Some Provisional Notes Toward A Disappeared City by Chris Kraus

1.
Stockton—LA—Mexicali

In the opening shots of John Huston's 1972 film *Fat City*, the camera tracks slowly along the main street of Stockton, California, past clusters of street drinkers, hustlers, and out-of-work fruit pickers: handfuls of prematurely old men whose lives are spent in rotation between flophouse hotel rooms, liquor stores, city missions, culverts, and parks. The black men hang together, talking animatedly in small groups, sitting dazed on park benches. Dressed like a down and out pimp in a dapper sports jacket and mismatched pants, a skinny Mexican man stands sentry outside a hotel. A white guy with a Jesus Christ beard and long hair, maybe 30 years old looking 50, sits alone on a curb looking crazed.

Reynaldo Rivera and I drove up there last winter to visit the scenes of his earliest work. Not much in Stockton has changed in the half-century, except now the main street is virtually empty and the street life has moved about half a mile east.

There, small bands of derelict people on synthetic drugs are camped along sidewalks and medians, living underneath tarps or in tents. Others sell drugs out of apartments in the old, formerly working class two-family houses. Rivera first came to Stockton in 1976, when he was 11 or 12. The sad down and out world that appears in *Fat City* lives on as a frightening bazaar for the homeless mentally ill, who are also stoned out of their minds. It was a Sunday morning in bedlam. When Reynaldo warned me against driving to Stockton alone, I didn't believe him, but driving around the neighborhood slowly, I saw he was right.

Downtown, the Hotel Cosmos has been turned into low-rent apartments. The St. Leo Hotel, where Reynaldo stayed with his dad when they came up from Mexicali to do seasonal work, was boarded and shuttered. Rows of corniced brick pre-war buildings, vacant except for a few 99 Cent stores, were awaiting developers who'd yet to arrive. Stockton is just seventy-five miles east of booming Oakland, but it became the largest American city ever to file bankruptcy in 2012. Four years later, the inspiring, progressive 26-year old Michel Tubbs became the city's first black mayor. Tubbs, a protégé of Oprah Winfrey and Barack Obama, is a Stanford alum and a child of south Stockton. Still, that Sunday morning, a thin gray mist

San Diego de la Unión, Mexico (1987)

that felt viscous moved through the air, pulling us into an emotional microclimate of utter despair that we weren't aware of until we left town. Even in 2018, Stockton felt like a toxic terrarium. Both of Rivera's parents were mexican-born, but they met in Stockton, where his mom fled when she was 16 and pregnant. A family friend introduced her to his dad, who was more than 20 years older. They married soon after so that her first child would not be born out of wedlock. He promised to help with her immigration papers, and she followed him back to Mexicali, where he lived most of the year. "That's the weird thing," Rivera recalled. "Somehow we all end up in Stockton."

Rivera thinks he started picking cherries in Stockton in 1976, when he was 12 or 13. His early life took place in constant migration between his estranged parents in Mexicali, Santa Ana, Stockton, Pasadena and LA, so it's hard to be sure. When he was 5, he and his older sister Herminia were kidnapped from their mom's Pasadena house by their father. By this point, his parents were splitting up. Rivera's father was seeking revenge, but once he achieved it, he had no idea what to do with two little kids. He dropped them off with his sister and mother in San Diego de la Unión, the small town in Guanajuato where he was born. Rivera and his sister did not know these relations. They'd never been to Guanajuato before. Everything about San Diego de la Unión was strange and frightening. The house had no running water, no phone or TV, and Rivera recalls his grandmother's erratic, abusive behavior. He remembers his hands being burnt on the stove; he remembers being dragged through the town by his feet and no one doing anything about it. He remembers being confused by how quickly things could change, and how the moment could vanish without any trace, leaving nothing behind except for his emptiness. He and Herminia went to Mexican primary school. They stayed for four years, until they were finally tracked down and sent back to their mother.

