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James Bidgood: Reveries and Mariette Pathy Allen: Rites of Passage, 1978–2006

Museum of Sex, New York: March 28–September 8, 2019

In view of this year's fiftieth anniversary of the Stonewall riots, New York City galleries and museums are brimming with contemporary and retrospective exhibitions reflecting on the history of LGBTQ rights and themes of sexual and gender identity, associated cultures, and social action, providing the Museum of Sex stiff companionship [Images 1 and 2].¹

Founded in 2002 by Daniel Gluck, in consultation with social critic Camille Paglia, among others, the Museum of Sex was envisioned to be a sort of "Smithsonian of Sex," and has weathered a number of controversies and rebrandings over the years.² The museum continues to develop its permanent collections and organize exhibitions of artifacts and representations of, or related to, a wide range of sexual and gender cultures. On my first visit since its hiring of the artistic and creative director Serge Becker³ and continuing renovation, I could sense the potent combination of liberationist and pedagogical tendencies as I moved from one exhibition to the next of the four main shows currently on. In passing from floor to floor, one first discovers a small exhibition on stag films titled *STAG: The Illicit Origins of Pornographic Film* (sponsored by Pornhub), then two others sharing the next floor, namely *James Bidgood: Reveries* and *Mariette Pathy Allen: Rites of Passage, 1978–2006*, both curated by Lissa Rivera.⁴

Rivera, a photographer herself, has since 2016 put together nine exhibitions in a continuing relationship with the Museum of Sex that focus on "traditionally underrepresented

1. For example, John Newton's article "A Witness to History: Looking Back at the 50th Anniversary of the Stonewall Uprising in NYC" provides a partial list of related exhibitions in the city. *AFAR*, May 30, 2019, www.afar.com/magazine/a-witness-to-history-looking-back-at-the-50th-anniversary-of-the-stonewall-uprising.

2. In interviews, Gluck tries to distinguish his museum from the Kinsey Institute for Sex Research (Bloomington, Indiana), founded in 1947 by Alfred Kinsey, the famous behavioral biologist turned human sexologist. The Kinsey Institute is a social scientific research institute that houses both an important archive of materials relevant to the study of sexuality and gender and a gallery for exhibitions, far beyond the scope of the Museum of Sex. For details see <https://kinseyinstitute.org>.

3. See "New York's Museum of Sex Appoints Serge Becker as Creative and Artistic Director," *Artforum Online*, June 16, 2017, www.artforum.com/news/new-york-s-museum-of-sex-appoints-serge-becker-as-creative-and-artistic-director-68988; and Alexxa Gotthardt, "The Museum of Sex Recasts Itself as an Edgy Art Space," *Artsy*, June 27, 2017, www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-museum-sex-recasts-edgy-art-space.

4. The fourth main exhibition, *Punk Lust: Raw Provocation 1971–1985*, on selected punk scenes and their use of sexualized language, sprawls over the top floor of the museum. There is also the permanent, immersive *Jump for Joy* (2014), requiring a separate entrance fee, designed by Bompas & Parr, with soundtrack by Dom James—an interactive installation the museum's website refers to as a "bouncy castle of breasts," located in the basement along with the new bar space.



IMAGE 1. *Statues and Slave (Bobby Kendall)* from the film *Pink Narcissus* (1965–71) by James Bidgood; courtesy ClampArt, New York.

voices regardless of formal education or exhibition history.⁵ In 2017, for example, Rivera curated the exhibition *Night Fever: New York Disco 1977–1979; The Bill Bernstein Photographs*; and *Canon: Juan Jose Barboza-Gubo & Andrew Mroczek*, all for the museum. *Reveries* brings together selected work by the gay photographer and filmmaker James Bidgood, while *Rites of Passage* surveys the photography of Mariette Pathy Allen, making evident her longstanding work with and commitment to the transgender and gender non-conforming communities across four decades. From the museum's stairway, visitors encounter first an assortment of Bidgood's spotlit pastel-hued erotic photographs mounted on three white walls, with his film *Pink Narcissus* (1971) looped and filling a significant portion of the farthest wall. Through the subdued doorways at the end, one discovers Pathy Allen's photography, which tenderly captures moments from the everyday lives of transgender people [Images 3 and 4].

5. Lissa Rivera, artist website biographical statement, www.lissarivera.com/about.



IMAGE 2. *Harlem Drag Ball* (1984) by Mariette Pathy Allen; courtesy the Museum of Sex.



IMAGE 3. Installation view of *James Bidgood: Reveries*; courtesy Pixy Liao, Museum of Sex.

