

GERWYN DAVIES — PLUSH

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UNSW Galleries

Gerwyn Davies’ photographs explore the expression of camp as an aesthetic strategy in photographic self-representation. They renew and affirm camp’s queer critical capacities, moving beyond popular understandings of camp as a gay sensibility, a mode of theatrical performativity, or an ironic inversion of taste.

‘Plush’ brings together works from the series ‘Utopia’, ‘Deluxe’, ‘Sunny Boys’, ‘Idols’, ‘Leisure Sick’ and ‘Bel-Air’ all produced over the last four years. In each series, the artist’s body is adorned, concealed and transformed by extravagant costuming constructed from readymade and mass-produced materials. They take on characteristics that reflect the architecture and atmosphere of the locations they appear within – digital habitats created from altered and enhanced ‘real world’ spaces.

For Davies, camp is a performative and aesthetic intensification that can be applied to images and the image-making process itself. Through character development, costume assemblage, performance and postproduction, his work makes evident the fabrications involved in the act of photography. They celebrate the incongruities that enable the body to resist identification and renegotiate the fixed conditions of normative visibility – or be hidden in plain sight.

Arriving on the red carpet at the 2019 Met Gala, celebrating the Costume Institute’s exhibition ‘Camp’: Notes on Fashion’, Lady Gaga had four outfit changes before entering the museum. Wearing a flowing pink cape dress designed by Brendan Maxwell, accessorised with an outsized bow and seven-metre train, she was assisted by a phalanx of male attendants as she removed additional layers like a Matryoshka doll. One year earlier, Comme des Garçons reminded us of fashion’s potential to express camp as style with its 2018 Fall Collection ‘Camp’ characterised by voluminous silhouettes and an abundance of lace, sequins and tulle. “I think camp can express something deeper and give birth to progress,” designer Rei Kawakubo noted at the time.¹

What is camp in the twenty-first century? Susan Sontag’s seminal 1964 essay ‘Notes on Camp’ (the inspiration for the MET exhibition) remains an influential if dated text. For Sontag, camp was “something of a private code, a badge of identity... among small urban cliques” and nearly 60 years since its first publication, Sontag’s treatise on the sensibility of camp retains a degree of currency yet fails to adequately reflect subsequent advancements in gender and queer studies; or the increasingly intermingled trajectories of popular culture and art history.² Gaga’s arrival at the MET Gala and the Commes des Garçons collection reflect the collapsing boundaries between art and fashion; but more importantly, they also embody the preoccupation with surface and performativity that are central to contemporary iterations of camp.

In Gerwyn Davies’ photographic images, the grammar of camp becomes an approach to image-making. Davies has observed: “Where straight photographic practice aims to minimise the traces of its own mediation, a camp photographic practice alerts to the fabrications involved in the representational act. Where straight photographic practice strives for the appearance and exposure of its subject, a camp photographic practice triggers a subject’s disappearance and concealment beneath a veil of representational extravagance.”³

The artist defines camp as a series of performative and aesthetic intensifications; of embellishment, materials, surface and feeling. Davies channels this approach into highly produced photographs in which the artist’s body, concealed in elaborate costumes, is captured performing against an evolving world of constructed backgrounds. ‘Plush’ brings together examples of this approach from multiple series made over the past four years. The exhibition’s title suggests a fabric that is luxurious, but also cheap and tawdry; many of Davies’ titles are both evocative and abstract, reflecting a tension between invitation and denial that is a key driver of his work.

In *Bomb* 2017, the artist straddles a missile camouflaged as a shark. On closer inspection, the projectile’s truncated form, lack of insignia and clownish face appear more pool toy than warhead. Davies is enveloped by a cascade of green ribbon rosettes, leaving only his tattooed legs visible, which adds to the image’s incongruity. The whole tableau is suspended against a pale blue background so flat it could be made of cardboard. The overall effect of *Bomb* is strange, but it is hard to pinpoint precisely why. Everything in the image is striving to be something else, but it never quite convinces. Rather, the work is undercut by absurd humour, evoking what Sontag described as camp’s ‘failed seriousness’.⁴

It is significant that Davies describes himself as a photographic artist *and* costume maker. Not only are the costumes an integral part of his images, the materials he chooses to make them from often inform the overall composition. Fashioned from a range of readily available yet unconventional materials, Davies’ costumes paradoxically conceal and draw attention to the artist’s body. Their makeshift aesthetic is deliberate; Davies does not keep the costumes after a shoot, preferring to bin them or repurpose elements for future work. They are a means of creating an illusion.

Davies’ deployment of camp does not privilege style over substance; the artist is interested in creating affective photographs that genuinely convey emotion. This is especially evident in works like *Dunce* 2019, from the artist’s ‘Deluxe’ series that plays with studio portraiture conventions.