"The earliest memories I had of feeling something was suffering," Rivera tells me. "That feeling you have when someone leaves you."

Returning to San Diego de la Unión for the first time in 1987, Rivera photographed gangs of small kids, not unlike his sister and him, climbing the wrought iron bars on a scarred stucco building. The stone streets around the town square are empty of traffic. Stillness and boredom breathe through the afternoon. The photographs capture the dreamlike dislocation of childhood migration, the shock of discovering the existence of parallel worlds, and how unfixed and arbitrary what you'd understood until then as reality actually is. He would photograph Herminia many times over the years: as a young girl in downtown LA and years later, in Mexico City and at his Echo Park house on Laveta Terr. with the artist Daniel Martinez and other friends. In all of these photos, she appears as a dreamy-romantic muse. But at the same time, she's graced with a toughness, an intact sense of herself and her place in the world that she maintains as a young girl, alone and looking straight at the camera, and in her 20s and 30s, when she becomes one of a circle of friends.

Rivera and Herminia were returned to their mother in 1975. By then, she and her two older daughters had moved south to Glendale. Coming back to California, he and Herminia were now set apart from their two older siblings by birth and by culture. Kathy and Connie, the two older girls, were Chicanas, born in the US, whereas Rivera and Herminia were born in Mexicali and had already partly grown up in San Diego de la Unión. On a good day in Santa Ana they were called Mexicans. The rest of the time they were known as TJs, chuntaros, or wetbacks.

Enrolled in the fourth grade when he was 10 or 11, Rivera was already confused. And then, his life could change again any time his father appeared. His dad liked to grab his only son for impromptu custodial visits that could last weeks, even months as he moved between LA, Mexicali, and Stockton. His father's two principal occupations were seasonal work in a Campbell's Soup cannery in San Joaquin Valley, and fencing stolen merchandise on both sides of the border. Sometimes he brought Rivera along when he had business in downtown LA. They stayed at the Alexandria, or the Cecil, or one of a half-dozen other transient hotels that catered to workingmen, winos, and drifters. His dad ran a de facto office on Second and Main out of a pool hall.

Was it 1976 or 1936?

At 12, Rivera had yet to read John Rechy's *City of Night* or John Fante, but the sense of LA as an archeological site that pervades all of his work was perhaps born here.

Juan Manuel, Mexico (1999)
Herminia Rivera, San Diego de la Unión (1987)

Through Rivera's work, the city becomes a place where all of the histories moving underneath the skin of the present can become visible. His photos of friends at Echo Park and East LA house parties in the early '90s; pictures of old buildings in downtown LA and photos of breakdancers grabbed from the street feel suspended in time, suffused with a presence that seems to include things that aren't physically there.

"You'd sit on these chairs in the pool hall," Rivera recalls, "and people would come by. If you were a regular, they'd come to you with all of their stolen stuff. It was boring, sitting around, waiting for someone to come in. Although sometimes, it could be fun, when we'd go to their houses and look at the stuff. There was a really old fat lady he did business with. She was in touch with the local thieves, she gathered their stuff, and we'd go to her place to look. I remember lots of gold watches. Downtown LA was full of those places, all of them gone."

During cherry season, his dad took him to work alongside him in Stockton. These trips—in late April, May, and early June—didn't necessarily correspond to the school year. Rivera's life followed his father's whims and migrations. Although, he recalls, there was nothing unusual at the time about a 13-year old boy picking fruit in the fields. He can hardly remember the work, but he remembers the boredom, and the stale, shared hotel rooms at the St. Leo, the St. Julien, and other, much sketchier, places. He remembers transient men, drinking, card playing, and business transacted in Spanish. His father moved stolen goods back and forth between Stockton and downtown LA. Rivera found it all pretty boring. Instead, he went to thrift stores and second-hand bookstores and collected 50-year old film magazines. An elderly Fillipina who worked in a used bookstore downtown let him take antique movie and photography books for free. He discovered Lisette Model...her gelatin prints from the 1940s, the fat woman bather at Coney Island, the blurred high-heeled leg on the sidewalk in front of an old-fashioned car, and the work of Brassaï, Kertész, and E.J. Bellocq. The images were proof that another life form existed. He read all the time, to a point where he felt like he'd teleported himself out of Stockton by reading about movie stars, films, and photographers day and night.