Each of the two exhibitions groups selected photographs in different ways on the walls. While *Reveries* retains a fairly linear presentation, *Rites of Passage* combines a linear format with scrapbook-like constellations of photographs. Both make use of display cases to reveal



IMAGE 4. Installation view of *Mariette Pathy Allen: Rites of Passage*; courtesy Pixy Liao, Museum of Sex.

collections of documents on or by the artists as well as magazines, newspaper clippings, letters, and other ephemera, and refer to the respective (pre-internet) print cultures that served to support the work. In his 2002 article “Publics and Counterpublics,” queer theorist Michael Warner argues that poetic world-making is implicitly a part of any public discourse, writing:

There is no speech or performance addressed to a public that does not try to specify in advance, in countless highly condensed ways, the lifeworld of its circulation. This is accomplished not only through discursive claims, of the kind that can be said to be oriented to understanding, but also at the level of pragmatics, through the effects of speech genres, idioms, stylistic markers, address, temporality, *mise-en-scène*, citational field, interlocutory protocols, lexicon, and so on. Its circulatory fate is the realization of that world.⁶

Doubtless this applies to both photographers’ work and publications here, as their work entered into public circulation via print culture or film in anticipation of opening up new lifeworlds of possibility. Bidgood’s work received sudden renewed attention upon publication of Bruce Benderson’s monograph *James Bidgood* in 1999, followed by Wolfgang Hastert’s short television documentary *Queer Reveries* in 2000.⁸ While the film was regularly screened in film studies classes and art cinemas, little was known about the filmmaker.

6. Michael Warner, “Publics and Counterpublics,” *Public Culture* 14, no. 1, 2002: 82.

7. Sean Fredric Edgecomb, “Camping out with James Bidgood: The Auteur of Pink Narcissus Tells All,” *Bright Lights Film Journal Online*, May 1, 2006, <https://brightlightsfilm.com/camping-james-bidgood-auteur-pink-narcissus-tells>.

8. Bruce Benderson, *James Bidgood* (Cologne, Germany: Taschen, 1999), and Wolfgang Hastert, director, *Queer Reveries*. Television documentary, ZDF, 2000.



IMAGE 5. James Bidgood as Terry Howe mixing with customers at Club 82, New York City, 1950s; photographer unknown; courtesy ClampArt, New York.

Bidgood arrived in New York City in 1951 fresh from his home state of Wisconsin. He took courses in fashion at Parsons School of Design and worked as a drag performer and lighting designer at the famous nightclub Club 82 on East 4th Street to pay the rent.⁹ More committed drag queens hired him to design or tailor their outfits. His expertise in design and visual culture led him to window display design, costume and fashion design, photography, and eventually filmmaking [Image 5].

Bidgood began working on his film *Pink Narcissus* (1971) in 1964, but as the years passed his producers grew impatient with him and took over the film, edited it, and added a soundtrack without consulting him. He demanded that his name be removed before it was released publicly, and so all the myths around the “anonymous” filmmaker came into being. He insists that there should not have been any mystery around what was an open secret, but in the end the myths were exploited for publicity purposes by the producers. The film serves as a *summa* of the work that he had been doing for mail-order physique magazines, including *Young Physique* and *Muscleboy*—a confluence of heightened camp aesthetics and artifice applied to the athletic male body: Maria Montez meets beefcake.¹⁰ Bidgood wanted to innovate the physique photographic genre that clung to its predictable grins, loincloths, poses,

9. Underground mafia-run drag and music nightclub Club 82 was located in the basement at 82 East 4th Street in the 1950s and '60s, with such celebrity sightings as Elizabeth Taylor and Errol Flynn; in the 1970s, the club gained cachet among members of the avant-garde punk and glam rock scenes, including Deborah Harry, the Stilettos, and even the Rolling Stones. By 1992 it had become the site of the Bijou Cinema, known as a site for men cruising men.

10. Thomas Waugh draws the link between Bidgood's film and physique films in his book on pre-Stonewall gay erotic images, *Hard to Imagine: Gay Male Eroticism in Photography and Film from Their Beginnings to Stonewall* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).



IMAGE 6. Cover of *Muscleboy* (1965); courtesy ClampArt, New York.

and uninspired backgrounds. He brought his appreciation for Hollywood musicals, fashion, and camp sensibility to bear in his photography and film. In the end, he designed all the sets and costumes for the scenes, almost all of which were built and shot in his small apartment [Images 6 and 7].

In a formal sense, the film is composed of a loose sequence of tableau fantasies as the pretty young sex worker, played by Bobby Kendall, daydreams in his bed. The film has a scene of tearoom trade reminiscent of moments in Kenneth Anger's *Fireworks* (1947) or even at times Jean Genet's (with Jean Cocteau) *Un chant d'amour* (1950), with Bidgood using urinals he constructed out of styrofoam.

