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“CLAYTON PATTERSON: PYRAMID PORTRAITS”

JUNE 3 – JULY 15, 2010

AN INTERVIEW WITH CLAYTON PATTERSON

Tod Lippy: What led you to the Pyramid Club during the mid-'80s?

Clayton Patterson: Basically, with all of my documentation, I've usually found a subject because of introductions. What led me to the Pyramid was that I was taking all of these photographs outside of my front door on Essex Street, and this guy named Peter Kwaloff (who is now called Sun PK) would come around the corner all of the time, and he was open and friendly and accessible. So I photographed him a few times and after a while he said, “You know, I do drag at the Pyramid on Sundays. You should photograph me getting ready sometime.” And I thought, “Wow, that sounds interesting.” So that pulled me into the Pyramid and the “Whispers” drag scene there on Sunday nights—it was all very natural.

Photographing Peter brought me into the dressing room, which is where nearly all of these portraits were shot. There was a hole in the wall in there that was about a foot deep. One day I cleaned it out and built a frame around it. I did a little embroidery thing with poodles. The people I photographed always wanted to see the prints, and I figured this would be a good forum to show them in. I would change it every week or so.

How long did you continue with this?

I went really steadily for at least a couple of years in the mid-80s. What happened was the police riots came along and turned me in an entirely different direction.

In interviews, you've said you were drawn to New York because you always felt like an outsider, and New York seemed like a place where you could fit in.

Yeah, I've been involved with all kinds of outsider art forms—like tattoos, for instance. And the drag queens certainly fit into that. Their art is about painting—face painting—but more than that, it's about creating a character. These people were heavily creative. Ultra-creative. They were sort of the “last of the fags,” which is interesting to me. I don't know if it started with *The Boys in the Band* or whatever, but there was a point where gayness began to be questioned, and people starting taking the part of gay culture that was on the edges and moving it toward the middle. There was a loss of that really effeminate behavior—which was maybe exaggerated in the first place as a defense mechanism—but you lost the Taylor Meads and Quentin Crisps. It's just something that I've noticed.

Can you describe the scene at the Pyramid Club in those years?

You just had this kind of spontaneous, unraveling creativity every weekend. The club was like a crystallization of the Lower East Side. Unlike SoHo, which was more of a careerist place for artists, the Lower East Side was an expressionist place, where it was more about just being an artist than being famous or rich. Also, in that period, it was one of the most racially integrated neighborhoods in the world: It had Chinese, Indians, Bangladeshis, Blacks, Hispanics, Jews, as well as lifestyle diversity—the Hell's Angels, skinheads, drag queens, religious zealots. And at the Pyramid Club, security would be people from the hardcore scene, which is supposedly very anti-gay, but all of these stereotypes didn't apply there. It was like a free zone. So it had that crazy mixture.

I can't get over how incredibly inventive all of the different looks are in these portraits.

The amazing thing about the Pyramid Club was that up to that point, drag had been about referencing movie stars like Bette Davis or Judy Garland, but the queens at the Pyramid invented entirely fictitious characters. You had people like Alan Mace, who always did these kind of space-age, Kenny Scharf-ish kinds of characters, and Maze, who did more goth-punk stuff, and then you had the Hapi Phaces and the Tabboos and people like that

who just spontaneously created characters—every week a new one. Especially Sun PK (née Peter Kwaloff), who lived about Bella's Fabrics on Stanton Street. You could buy fabric there for as little as a dollar a yard. Or if you wanted something really exotic you could go to Diamond Fabrics, which was on 2nd Avenue and 12th Street. And then you had the shoe stores on 14th Street: where else could you find a man-sized 12 stiletto-heel shoe? And cheap wigs on 14th Street and Delancey Street. There were a bunch of these outlets.

This all coincided with Kembra Pfahler, from *The Voluptuous Horror of Karen Black*, talking about "Availabilism," which was essentially the practice of making something out of whatever you had access to. I come from Western Canada, and I will never forget as a kid going to one of my aunt's houses to ride on "the train," which was just a bunch of stools that were set up in her kitchen. You use your imagination to create something that you don't—or can't—have.

What used to happen a lot in New York was that if people were moving, or if they had a son who had died or something, they would take their clothes and clean them and wash them and put them out in the garbage can, and people would come along and take them. Plus, you had a very thriving second-hand store scene—like Cyndi Lauper in "Girls Just Want to Have Fun," which was all about dressing up from the next-to-new shops. The idea was to make these costumes as elaborate as possible and as creative as possible but as cheaply as possible. For instance, in one of the portraits of Cathleen, that little piece of jewelry she's wearing? That's a broken piece of a car window shield that's been fractured into a thousand pieces, but it looks fabulous as a piece of jewelry. Or you'll look more carefully at the scarves in other portraits and notice that their edges are pretty tattered, and you realize, "My god, these things were made for nothing."

It's interesting that you mention childhood, because one of the most striking things about these portraits is this very palpable sense of joy inherent in them—although the personas are incredibly creative and original, there's an element of "playing dress-up" to them that's completely endearing. Everyone seems to be having a blast.

I think that's due to a couple of things. I really used to love Diane Arbus's artwork, and then I discovered that she had grown up in this wealthy Upper East Side environment, and I realized that her photographs, like those in Richard Avedon's "American West" series, are essentially caricatures. The people in that Avedon series are looking at him like, "Why are you photographing me?" And that's what I realized about Diane Arbus: She was looking at her subjects as freaks, as alienated people. She was looking at them as a way almost to redeem herself. You know what I'm saying?

I don't see any of my subjects as victims or as caricatures. In my universe they're superstars, because I'm dealing with them on a level that's about pure creativity. The sexual aspect doesn't matter; how much money you have doesn't matter—the moment is what matters. I always saw what they were doing as joyous and creative and imaginative. To be honest, I think of them as me in a way—there is this sense of identification I have with them. When you're dealing with kids who deal drugs on the street you're dealing with one form of outsider, or drag queens, another form of outsider—because of my background I have always been an outsider.

The other thing about this is that when one is trying to be a painter you have an ideal picture in your mind of what you want to create. But with these drag queens, there's something more total about their art. You have a character, you have a look, you have a newly created image and story—there's a wholeness to it. Once you have that whole character down, there's like a truth attached to it: It's a form of perfection.

Once you're in New York City long enough you realize everything comes in waves, and eventually the wave hits the beach and once it does, there's only that one line in the sand where the water was. And that's what happened with the Pyramid Club. For a while, that Pyramid look was the look, and then out of that came people like RuPaul, who ended up becoming the commercial product: quaffed, designed, overly made-up. Everything was worked and worked and worked until you had the perfect product. But there is also a boring side to the perfect product, because now it's strictly about business and repetition. You're trading off the creativity for the money.

(This interview was conducted in New York City on February 10, 2010)

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