For company, he took up with the homeless. He became friends with a man and a woman, a brother and sister, who hung around outside one of these stores. The man, paralyzed from the waist down, was confined to a wheel chair, but he had elaborate Vietnam tattoos. His sister had once been a beauty queen, but she looked ravaged and frightening after her face was disfigured by one of her tricks. Rivera, comparatively clean cut, became their mascot. He was a nice, white Mexican boy helping an older man in a wheelchair. Together, they could go anywhere. So they robbed stores. His ambition then was to be homeless as well.

"One day," he recalls, "I got busted. I was fucked up out of my mind, we had drank and I'd smoked a lot of pot. I was sitting in the shoe department of this little department store Mariani's in the middle of the hood, just getting my bearings.

Kids, San Diego de la Unión (1989)

I was so loaded, and didn't want to go home to my dad. 'Cause it was already late. Apparently somebody told my dad about the drama that happened earlier in a liquor store, which happened to be the one where he bought his beer and his sandwich. And my dad found me there, and beat the shit out of me. So, yeah, that was Stockton. It was an awful, depressing place. But I remember those homeless people very fondly."

Back at home with his mom in Pasadena, Rivera liked to ditch school, stay home and watch movies. His favorite show *Hollywood Presents* came on at noon, and it featured month-long festivals of the complete oeuvres of Hollywood stars like Greta Garbo, Jean Harlow, and Marlene Dietrich. Silent films from the '20s, the Hollywood Golden Age, and eventually Mexican Golden Age cinema. The movies burned into his brain, and he felt hypnotized by them.

After watching these films, he started looking at the elderly SRO residents during his sojourns to Stockton through different eyes. These worn out old pensioners in their 80s and 90s had lived through that time. They'd seen silent films. Through them he could access a world of impossible strangeness and glamour. He asked them about movies and stars: What about this actress? What was this place? And they loved talking to him, no one in mid-1970s Stockton, CA, could not care less about how they remembered their youth. A movie theater downtown put on a matinee festival of Golden Age Mexican cinema, and he discovered the work of Lucha Reyes. He decided her song *La Tequilera* was written about him. *Como buena mexicana sufriré el dolor tranquila*...Like a good Mexican, I will suffer pain quietly...He collected boxes of magazines from the '20s and '30s. He knew that era better than the one he was living in.

At school and at home in Santa Ana, he was always in trouble. He got arrested for selling drugs in sixth grade and sent back to his father in Mexicali. When he returned to LA to start seventh grade, his mom was living in Pasadena. He got briefly involved with the South Side Pasa gang, but by the time he was 14 he was finished with school and he moved back to Mexicali.

His father had purchased a liquor store in the border-adjacent, working class Puerto Nuevo neighborhood from a friend who was going to prison. Rivera worked in the store, not sure what his next move would be until he watched his dad shoot a prominent gangster during a minor dispute over the purchase of a beer. The gangster stumbled out onto the street, where he died. His dad fled immediately, taking Rivera's green card along with him. Rivera, 14, was left with the corpse. When the victim's friends came around seeking revenge they didn't realize he was the son, and asked him where is that fucker? Rivera had no idea. He cheered them on while they emptied the register and tore up the store.

After that, he had to leave fast, but without his green card, he had no way to cross over. He spent his last $10 on a motel and some vodka, then he was broke. He'd never imagined having no money. For two weeks he slept in the streets. At one point he asked a street vendor for a hot dog that, after not eating for a while, looked like the best thing on earth. Finally, he ran into a friend who helped him get back to Calexico, where he found his dad at the bus terminal, about to get onto a bus to LA. After the shooting, they couldn't go back to Mexicali. Together, they went to LA.

