RADICAL TENDERNESS
TRANS FOR TRANS PORTRAITURE
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THE ALICE AUSTEN HOUSE PRESENTS

RADICAL TENDERNESS
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GUEST-CURATED IN PARTNERSHIP WITH DR. ELIZA STEINBOCK
PHOTOGRAPHING SOMEBODY IS AN EXCUSE TO FALL IN LOVE WITH THEM.

ZACKARY DRUCKER
Opening on the annual International Day of Transgender Visibility on March 31, Radical Tenderness: Trans for Trans Portraiture highlights photographic work from four trans and non-binary artists whose portrait photography exudes tender intimacy and calls for a radical shift in visibility politics.

The presented images turn away from thinking of visibility in terms of commercial representation made for others to gaze at. The photographs portray muses, friends, icons, and self on aesthetic terms that say this one is “for us.” Consider the different resonances of the portrayed having their eyes closed or averted. Feel the atmosphere of a bedroom, a dressing room, a private moment in a park.

This group show is in honor of the Alice Austen legacy of creating meaningful photographs with friends that both create opportunities to bond and leave a trace of one’s affection for each other behind. Showing work from Johanna Jackie Baier (GERMANY), Zackary Drucker (US), Texas Isaiah (US), and Del LaGrace Volcano (US/SWEDEN), Radical Tenderness aims to inspire visitors to consider the role of the photographic camera in practices of survival and care.

PORTRAITURE presents a subject to be looked at. In the framing of every portrait we can find signs of how the image-maker views their subject and how the sitter activates their agency in deciding how to present themselves. Portraiture is a delicate, collaborative exercise. It involves acts of inviting, negotiating, sharing. The participating photographers included in Radical Tenderness have established practices of documenting their communities, sometimes for decades already. Their work can show us what it means to cherish a community through extending attention to them again and again. In conversation with each artist I learned that they all agreed that love and care were central to their portraits of other trans people, and that photographing them was a deeply affirmative act. A portrait’s value is multiple: the evidence of existence also says that someone ‘sees’ you and connected with you in that moment that remains forever accessible by revisiting the image.
THE INTERNATIONAL DAY OF TRANSGENDER VISIBILITY is an annual holiday dedicated to celebrating the accomplishments and victories of transgender, gender non-conforming and non-binary people around the world, while raising awareness of the work that is still needed to save trans lives. Portraiture is an important art form for gaining social and political visibility. As a genre it has a dignifying function. However, portraits that foreground gestures of protection and privacy can also call attention to the potential harms of being exposed. At stake in ‘visibility’ then is whether a person is being made visible through the filter of a dominant, stigmatizing culture, or provided a space within the photograph to breathe while expressing themselves on their own terms. Trans portraiture can rectify the ways trans lives have been undermined as impossible, deemed nonexistent, or belittled as a mere performance.

VISIBILITY in and of itself is not enough to enact social change. Image-making can also lead to tokenization and to the exclusion and erasure of less desirable parts of a community. Trans scholars and activists have also found that heightened visibility in the last decade has produced frameworks of recognition that lead to more harm for the most intersectionally vulnerable trans folks, such as those affected by poverty, policing, and racism. For these participating artists, photography of other trans people comes with great responsibility. It is embedded within their activism.
Volcano explains to me that as a photographer, “my queer feminist methodology is about making work with subjects who speak back” to those gendered, sexual, racial and class-based norms that would limit their self-expression. The portrait of the interracial couple Jo & Isling, London, 1993 shows them in profile, shirtless with foreheads touching, completely wrapped up in their own joy.

Isling was already a buddy, and asked Volcano to document his transition in a series that includes the early image Zach’s Back, London 1994. He shortly thereafter made the book, Lesbians Talk Transgender (1996) under the name of Zachary Nataf. Their three-year collaboration was one of many for Volcano that features cross-racial production and agency, even though Volcano is frustrated that this dimension in his body of work is largely ignored due to the presence of white beauty norms in the (queer) art world.
DEL LAGRACE VOLCANO
JO & ISLING, LONDON, 1993
13