In 1971, at the time of the release of the film, critic Vincent Canby wrote in the *New York Times*, uncharitably, "*Pink Narcissus* is a fragile antique, a passive, tackily decorated surreal fantasy out of that pre-Gay-Activist era when homosexuals hid in closets and read novels about sensitive young men who committed suicide because they could not go on."¹¹ Later

11. Vincent Canby, "Screen: 'Pink Narcissus': Movie at 2 Theaters Is Story of Homosexual," *New York Times*, May 25, 1971, 44.



IMAGE 7. *Bobby Kendall Seated in Chair Holding Phone* from the film *Pink Narcissus* (1965–71) by James Bidgood; courtesy ClampArt, New York.

in the short review, Canby champions George and Mike Kuchar’s use of camp over Bidgood’s, but the two approaches are so different the comparison makes little sense. To give some context, however, when *Pink Narcissus* hit screens in New York City in 1971, the Stonewall riots had taken place two years earlier, and porno chic was trending¹²; among others, Wakefield Poole’s hardcore gay feature-length narrative *Boys in the Sand* (1971), shot on Fire Island, was released. Moreover, with so much radical underground cinema such as Jack Smith’s *Flaming Creatures* (1963), Anger’s *Scorpio Rising* (1963), and the films of the Kuchars preceding it, and post-Stonewall attitudes and expectations in the air, the film was not fully appreciated at the time.

Today any art-savvy viewer would immediately recognize and situate Bidgood’s work and camp sensibility in a lineage that would include the likes of the contemporary French duo Pierre et Gilles,¹³ American David LaChapelle,¹⁴ and arguably some of the campy tendencies of the Pop artists.

The pastel hues and lurid glances captured in Bidgood’s work distinguish it clearly from the adjoining exhibition, *Mariette Pathy Allen: Rites of Passage, 1978–2006*, with its subdued walls and distinct emphasis on portrait and documentary photography [Images 8 and 9].

12. For more on the “porno chic” moment in film history see Elena Gorfinkel, “Wet Dreams: Erotic Film Festivals of the Early 1970s and the Utopian Sexual Public Sphere,” *Framework* 47, no. 2 (Fall 2006), 59–86.

13. See especially their video for Lamur’s song “Tu es foutu” (2002).

14. See his photograph *Rape of Africa* (2009), a parody of Sandro Botticelli’s painting *Venus and Mars* (c. 1485).



IMAGE 8. *Pajama Party at Fantasia Fair* (1985) by Mariette Pathy Allen; courtesy the Museum of Sex.



IMAGE 9. *Carrie being made up for a drag ball in Harlem* (1984) by Mariette Pathy Allen; courtesy the Museum of Sex.

Pathy Allen studied art history at Vassar College and then enrolled at the University of Pennsylvania where she completed her MFA in painting. It was her chance photography class with the photographer Harold Feinstein that opened her to the vast possibilities of the medium. While Pathy Allen is not transgender herself, she has contributed to the community as an ally and activist through her photographic projects.¹⁵ Her expertise in photography and sense of compassion have foregrounded her long commitment to documenting the lives of members of transgender and gender-nonconforming communities, since first befriending cross-dressers in New Orleans during Mardi Gras in 1978.¹⁶ Transgender activist, multimedia artist, and television producer Zackary Drucker has become a strong advocate for Pathy Allen's work over the past decade, participating in public conversations together and including her work in publications on trans representation. Drucker writes, "For me, as a millennial trans person who didn't experience the '70s and '80s, Mariette is crucial to helping me locate my own history."¹⁷ In a sense, Pathy Allen is a pioneer in working with transgender and gender-nonconforming communities as a professional photographer in order to both document facets of the communities in collaboration with members, share the images in fostering community, and increase visibility outside the groups. She recounts in an interview how

gender-variant people were often depicted as freaks, evil, dangerous, or crazy people. They were usually photographed alone, always the "other," and never as lovable people. A lot of media coverage focused on shock value. They also enjoyed outing gender non-conformists. I always wanted to show them in the daylight, in everyday life, to make them feel relatable.¹⁸

Rites of Passage, 1978–2006 takes a longitudinal survey of this cis-woman artist's approach to documenting the lives of gender variant people, a photography whose aesthetic and poetic commitments lie far from Bidgood's extreme artifice and gay male eroticism. More specifically, *Rites of Passage* takes into account the importance of print culture in its selection of Pathy Allen's work across the four decades, before the current dominance of digital communication, when ephemeral newsletters and magazines served as essential media for social networks, and safe spaces in public were rare. Similar to the mail-order physique magazines, such newsletters and publications circulated among and contributed to constituting publics and even counterpublics, as Warner would call them. According to the exhibition notes, "Pathy Allen's archive consists of over 5,000 records of her process before the advent of digital photography, including darkroom work, prints, photographs, type-written notes, DIY event programs and handwritten correspondence." Duke University is archiving her collections.