His father returned to Stockton in early July, as he did every year, for his seasonal job at the Campbell's Soup cannery. The cannery was a unionized job, and he had seniority. After the liquor store drama, Rivera's father got him a Teamster's card and a job at the cannery. He was almost 15 and could pass for 18. Rivera had sworn to never pick cherries again. The cannery job was equally boring, but the money was better. He could pay his own way without getting involved in his dad's schemes. That summer, when he saw a Yashica in a pile of stolen stuff at the hotel, he realized he wanted a camera. "And then the genie came out of the bottle. I thought if I could capture these moments, keep them on file, I could find some kind of order. It was everything to me. I started capturing, documenting, for lack of a better word, the things that I saw. It was a kind of alchemy. It became my thing."

Child, Mexico City (1993)

2.
Como Buena Mexicana sufriré el dolor tranquila

He started taking photos of people around the hotel—not his dad or his friends, but of the women who cleaned. He asked an elderly woman named Minnie to pose like a star in an old silent movie. The results made him want to do more. In these early photos, the dull, rundown and depressing St. Leo Hotel and the grandmotherly lady who called him lil chicken were transformed into something bigger and better than life. Photography was clearly the next best thing to making a movie. He dropped his rolls at a downtown Photomat; most of the prints came back blank. When he asked the girl working there what he'd done wrong she told him about f-stops and focusing. He was thrilled when he finally began getting images back. He worked the cannery job for four months each summer. The rest of the time, he lived in LA. He left the cholo and gang world behind him and didn't look back. In Stockton, he played old records by Edith Piaf, Billie Holiday, Bessie Smith, and Louis Jordan on an old victrola he'd found in a secondhand store. And he followed new bands. In LA, he went to clubs, bleached out his hair and wore vintage clothes. He reconnected with his cousin Trizia, who was "the most beautiful and cool girl I'd ever seen." Through Trizia, he met the photographer Michael Rush, a veteran of the 1960s

Untitled, Mexico City (1993)

London underground scene. Michael taught him more about photography, and they both introduced him to cocaine.

There was a lot of cocaine, and eventually things would blow up. But in the early '80s, Trizia and Michael were his gateway to another world. Through them he met Myriam Sorigue and Alex Jordanov, a French couple living in Hollywood. Alex Jordanov worked for Celluloid Records and started Radio Club, the first rap club in LA. Myriam liked Rivera's work. Myriam set him up with his first photography job, taking photos for Ice-T's girlfriend. He bought a new Pentax K1000 camera, and took the 1983 black and white glamour photos of fresh, pixie-ish 19-year-old Herminia in the hallway of an old rooming house, in an alley behind industrial buildings downtown. "In LA, I started documenting everything around me. It was my way of being able to hold onto things. Moments that ordinarily would have disappeared, I would take home to relive over and over. It was some kind of insanity. Because photography was always so expensive, I really had to be careful about how I used my film, because I had no money when I wasn't working in the cannery. I shot a roll here, a roll there."

