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Drag shows meets virtual words in the messy, absorbing ‘Make Me Feel Mighty Real’

BY CAROLINA A. MIRANDA | APRIL 29, 2023 8 AM PT



An installation view of video works, including Jacolby Satterwhite’s “Avenue B,” 2018-19, at right, in “Make Me Feel Mighty Real: Drag/Tech and the Queer Avatar.” (Jeff McLane / Honor Fraser Gallery)

In her 2020 book, “Lurking: How a Person Became a User,” tech culture critic Joanne McNeil examines the rise of the early internet and, as part of that, the significance it had to queer culture — a place where a person questioning their sexuality might find answers or be able to present a truer version of themselves. “Members of the trans community speak of the internet more viscerally,” she writes, “because as a user, with options for anonymity and pseudonymity, it is possible to express an identity more ‘real’ and factual than what the physical world can see yet.”

An exhibition at Honor Fraser Gallery in Culver City looks at the inverse of that proposition, advocating “for a recontextualization of drag as a form of technology itself — applied queer knowledge accumulated, preserved, and reperformed across multiple generations and cultural terrains.” The group show, “Make Me Feel Mighty Real: Drag/Tech and the Queer Avatar,” curated by Jamison Edgar and Scott Ewalt, features work by a multigenerational group of more than 40 artists to examine notions of what the curators describe as “Drag/Tech.”

“Make Me Feel Mighty Real” takes its name from the hit disco-era single by Sylvester, the androgynous crooner with the falsetto voice whose well-known hit serves as an expression of queer love at its most ecstatically danceable. Its works span a variety of media: painting, photography, installation, video, digital animation and assemblage. Like a good drag show, the exhibition is messy and overstuffed, but punctuated with poignancy and wicked bite.

Across Honor Fraser’s gallery spaces, the show tells a story about the ways in which identity — particularly gender — is constructed and wielded, especially in the technological sphere. “Drag is a conscious outward construction representing

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an inner self,” wrote my colleague Christopher Knight in a recent column about why drag inflames the bigots. “It might mean a man in a dress or a woman in a suit and tie. But all those signifiers of gender are ultimately costumes, regardless of who puts them on.”

To go forward, the show looks back. An early room focused on the 20th century features images of well-known performers such as Divine and Candy Darling, as well as L.A. artists Mundo Meza and Jef Huereque decked out in their “Drag Queens From Outer Space” ensembles. And there is plenty of intriguing ephemera, including a magazine called “Female Impersonators” and wigs by the performer known as Perfidia. (This room could have really used some acknowledgment of L.A.’s legendary and influential Cyclona.)

Also displayed is a collection of Andy Warhol prints from his “Ladies and Gentlemen” series, featuring trans women and drag performers. It’s an ambivalent piece, seeing as, until 2014, the figures in the works — which included activist Marsha P. Johnson and performer Wilhelmina Ross — went unnamed, presented more as archetypes than individuals. But the gathered portraits nonetheless serve as a historic honor roll. Supplementing the series is a 1981 image by Christopher Makos of Warhol himself in drag.

More striking is a 1987 portrait of Octavia St. Laurent by Josef Astor. St. Laurent was a trans model, entertainer and activist whose life was chronicled in the 1990 documentary “Paris Is Burning.” The image shows St. Laurent (who went by shifting monikers) perched on a banquette in a yellow bikini, looking the part of glamorous ’80s pinup. In the same gallery, you’ll find the absolutely hilarious and surreal “Tricia’s Wedding,” a 1971 film by Milton Miron that featured the Cockettes spoofing Tricia Nixon’s wedding — presidential nuptials as reimagined by hippie drag queens on acid. (Sylvester, who was part of the Cockettes in those days, makes an appearance.)

As Knight noted in his story: “Patriarchy puts straight men at the top of a social pyramid. Drag queens say, ‘Nope.’” There’s a lot of nope in this show.

As the exhibition moves into the present, you navigate a sequence of darkened galleries featuring a bounty of video and projections — so much that it can be hard to make sense of what’s what. But the overload is part of the fun.

This includes an array of hyperreal works, such as Angela Washko’s feminist interventions into the multiplayer online game “World of Warcraft” and Wesleigh Gates’ absurdist play/performance “A/B Machines,” an online drag play inspired by Warhol’s texts. I found myself inhaling Dynasty Handbag’s “Garbage Castle,” from 2019, a spoof art-comedy about gentrification that is also a tale about the abjection of existing under capitalism — dire topics made funny by Handbag’s comedic muscle and puppet sidekick.

In a final gallery, Antigoni Tsagkaropoulou’s soft vinyl sculptures, evoking oversized, spiked platform boots, serve as appealing signifiers of the tools of drag and drag as tool — pieces that are as tough as they are luscious. At a time in which we all build online personas and inhabit various digital avatars, this is a familiar space — one in which the outward construction of the self takes on additional layers. Is it a true self revealed through artifice? Or a glamorous layer of virtual armor piercing social mores and their attendant hypocrisies? I’d say all of the above.

The bigots won’t know what hit them.

“Make Me Feel Mighty Real: Drag/Tech and the Queer Avatar,” at Honor Fraser Gallery is on view through May 27; honorfraser.com.