



ENTERTAINMENT & ARTS

'We are not the footnote': In photos, Reynaldo Rivera evokes L.A.'s queer Latino bohemia





By CAROLINA A. MIRANDA | COLUMNIST

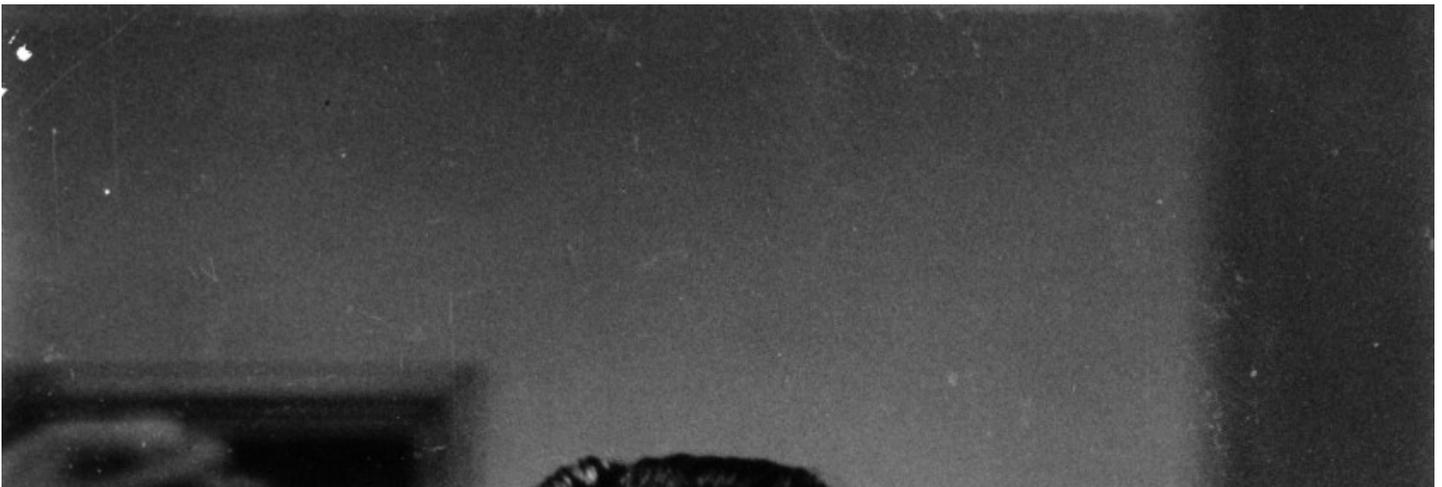
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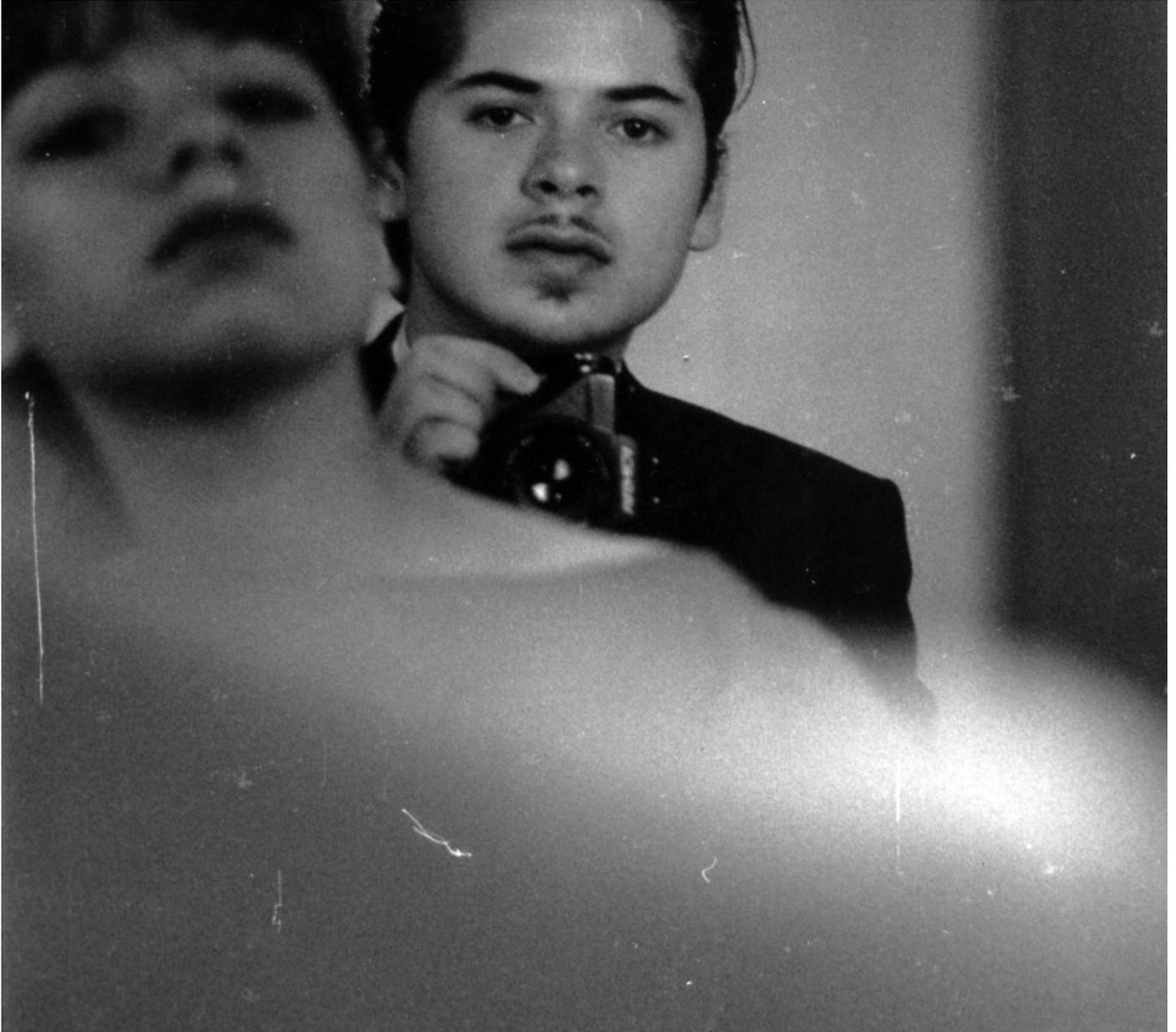