15. For contemporary photography on transgender and gender-nonconforming issues, see Zackary Drucker, guest editor, *Aperture* 229: "Future Gender" special issue (Winter 2017). Photographers include not only Pathy Allen, but also Kike Arnal, Josue Azor, Jess T. Dugan, Juliana Huxtable, Amos Mac, and Nelson Morales.

16. Molly Petrilla, "Beyond the Binary," *Pennsylvania Gazette*, Feb 21, 2019, <http://thepenngazette.com/beyond-the-binary>.

17. Petrilla, "Beyond the Binary."

18. Katie Booth, "Trans Lives Illuminated," *Aperture*, December 15, 2017, <https://aperture.org/blog/mariette-pathy-allen>. See also Paulette Beete, "Art Talk with Mariette Pathy Allen," *Art Works Blog*, July 9, 2014, www.arts.gov/art-works/2014/art-talk-mariette-pathy-allen.

The exhibition space has three basic elements: the display cases in the middle of the room containing various print ephemera, groupings of photographs on the walls, and a projection of slides on one wall. The horizontal line of portraits on another wall guides the viewer into the exhibition, which leads to the display case containing newspaper clippings on challenges to her NEA funding at the height of the Culture Wars of the 1980s, letters of support to the photographer from community members, and posters for her exhibitions and talks, among other items. The nonlinear collections of photographs from the everyday lives of transgender people imitate a large scrapbook, each of them pinned to the wall and left to the viewer to bring into relation to the other photographs in the vicinity. The silent slide show of selected photographs from Pathy Allen's career add a temporal rhythm of light and color to the space. As a whole, the exhibition provides an excellent introduction to the photographer's work, attending to its historical depth, personal intimacy, community commitment, and formal variety.

Impressively, Pathy Allen has published five books of photography and interviews, each dedicated to transgender and gender-nonconforming subjects. Her first book, *Transformations: Crossdressers and Those Who Love Them* (1989),

was received with joy and relief by the "community." This was the book that [the gender-variant community] had been looking for when they were growing up. *Transformations* was the book that many people used to tell their family and friends who they were. I've been told that it saved marriages, and saved lives. At that time, however, the art community wasn't all that impressed, but gender non-conforming people were ecstatic over it.¹⁹

Pathy Allen's collaboration with the community of cross-dressers led to an important publication with transformative influence. Regarding her "fantasy shoots," Pathy Allen elaborated in an interview on her relationship to her subjects:

Many cross-dressers were involved in very typically masculine work: police officers, truck drivers, or in the military, for example. When somebody would pose, it would be like standing there for a passport picture, totally symmetrical. I would try to help them figure out what kind of woman they wanted to be, and encourage them to act as that person. It was a combination of trying to get more at the essence of a person. You can see in the pictures in *Aperture*: they don't all look happy, but I think they do look true to themselves.²⁰

Pathy Allen's second book, *The Gender Frontier* (2003), is a collection of photographs, interviews, and essays on transgender activism in the United States and won a 2004 Lambda Award. More recently, Pathy Allen published *TransCuba* (2014) and *Transcendents: Spirit Mediums in Burma and Thailand* (2017), following her interest in transgender and gender-nonconforming people to an international level. According to the photographer,

19. Booth, "Trans Lives Illuminated." See also Mariette Pathy Allen, "Connecting Body and Mind: How Transgender People Changed Their Self-Image," *Women & Performance: Journal of Feminist Theory* 20, no. 3 (November 2010): 267–83.

20. Booth, "Trans Lives Illuminated." Pathy Allen's own historical survey is available at "Momentum: A Photo Essay of the Transgender Community in the United States Over 30 Years, 1978–2007," *Sexuality Research & Social Policy* 4, no. 4 (December 2007): 92–105.



IMAGE 10. *Steve Dain, formerly Doris, at home* (1984) by Mariette Pathy Allen; courtesy the Museum of Sex.

interest in her work in the United States waned as digital communication displaced analog, enabling more widespread photography across the communities, and this is what motivated her to take on the more recent international projects [Image 10].

Neither Bidgood's photographs and film nor Pathy Allen's photography were widely embraced early in the artists' careers. If Benderson's 1999 book ignited some delayed recognition for Bidgood, it seems that the time is ripe now for Pathy Allen's turn. Rivera courageously brought together two remarkably different artists, who both strive in their own way to create work that imagines new worlds of desire and everyday lives. ■

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