



A participant walks the runway during a house ball in Harlem in 1984 in a photo taken by Mariette Pathy Allen (below), part of her new show focusing on that community at Clamp Art Gallery in Chelsea.

Her pioneering LGBTQ photos

New exhibit offers behind-the-scenes look at a house ball in 1984 Harlem

BY MURI ASSUNÇÃO
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She has been *working* it for years.

Decades before shows like “RuPaul’s Drag Race” and “Pose” brought New York City’s house ballroom culture into the mainstream, photographer Mariette Pathy Allen was already documenting the lives of those engaging in the underground LGBTQ subculture of the early ‘80s.

Allen, who’s also a noted essayist and lecturer on gender non-conformity, began photographing the transgender and nonbinary community more than 40 years ago. Her new exhibit, “House Ball, Harlem, 1984,” which opened this week at a Manhattan gallery, offers an intimate view of what went on behind the scenes of a typical house ball in the Black and Latino queer community during that era in the city.

“There was nobody out there” documenting trans people then, she told the Daily News. “I realized I had found something that I really could do myself that I could

make a change in people’s lives?”

The show at ClampArt in Chelsea is Allen’s second with the gallery, and runs through July 16. It features a behind-the-scenes look at a ball, where attendees — or “children” as they were called — from different “houses” take on different personas as they vogue, slay the runway and compete for prizes, trophies and glory.

Drag balls, some iterations of which can be traced to the post-Civil War era, have for long worked as a refuge for members of the LGBTQ community who often felt ostracized. House balls — which first gained popularity in Harlem and the Bronx in the early ‘70s — center around participants coming together to celebrate their “chosen family,” by competing for high scores from a panel of judges.

These houses became more like families to them, led by house “mothers” or house “fathers” to guide. Some of the categories in which the “children” competed featured names like Face, Femme Queen Realness and Runway.

Allen, who was already involved with the transgender and



gender-nonconforming community at the time, said that she was invited to photograph the 1984 event that is the subject of the new exhibit through her late husband, Ken Allen, who knew somebody who was connected to the ball.

“They invited me to come to the ball and take pictures,” she told The News. “I was very lucky I got to do that.”

The artist, who declined to reveal her age, began as a painter and only became a photographer

after she graduated from the University of Pennsylvania in the late ‘60s.

In 1978, she went to New Orleans for Mardi Gras with her husband and they stayed in the same hotel as a group of cross-dressers who were there for the parade.

There, she became friends with someone named Vicky West. “She was a crossdresser,” Allen said, alternating both he and she pronouns.

“As a man, he was very

successful,” Allen said of West, who identified as bisexual. “He was a book designer, working for a very famous company called Abrams Books ... And as Vicki, she designed all kinds of things for drag magazines and other things related to transgender [people]. So this is a person who functioned as an artist both ways.”

West, who also lived in New York City, ended up taking Allen “everywhere she went,” and eventually to a conference in Provincetown, Mass., called Fantasia Fair, which has been called the longest-running transgender event in the world.

After that, Allen started going to conferences all over the country and speaking on radio and television. Now, for the last 40 years, the mother of two and grandmother of three — who’s also published four books on trans people in the U.S., Cuba, Myanmar and Thailand — has used her art to highlight the experiences and amplify the voices of members of the trans community.

“They knew I was on their side,” Allen said.

MARIETTE PATHY ALLEN, CLAMPART, NEW YORK; SHAWN INGLIMA/FOR NEW YORK DAILY NEWS