Reynaldo Rivera didn't pick up a camera with the intention of making art. The Yashica he retrieved from a pile of his father's things was a way of bringing order to a peripatetic life that had him bouncing between the care of his mother, his grandmother and his father, between Mexicali and Los Angeles, between Stockton and San Diego de la Unión, a small, agricultural outpost in the central Mexican state of Guanajuato.

"I did it out of this need to have something stable in my life," he says. "Photography makes time stand still. And for someone who has had a crazy life, hectic and moving (I left home when I was very young), it gave me some kind of normalcy. ... It allowed me to freeze time in moments that were special to me, and I was able to relive them over and over."

Those frozen moments are the slivers of Los Angeles of the 1980s and '90s, pieces of city that no longer exist or have been rendered unrecognizable.





Reynaldo Rivera, in 1981, photographs himself in a mirror over his sister Herminia Rivera's shoulder. (Reynaldo Rivera)

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For Rivera's L.A. was a city of \$300 apartments and low-budget art happenings. It was a singer roaring into a mic at a house party. It was a turbaned performer swaddled in feathers, staring imperiously at the camera.

These intersecting worlds all materialize in the artist's beguiling new photographic monograph, "[Reynaldo Rivera: Provisional Notes for a Disappeared City](#)," published by Semiotext(e) last month. Its images also make an appearance in the Hammer Museum's biennial, "[Made in L.A. 2020: a version](#)," which has yet to open due to the pandemic. (Rivera's photos, along with a video piece, are featured in the biennial's parallel shows installed at [the Hammer](#) and at the [Huntington Library, Art Museum and Botanical Gardens](#).)





Many of the L.A. clubs Reynaldo Rivera once photographed have been shuttered or evolved to serve other clientele. Seen here: a performer at Mugy's in 1995. (Reynaldo Rivera)

The book gathers 190 images from Rivera's early career, a time when he was avidly recording his milieu for no purpose other than his own. Rivera photographed artists, writers and curators hamming it up at apartment parties, post-punk bands rocking club stages and Latino drag queens and trans performers in shining gowns putting on resplendent floor shows in old-school Silver Lake bars. It's a milieu that, like Los Angeles, is largely Latino — straddling both sides of a border along with its in-between states.

Rivera, whose career has been as peripatetic as his life, has shown his work infrequently. But as L.A. has evolved and the neighborhoods he once frequented have been gentrified — and the Latino presence in those neighborhoods has been overwritten — he says he felt an urgency to publish a record of the city as it once was.

“To find things about Latinos, you have to read other people's footnotes,” he says. “I wanted a book about us in L.A. where we are not the footnote.”

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Reynaldo Rivera's monograph captures intersecting artistic and queer scenes in L.A. in the 1980s and '90s. Seen here: "Cindy Gomez, Echo Park," 1992. (Reynaldo Rivera)

In this monograph — his first — Rivera not only makes Latinos the centerpiece, he



U.S. pop culture industries often reduce the Latino to archetypes: the laborer, the cholo, the long-suffering matriarch. Rivera explodes those blinkered visions with a textured rendering of a polyglot Latino bohemia, all of it within view of the mountain where the Hollywood sign lords over Los Angeles.

Moody black-and-white images chronicle now well-known figures from the L.A. art world at moments when many of them were coming up. Conceptualist [Daniel Joseph Martinez](#) is seen chatting in a kitchen as Rivera's sister, Herminia Rivera, observes. Painter [Roberto Gil de Montes](#) poses playfully amid garden statuary. Curator [Rita Gonzalez](#), who now heads the contemporary art department at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, is shown, hands on hips, facing down the camera in an Echo Park apartment. Performance artists Marcus Kuiland-Nazario and [Vaginal Davis](#) are captured in unscripted moments before and after their shows.





Performance artist Vaginal Davis, photographed in downtown Los Angeles by Reynaldo Rivera in 1993. (Reynaldo Rivera)

Interspersed with these images are photographs that Rivera took in working-class nightspots throughout the same era, places like La Plaza, the Silverlake Lounge and Mugy's, which catered to largely queer Latino clientele of all ages and genders.

In these spaces, cross-dressing impersonators and trans performers staged elaborate shows that paid tribute to Mexican singers such as Yuri, Gloria Trevi and Paquita la del Barrio, women who crooned about love and heartbreak and [the exuberance of big hair](#). (When the pandemic hit, La Plaza and the Silverlake Lounge were still going — albeit with a shifting, increasingly white customer base; Mugy's, once located in Thai



Amid all of the pageantry, Rivera found intimacy.

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REYNALDO RIVERA

Thanks to Miss Alex, a performer whom the artist befriended early on, he gained access to the dressing rooms at these venues, where he recorded private scenes of trans performers primping before and after their shows. They are scenes that capture raucous camaraderie but also silent moments of intense self scrutiny: a performer practicing a pose in front of a mirror; another analyzing the shape of her body.

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At a time when literacy over trans issues was nonexistent, and cross dressers and trans women were universally categorized with the sobriquet “trannies,” Rivera recorded their lives with humanity — conveying glamour along with gritty realness.