Rivera lost almost all of his earliest work in 1985. By then, Michael and Trizia's lives had taken a much darker turn, with their drug habits out of control. They were sharing a house. Once, in a rage, Trizia locked him out and when he came back to retrieve his things, most of his negatives were no longer there. He still has the photographs he took in Mexico City in 1983, of the room in Tepito where his step-grandfather was killed. At that time, Tepito was still an underclass neighborhood known for its open-air markets of counterfeit and stolen goods. Rivera and his father had traveled there, weeks after the murder, to help his grandmother deal with property matters. She and her late husband had owned the semi-communal slum building where the murder occurred. "In Mexico, buildings like this are called vecindades—I don't know where this word comes from. They have courtyards in the middle, called patios, and the deeper inside the vecindad, the poorer you were. There was a song, very popular in Mexico in the '40s, called *Quinto Patio* (Fifth Patio). My grandfather was killed by a man with a machete, the boyfriend of someone who lived there. This lady was getting beaten. He went to help her, and the guy just chopped him up. So I went in the room, with my dad, to check the place out. And I took photos of all the blood splattered everywhere. There was a big, framed saint on top of a table, splattered with blood. It was such a creepy image. My step-grandfather was such a nice man, the only one that showed us any kindness. We really felt his departure. That was the first time I went to Mexico City as an adult." The photos Rivera took in that room are anomalous to the rest of his work. They are a literal document of a horrific and filthy crime scene gone stale. Images of landscape and streets produced in subsequent trips are emotionally rich triggers of portent and imminence. In a photograph taken while traveling in Central America, a passenger boat moves through an empty, dark lake under a cloud-leaden sky, and the bland windowless hall in ***Bus Stop**, Mexico (1991)* feels thick with echoes and ghosts.

Crime Scene (step-grandfather), Mexico City (1983)

Across his body of work, Rivera depicts people enmeshed in their own private worlds who completely transcend their surroundings through the force of imagination and their inner lives. This remains true, whether the subject is photographed in a garden (***Roberto Gil de Montes**, Echo Park (1995)* p.198), a public toilet (***Julie**, Hollywood (1985)* p.214) or a house party in pre-gentrified Echo Park (***Elyse Regehr and Javier Orosco**, Downtown LA (1989)* p.111).

I think this is a primary difference between Rivera's work and Nan Goldin's, to whom his portraits of drag queens, trans women, and other friends might be compared. Goldin's subjects in *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* are downwardly mobile: middle class kids who took a wrong turn, captured in louche dens of bohemian squalor during emotionally intimate scenes. Her color-drenched portraits of drag queens taken five years later in *The Other Side* are deliberately realistic. Jimmy Paulette's face looks like a death mask in *Misty and Jimmy Paulette in a taxi, NYC* (1991). His makeup is overdone, his fishnet midi is ripped, and the two of them look like pissed off punk girls confronting the sun after a long debauched night.

Rivera's photographs of drag performers taken in Latino gay bars in LA between 1989 and 1997 reflect a different kind of collaboration. He sees his subjects less as they "are" than how they most wish to be seen, lending himself to their dreams and illusions of glamour. And why shouldn't these dreams be realized? Wearing a blonde wig and a long taffeta wedding-cake dress, Yoshi floats off the dirty linoleum of the Mugy's stage (***Yoshi (owner)**, Mugy's (1995)* p.159). Wrapped in a towel and a turban, Tina stands on an old wooden chair with a dollar tip tucked under a bra strap, but she's in heaven. Her eyes closed, the pale shadow rests on her lids and her head tilts gently back as she moves to the music. She's so forcefully channeling fragile delight that you have to look twice before seeing her masculine triceps and shoulders (***Tina**, Mugy's (1995)* p.174).

By the time he was 19, Rivera stopped going to Stockton for seasonal work. A musician friend introduced him to friends at the *LA Weekly*. He got a job as a janitor, where he stayed for about a year. Being involved with the paper gave him access to concerts and fashion shows. He took pictures at these events for his own pleasure, and later on sold his prints to the *Weekly*. Between 1985 and 1990, he photographed dozens of artists and bands, including Chaka Khan, Nick Cave, Sade, Vaginal Davis, Bob Dylan, Siouxsie Sioux, Echo and the Bunnymen, Depeche Mode, Tom Petty, Ray Charles and many others. None of these shoots were assignments. "I got to choose the people I wanted, and I would photograph them however I wanted to. Because for me, they were the same as my other photographs. I was doing the work for myself. Except for the concert photos, I usually took the photos at their homes, or in other scenarios that were interesting. There'd be times when I got to spend the whole evening hanging out. The pictures of Siouxsie, we took at her birthday party. I remember people saying they didn't look like photos they saw from regular shoots. They looked like art photos, as opposed to commercial photography. Maybe it's because I wasn't thinking, oh, I'm doing this for my career, to put on my resume, so I can sell it—I'm doing this for myself. Photography, for me, was that space between reality and make believe. It kept me protected."