Davies is pictured close-up, sitting on a stool, his body covered in a glitter-encrusted top, bike shorts, and a matching facemask. The artist’s sparkling ensemble is topped off with a dunce’s hat, and the artist holds a single red rose to his mask (where his nose should be).

The dunce is a stock character, symbolising failure; it is unclear what Davies is trying to communicate here. That he has failed at love? School? Heteronormativity? This ambiguity is compounded by how the glittering fabric of Davies’ costume and the silver lamé curtain reflect light and disrupt the image surface. On prominent display in *Dunce*, the artist’s tattooed legs represent another form of adornment and reinforce the attraction-repulsion binary that charges his work.

There is a consistency of approach and aesthetic throughout Davies’ oeuvre. However, gradual developments are elicited in the context of this exhibition. Before making his most recent series, ‘Utopia’, Davies travelled to Los Angeles and Palm Springs to shoot hundreds of urban and desert landscapes, some of which the artist dropped into the new images during postproduction. Davies has described this shift as “a move towards the real while remaining a contrivance, a fabrication”.⁵

In *LA # 2 (Norms)* 2020, Davies stages himself on an overpass wearing a silver Lycra bodysuit covered in metallic spikes, like a shattered disco ball. Everything about the image feels amped up, from the saturated light to the artist’s exaggerated pose and fantastical costume. Even his shadow feels too compacted to be real (it’s not). Davies’ pixelated body recedes in and out of focus against the linear forms of the pavement, overpass and power lines. The inclusion of a sign for the diner ‘NORMS’ adds an inter-textual dimension to *LA # 2 (Norms)*, further complicating the figure-ground relationship and the subject’s engagement with social expectations. The image is more constructed than previous works, yet it also feels more real.

Davies’ use of natural and manipulated light to integrate his figure with the backgrounds in these recent works mirrors Krista Smith’s consideration of how African American street photographers use light and painted backdrops to create alternative spaces for representation:

The representation of light in these backdrops might not simply represent an imaginary counter-realm of value or prestige, but might constitute a shifted space-time where the depicted subject matter enters into a different realm of possibility.⁶

Davies draws upon contemporary photographic techniques and camp’s intensification of surfaces, materials, and feeling to posit new potentialities for queer self-representation. His images provide a spatial and temporal zone for the performance of queer identity, one in which the artist’s body remains forever on the precipice of visibility and invisibility.

—Hamish Sawyer, February 2021

Notes

- Sarah Mower, ‘Commes des Garçons Fall 2018 Ready-to-Wear’ *Vogue*, 8 March 2018. <https://www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/fall-2018-ready-to-wear/comme-des-garcons> (accessed 12 February 2021).
- Susan Sontag, ‘Notes on “Camp”’, *Partisan Review*, vol 31, no 4, 1964. Rpt. in *Camp: Notes on Fashion*, ed. Andrew Bolton, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 2019, p. 163.
- Statement provided by artist, 29 September 2020.
- Sontag, ‘Notes on “Camp”’, p. 169.
- Interview with the artist, 9 February 2021.
- Krista Thompson, ‘KEEP IT REAL: Street Photography, Public Visibility, and Afro-Modernity’, *w Shine: The Visual Economy of Light in African Diasporic Aesthetic Practice*, Duke University Press, Durham; London, 2015, p. 106.

From ‘Bel Air’ series:

Bomb 2017
81 x 110 cm

Hedge 2017
100 x 100 cm

Narcissus 2017
80 x 105 cm

Opera 2017
80 x 105 cm

From ‘Leisure Sick’ series:

Cowboy 2018
120 x 120 cm

Matterhorn 2018
120 x 120 cm

From ‘Idols’ series:

Flex 2018
77 x 95 cm

Madonna 2018
96 x 110 cm

Martyr 2018
86 x 110 cm

From ‘Sunny Boys’ series:

Sir Joh Heslop 2018
110 x 110 cm

From ‘Deluxe’ series:

Adonis 2019
100 x 80 cm

Dunce 2019
100 x 80 cm

Mars 2019
100 x 100 cm

Ned 2019
100 x 100 cm

Saint 2019
100 x 72 cm

From ‘Utopia’ series:

99 cent 2020
100 x 90 cm

Caravan 2020
84 x 100 cm

Float 2020
100 x 100 cm

Fountain 2020
90 x 74 cm

LA #2 (Norms) 2020
86 x 100 cm

Palms 2020
100 x 100 cm

Archival inkjet prints
Edition of 8 + 1AP

Courtesy: the artist;
Jan Murphy Gallery
Protege, Brisbane; and
Michael Reid Gallery,
Sydney/Berlin



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NORMS