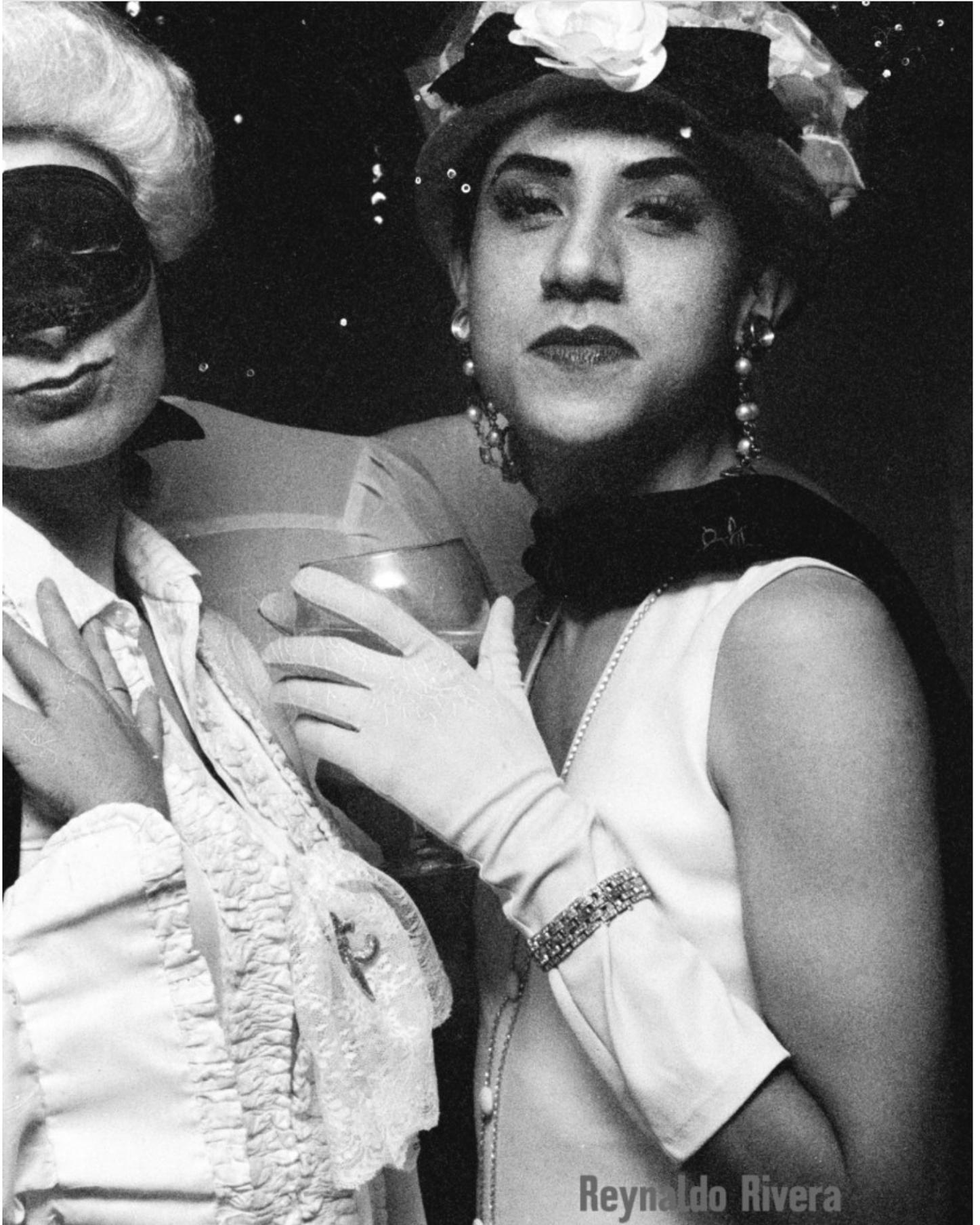
The performer known as Miss Alex, right, photographed by Reynaldo Rivera in 1992. (Reynaldo Rivera)

For the photographer, it was a special place to be.