DEL LAGRACE VOLCANO
ZACH’S BACK, LONDON 1994
Texas Isaiah relates that they have thought a lot about the impacts of what it means to be Black, trans, gender-expansive, and visible. He says, “I’m not impressed with the enchantment of visibility,” so “I am attempting to accomplish a level of privacy and protection as I try to dispel the power dynamics deeply rooted in creating images and how we view them.” As you look at the portraits you may notice that many of them have closed or averted eyes, signaling a challenge to being easily accessible to a voyeuristic viewer. On this Texas Isaiah comments, “I’m not someone who finds visibility safe for myself and others, so shifting the sitter and my gaze within portraits feels important.” The portrait with Lex Kennedy titled [we are] being held by the first time, 2019 was taken in Los Angeles’ Exposition Park, with the artist’s hand embracing Lex’s face as “an endearing way of being present in Lex’s image” that prioritizes “privacy (between us/for us).”
ON THE portrait of Bianca in the Mirror, J. Jackie Baier shared that it was taken in an unusually empty backstage room of the House of Shame club where she was preparing to perform. Born as a boy in Cape Town, South Africa, he/she had become a dancer in the “African Follies”, then migrated to Madrid in order to study the Flamenco, but transformed instead, moved to Barcelona and became “La Bianca”, working as a diva dancer and a singer in night-clubs all over Europe. She eventually made her way to Berlin, where she continued her nightclub acts for a much younger queer audience. Captured in this image is the split second that she closed her eyes preparing to be seen, which creates an “unintentionally private” moment of being unscripted. The theme of reflecting inward also tracks in Zackary Drucker’s portrayal of Rosalyne Blumenstein, LCSW, in Lady, Conjuring.

Her honey-dewed face turned towards the light, Rosalyne appears as “a resplendent goddess,” Drucker emphasizes, “just a ravishing, luscious earth angel” dreaming her vision into being. Rosalyne is also a longtime community organizer for trans health and addiction support from New York City, who Drucker met in community spaces in Los Angeles, where she continues to be a resource to young people and an activist for racial and economic justice.
RADICAL TENDERNESS

is a way to approach relationships of all stripes by being courageously vulnerable, by tuning in with and not just empathizing with someone, write Dani D’Emilia and Vanessa Andreotti (2018) in their “Invitation” to the practice. Such a manner of being calls for criticality and care, for study and celebration. With the notion of being radically tender placed in relation to trans for trans portraiture, I want to stress the broader purview of intimate relationships, which are for the participating artists inclusive of friendships, cultivated mentorships, and to muses who inspire the artist. In Drucker’s words, “To create art and to create love are the most noble pursuits.” Committing to trans for trans portraiture is a means to extend love to other trans people, which for Drucker “is a crucial path to loving ourselves.”
Volcano’s portrait of David in his own bedroom, Berlin 1997, came out of such a friendship that admittedly had an element of “erotic frisson,” that for Volcano was a no go because of their age difference. At the time David was 18 years old, on hormones for two weeks, and then identifying as a transsexual man participating in gay male leather culture where he wasn’t always welcomed. Volcano was 38 years old and then identified as a pansexual tranny boy, which was a designation that meant he was not a binary gender and more queer than transsexual. This image came out of the best session for Volcano because David had really wanted to show him where he lived in a former East Berlin apartment, and to express himself in an environment that felt truly his own. The portrait celebrates David’s Dominant/Top identity yet also captures his baby face and soft teddy bears.

Texas Isaiah’s self-portrait my name is my name i, 2016 is also set in a domestic space, with their body tucked under the branch of an impressively leaved potted plant. The image belongs to a series of four photographs which incorporates a system of celebration (altar) to highlight the multi-dimensional relationship between ancestry, ceremonial rituals, natural elements, dream etching, and protection. It exudes quiet, with the figure shown folded in to themselves, or in repose. The tenderness of the artist’s hand touching the cheek of the sitter in [we are] being held for the first time, 2019 is part of Flowers at Your Feet series which archives the contemporary presence of anyone underneath a Black trans masculine umbrella. Although the artist developed both projects years apart, they share common threads regarding perceived masculinity, community, and locating selfhood within the archives.
A conundrum of printed photographs is that they index a moment in time, both freezing the subject in a death-like state and allowing them to live on in that moment forever. In this sense photographs are a living archive, the undead as a resource to locate oneself in the now by having an anchor in the past. As documents that might be placed into a personal or formal archive, the portrait attests to a life lived and as such has had an especially important role for subjects marginalized by history. Baier told me, “I don’t want to die and someone to find all the negatives in the attic,” so she feels compelled to make a book about these people and the lives they lived uncompromisingly. Her friends and colleagues of the Royal Bar project might be existing within the economic margins of the sex trade, but they embody the joie de vivre of hard-won freedoms that comes from surviving despite the inhospitable conditions.