His friend Gloria Ohland, then an editor at the *LA Weekly*, brought him along to fashion shows by designers like Christian Lacroix, which he photographed onstage and off. Although most of the negatives for these photos have been lost, I imagine them as precursors to the pictures Rivera would take several years later, an enormous body of work, of performers in Los Angeles drag clubs.

The concert photos he took during those years are remarkable for the relations that they reveal between performers, and the act of performance itself. They provide psychological insight into the dynamics at work among band members. His photographs of Eurythmics performing in 1985 at the Whiskey feature Annie Lennox scowling, seducing, and exhorting the audience, supported by an energy field running between her and guitarist Dave Stewart that feels almost visible. His photographs of Depeche Mode's 1988 concert emphasize the carefully measured moves of lead singer Dave Gahan's performance. Photographing Chaka Khan's show at the Wilshire Bell a year later, Rivera turns from the stage and considers the audience at this small venue, completely connected to the performance, almost as one.

Rivera's approach to producing these concert photographs wasn't exactly a matter of framing, exposure or angle. "At the end of the day, it's how you picture the world. And this is where one photographer is different from another. At the concerts, it would be about finding that moment—the way I want them to look. Sometimes, out of 200 frames, you get two really good ones. Sometimes I didn't get anything. But if you look at my band photos, I think you'll see I made the effort to give them more depth. To make it a multi-dimensional image, as opposed to a flat concert photo. I've never been into this. I needed them to say something, if that makes any sense. I always look for the image to speak for itself. Whoever looks at the photo, it's going to say something. My photos are very documentative, laying testament to things that happened. But at the same time, it's about creating a narrative, a movie. And I see the people as characters. You can say this about all of my work. Sometimes I ask myself why I spent so much money, which at that time was so scarce, on photography. I was constantly creating the movie I wanted to be in, as opposed to the one I was born into."

The photographs sold to the *LA Weekly* comprise just a small part of Rivera's body of work. Throughout the '80s and

Siouxsie Sioux, birthday party, Hollywood (1986)

'90s, he continued taking pictures of parties and people around him. He traveled to Mexico, Berlin, and Central America, sometimes staying for months. Photography was that space between reality and make believe...The photos he took during these travels often loop back to his literal childhood, as well as his childhood fabulations and dreams. The slick surfaces and glowing street-lights during and after a summer monsoon in Mexico City recall the Paris streets seen by Brassaï, Germaine Krull, and Ilse Bing. The gestures, hairstyle and dress of a bolero performer seen in the street evoke the glamour of Mexican film stars of the golden era, but triply filtered through the passage of a half-century, poverty and old age. A tenement courtyard evokes the Tepito vecindade where his grandfather was murdered; a boy on a metal chair gazing into the camera could have been him two decades before. His photographs of indigenous children selling things in the street could have been ripped from an old *National Geographic* magazine or *The Family of Man*; they belong to another world. Later, he travels south to Chiapas and Guatemala. He stops at the edge of a village where a traveling show has set up an old Ferris wheel. The place feels as lost and remote as San Diego de la Unión seemed when he was a child.

"The photos were part of something I was documenting. And so all my work looks—if you put it back to back, it doesn't matter what the subject is, it's like one big movie. Whether I was taking photos at fashion shoots, concerts, at home or the clubs in LA. They are all of the same kind of atmosphere. Usually dark."