“In those days, this was kind of hush-hush,” says Rivera. “Remember, this is illusion and you don’t want to break the illusion. And their families might not know they were *vestidas* — that’s what they called it in Mexico. It was a different world, and it was very private and they needed to trust you.”

Altogether, the images capture Rivera’s singular view of the city. They also reflect the ways in which cultures cross-pollinate, whether it’s artists and queer undergrounds, or Latinos and American culture at large.

“The performers, they were not living in a vacuum, living in some tragedy corner,” says Rivera. “They were not only influenced by culture, they were influencing popular culture. We too — Latinos in Los Angeles — we are part of all the things going on at that moment. We were influenced by popular culture and we were influencing it.”



Reynaldo Rivera



“Reynaldo Rivera: Provisional Notes for a Disappeared City” was published by Semiotext(e) in December. (Reynaldo Rivera / Semiotext(e))

This is something that filmmaker and author [Chris Kraus](#) touches on in her contribution to the book: an absorbing essay that chronicles Rivera’s operatic biography (his father might as well have been a hustler out of a Luis Buñuel film) but also shows the ways the photographer is interested at poking through the various layers of Los Angeles as if it were “an archeological site.”

“Through Rivera’s work,” she writes, “the city becomes a place where all of the histories moving underneath the skin of the present can become visible.”



ENTERTAINMENT & ARTS

Review: Extreme alienation reigns in the Hammer Museum’s (unopened) biennial

Nov. 10, 2020

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We now find ourselves at a time when working-class Latino joints are struggling to hold on in a city growing more expensive by the minute. And what gentrification hasn’t eliminated, the pandemic just might. (The New Jalisco Bar, a longtime queer



[Someone to pay his rent.](#)

All of this makes Rivera's work especially poignant. Not simply because it records an L.A. that is fast disappearing. But because it represents an inside view — not an outsider parachuting in to conduct anthropology.

“Who gets to tell a story? Whose stories are told? And who tells that story and to whom?” asks independent curator Lauren Mackler, who helped edit the book with Hedi El Kholi of Semiotext(e) and served as co-curator of the Hammer's biennial. “Rey thinks about that *a lot*.”





"Patron, Silverlake Lounge," 1995, by Reynaldo Rivera. (Reynaldo Rivera)

In addition to Kraus' essay, the book features some stellar contributions. Among them, a piece by writer Luis Bauz about Tatiana Volty, one of the performers featured in the book. There is also an absolutely poetic email exchange about art, love and Los Angeles between Rivera and Vaginal Davis that is worth the price of the book alone. (That's [\\$34.95](#) in case you're wondering.)

"Maybe this book is more about leaving a body of beauty out of such an ugly life," writes Rivera in one missive. "I was determined to find beauty in places deemed ugly, or maybe I was just documenting the way that beauty can live side by side with violence and the ugliness of life, society and this country, a country that let millions of us die in the most inhumane way. We were rewriting the script we were given at birth. So many of us died without a trace due to AIDS and other acts of violence. I've chosen to leave a trace."



...spectacle in ways worthy of celluloid. He makes the most of penumbra. He finds, in glamour, a dangerous edge. That is no accident. The photographer was inspired by silent film as a boy, especially the work of Erich Von Stroheim, a director who had a knack for making high art out of the marginalized.



Artist Marcus Kuiland-Nazario looks into the mirror in this 1996 image by Reynaldo Rivera. (Reynaldo Rivera)



communities at a moment in time.

“I told my niece, when I gave her my book, I told her, ‘I’m giving you the family album,’” says Rivera. “It’s really that. It’s our family album. It’s a Latino family album and it’s a queer family album. It talks about the complexity of who we are.”

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It is L.A.'s family album too. The city, indelibly recorded, so that future generations might know.

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