Drucker’s project with Rosalyne took as its source material Rosalyne’s own archive of personal photographs, which were installed in wallpaper format in the showing of the full project as ICONS at the Baltimore Museum of Art (2020). The portraits are rooted in the intergenerational sharing that the snapshots facilitated and communicated through Rosalyne’s raw memoir Branded T (2003) that contains a cavalcade of memories of how she survived the streets of Times Square as a teenager from Canarsie, Brooklyn. Drucker reflects on Rosalyne turning 60 and being overwhelmed with loss and guilt about being one of too few survivors from this time: “I think for Rosalyne, having crossed through the fire and survived and persevered into the future is miraculous. She didn’t see herself this far into the future.”
THE RADICAL TENDERNESSEXHIBITION

is about photography as ritual, archive-making, and the celebration of love. The collection of Alice Austen’s photographs that depict her queer friendship circle has literally been a touchstone for some of these artists, but more generally their approach to questions of intimacy and memory share Austen’s dedication to making images “for us.”
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR and photographic archive specialist Victoria Munro sees that Austen’s zeal for photography was both as a commercial venture and for personal pleasure. She created thousands of photographs that were intended only for personal circulation. These were of her family and home, of her lovers and friends. Austen would print contacts as small as 5 x 7 inches to study for technique as well as to give away, souvenirs and keepsakes of their time shared. This is not unlike Baier’s printing of small format rushes at the lab from their sessions to share with the women of the Royal Bar. Going through the latest batch of results from experimenting together, as a group they would sort pictures into piles of yes (love it), no (hate it), and maybe (let’s redo this shoot). Then girls could take the pictures they liked, but Baier stresses, it’s important to know it was not a studio session but the cave-like space of the brothel was like their living room.

PHOTOGRAPHY is for each artist about connection between people in the here and now as well as in the now and then. Drucker muses that, “we are time travelers by nature, we exist through time until we don’t. We have a lot of work to do while we are alive, and a lot of information to gather and pass on.” Photographs can serve as a means of cultural communication between these generations. Drucker’s own great-grandmother was from Austen’s time, having arrived in 1914 at age 17 into Ellis Island, escaping the pogroms in Austria-Hungary.
She lived in a tenement on the Lower East Side with a dozen other people; precisely the kind of situation that Austen captured in her photojournalism from this period. But with her life-long friends she also cross-dressed in gorgeously tailored three-piece suits and had themselves photographed, of which around 20 survive. Drucker reflects that “she found a lot of freedom here,” a kind of gender freedom which seems to have been shared by Austen even though they lived worlds apart in terms of class and privilege.

And so it seems fitting to place these images of trans for trans portraiture in Alice’s house: a queer space, a place for gender freedoms to be won, and now also a platform for queer and trans photographers. As Munro expressed, the legacy of Alice Austen continues to “show me the essential way that queers use artwork to connect with one another.”
**DEL LAGRACE VOLCANO**

Photography for me is a survival strategy. I am intersex but also trans and non-binary, so my approach is from the inside, not ethnographic or anthropologic. I make work with people I connect with or am hoping to know better. Afterwards, in silence, tenderly working with my memories of the photographic moments we created together, I wonder if they have any idea how much they all mean to me? Connection is the key ingredient and the process is as important, if not more so, than the product.

**JOHANNA JACKIE BAIER**

Once I started photographing, everyone else was outside, it had no one else’s point of view. It was only between the girls and me. The place was a cave-like heaven. We could extend our sessions endlessly. It taught me to not think of anybody on the outside. To not follow any rules. I found what I’m looking for when I go out making photographs: I’m throwing myself into something, waiting to be touched. All these photos are when I met my “tribe” and are about being moved and touched.

**ZACKARY DRUCKER**

Photography creates an opportunity to bond. There is tremendous value in intergenerational dialoging: elders pass on survival strategies, and the young help them navigate a changing world. In forming queer families, we seek out family figures, fairy godmothers, children, and siblings. Being a mensch is about paying it forward in the hope that one day someone will sit with us in turn -- it has always given my life a sense of purpose. It is up to us to show up for people, and not for any kind of tangible return.

**TEXAS ISAIAH**

I’m finding that the phrase T4T is not enough to embody my love for other Black trans people. I’m always searching for better diction. Personally, I don’t feel we can ever leave a gaze that isn’t assisted by white supremacy because our society still leans on fractured perspectives of what gender can be and WHO we can be if we left gender behind. However, I will always prioritize fulfilling the work I create alongside trans people with a sentiment of love and care. You cannot do this work without that.
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Johanna Jackie Baier

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Texas Isaiah

I’m finding that the phrase T4T is not enough to embody my love for other Black trans people. I’m always searching for better diction. Personally, I don’t feel we can ever escape this. That isn’t assisted by white supremacy. Black society still isn’t accustomed to what gender can be and WHO we can be if we let gender being. However, I will always be looking for fulfilling the work I always promote: uniting the work with a sentiment of love and care.

Del Lagrange

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