

Pushing Boundaries

At Provincetown's Berta Walker Gallery, 'The Feminine Mystique' Offers a Sensitive, Photographic Close-Up of Male Cross-Dressers

By Carol K. Dumas

Alison, Ariadne, Carole, Christine, Dee, Diane, Joanna, Kathy and Lisa — each loves being a girl.

The only thing is, they aren't. Girls, that is. They are nine heterosexual men who are cross-dressers: men who enjoy dressing up like women.

These nine cross-dressers are the subject of "The Feminine Mystique: Males Exploring Gender Boundaries," on exhibit through Oct. 27 at the Berta Walker Gallery in Provincetown. Provincetown photographer Helen Strong has assembled more than 200 photographs in both color and black and white to make up this unusual show about a lifestyle that generally raises eyebrows but is more common than many people think.

The exhibit coincides with Provincetown's annual Fantasia Fair, a 10-day cross-dressers' convention with events scheduled through this weekend. Ms. Strong said she has become a sort of resident photographer for events at a number of cross-dressing festivals across the country.

While she had been aware of the fun-loving, colorful side of her subjects, she said, she discovered the somber side of cross-dressing after spending days with each man completing their portraits.

"I had never witnessed the extremely closeted life of cross-dressers," she said. "In many cities, cross-dressers have a difficult life. To get photographs, we were sneaking in and out of apartments, changing in alleys, darting to cars. My heart was in my mouth. I never realized how hard this life could be for them."

While cross-dressing is beset with stereotypes, Ms. Strong's photographs show another, personally illuminated view of her subjects. Rather than taking an exploitative approach, her sensitive eye



A portrait of "Carole" by Provincetown photographer Helen Strong is part of "The Feminine Mystique: Males Exploring Gender Boundaries," a show on cross-dressing at Provincetown's Berta Walker Gallery.

Staff Photo by Carol K. Dumas

captures each subject's journey of self-discovery. She chose symbols of her subjects to accompany the faces. Many of the portraits are also accompanied by personal notes written by the models.

"Diane," a zoologist, is shown in glowing gel portraits with her beloved plants. A soft-edged "Kathy" is pictured in the dunes of Provincetown executing yoga positions in several infrared black and whites, "searching for grace, finding Kathy, my shadow, myself."

"Lisa," who's married and has "a warm, family relationship" with her children and grandchildren, loves to show off her legs and a startling collection of shoes that would turn Imelda Marcos green with envy. The color photographs of her are the most spirited and outrageous of the collection.

Ariadne Kane, a well-known Provincetown figure, is snapped with a jaunty fedora hat and earrings, wearing a broad smile suggesting her unstoppable sense of humor. A couple of other subjects show a

darker side, posed in New York City's The Vault, a straight bar for S & M practitioners. Ms. Strong's stark black and white photographs hint at what goes on there — showing, for example, handcuffed, high-heeled legs and nothing more.

Other photographs make clear that, for these cross-dressers, clothes and makeup aren't what it's really all about: "Christine" has feminine, lovely hands, Ms. Strong said, so she focused her portraits on simple compositions showing only hands holding a flower, cutting an onion and writing a letter. Each is set against a black background. "Carole" is shown demurely in several nude poses with just a leopard-print scarf.

"What's important is the spirit of what these people feel," gallery owner Berta Walker says. "It has nothing to do with clothes. It's about how you feel about yourself and how it comes across."

Ms. Walker has done a fine job of displaying the portraits, first presenting one of each as an introduction to the personalities, then devoting a group of portraits to each subject, allowing the viewer to get to know them individually.

Some of the models' notes, displayed with the photographs, are humorous: "If only the rest of me looked as good as my legs!" Others are more somber realizations, as in the letter by "Allison" to her colleagues at work:

"The sex of a person refers to the reproductive functions and related aspects of the body. The gender refers to an aspect of the person's identity; it has to do with how we see ourselves.... I think of myself as multi-gendered. I was either born that way or it happened very early in life. Somehow I wound up with a body and brain that were out of sync regarding gender."

"The Feminine Mystique" is at the Berta Walker Gallery, 208 Bradford Street, Provincetown, through Oct. 27. Hours are 11 am to 4 pm daily. Additional Saturday and Sunday hours are 7 to 9 pm. For more information, call 487-6411.

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