography, wall mounted vinyl text and video documented performances, places multiple modeled portraits of women in a variety of poses. These women, however, subvert the male gaze by being simultaneously whimsical and challenging, hands jammed nonchalantly in pockets, arms crossed, or high in the air in jubilation, about to break into a dance move. Far from the Western conception of the male dominated gaze of women as beauty queens, we have beauty kings, or women as emblems of power and fun, yet not taking themselves too seriously. Latour explains more on Vancouver as the locus for her continuing work on queer culture describing it as "dyke friendly" and "a lot safer and very community oriented — really a Mecca for queers." As a prime example of this support, in 2007, Vancouver hosted the international Drag King Extravaganza and Academic Conference, and asked to have Latour's work shown during the event.

Earlier projects deal with these same themes of self-representation, marginalization, and interrogating the central tropes of Western gender roles in society. *Queers on the Move: The Make Friends Project* features Latour and a friend performing a choreographed cheerleader cheer in front of the very conservative audience at the Calgary Stampede. The performance ends with a positive slogan "Make Friends Today!" and an urge to try their free cupcakes decorated with pink icing and the slogan of their cheer. Latour's "Make Friends" project, gently confrontational, forces her audience to acknowledge the presence of the counterculture in their society in a non-threatening and engaging manner.

Latour has continued on with this theme of self-definition and women in multiple forms of representation in her Vancouver work. *You Can Do It!*, her recent 2004 work presented at the Surrey Art Gallery in Vancouver, is a revisiting of a previously self-made motivational video (1999) with

Latour as the main speaker encouraging audiences to boost their spirits and self esteem. The performance work relies as much on audience as it does on speaker, fusing the two in an interactive response to the raising of energy levels in the room. In answer to how moving to the West Coast has affected her work, Latour responds: "For years I've seen Vancouver debate and discuss and accept and welcome drag kings and trans men into the queer community. This is not to say that everything is smooth all of the time, but I truly feel like this is one of the most open and accepting places to be in the country."

Latour is newly represented by Buschlen Mowatt Galleries in Vancouver. □

EXHIBITION

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