In 1988, Rivera's sister Herminia returned from Seville, where she'd been studying flamenco. Together with their sister Connie, they rented a house near MacArthur Park. The city's Department of Cultural Affairs was funding a Photography Center nearby, offering free workshops and printing facilities to neighborhood youth. Rivera's friend, the photographer Laura Aguilar, was in charge for a while. He got a job running the dark room. He extended his printing skills, and produced a lot of new work. The following year, they moved to a bigger apartment on Laguna Avenue, a big slice of a crumbling apartment building across the street from Echo Park Lake.

Rivera's then-boyfriend moved in. The house became a kind of center, open to anyone who arrived and needed to stay for a while. "Having my sisters guaranteed never a dull moment. I was thinking about how fortunate we were, to have each other when we were young. When we left home we had no money or education. But they all had many friends and were involved in the arts—Connie with acting, Herminia with dancing flamenco. Herminia was working at a punk rock venue called The Vex in East LA, so she knew a lot of people in the Chicano music scene. We knew a lot of people, and we would pool our friends at all the parties we had." They were broke most of the time, and Rivera sold off the collection of records and books he'd gathered in Stockton, but there was always a pot of lentils or beans on the stove. All kinds of people came by, and their Echo Park house became one of LA's most cosmopolitan salons. They had movie nights, discussions, dinners, Halloween galas and holiday parties, and regular

Sonic Youth at Anti-Club, Hollywood (1985)

parties at least once a month. Cindy Gomez performed in their living room.

Rivera documented it all. He had a Rolleiflex 2.8 camera he'd bought for $75 from a woman in Echo Park. Between 1989–1998, he produced a remarkable body of work taken at the houses he shared in Echo Park. The photographs range from portraits to group photographs to performance documentation and snapshots, but all produced at that moment, that I've never seen documented before, where for a brief moment LA was a glamorous outpost where all kinds of people of different races and countries, queer and straight, privileged and street, mixed.

The Riveras stayed at the place on Laguna for five years, and eventually moved over to Laveta Terrace, where he remained with his partner Bianco until 2002 when the building was sold.

3.
Se agradece todo, hasta lo fingido

During his first visits to the Hollywood club in the mid-1980s, Luis Bauz writes in his story *La Plaza*, "the crowd was 90% Latino, and its main attraction was the female impersonators—an amazing show. What is better than to drink a whiskey sour, contemplating feathers, dance sequences, very cheap jewelry and lip syncing? All the famous Latin American, Spanish and even American divas were performing behind a crystallized illusion: Raffaella Carrà, Amanda Miguel, Olga Guillot, Lucha Villa..."

Rivera went to La Plaza a few times with friends in the late '80s. Located on the same block of La Brea as Pink's hot dog stand, the club was hardcore Mexican and Latin American, and no English was spoken there. "The neighborhood then, it was just dead. There was nothing besides Pink's on that street. It's amazing how many of these neighborhoods that now look so chic were once, not that long ago, Latino neighborhoods. Like Silver Lake, Griffith Park, even Pasadena—they completely wiped us clean." It wasn't unusual for gay Mexican writers and artists like Rivera and Bauz to stop by for 2-for-1 Margaritas and check the place out. The club remains open, now catering mostly to tourists and students, but at that time it was a big open room with long side-by-side tables, like a church or cheap banquet hall. The raised stage had a homemade-looking sparkly backdrop, but every set ended with a turn through the hall, where performers would collect tips.

La Plaza was one of several other LA Latino drag bars like the Silverlake Lounge, Little Joy, Club Mugy's and Le Bar at a time when Latino gay and drag bars were the same thing. Miss Alex was one of La Plaza's stars. Most performers remained in one place, but she rotated between clubs. Rivera became interested in her and photographed one of Miss Alex's shows at La Plaza in 1989. She has large breasts, round buttocks and thick, shiny hair cut in a bob, and she's wearing a lace bodysuit barely laced up at the front. Miss Alex—born as a boy in a small Veracruz village—hadn't fully transitioned, but at the time, few people had. And what would be the point of performing for someone who'd completely transitioned to female? One of the rules of the clubs that performers had to still have a penis. As Rivera recalls: "It wasn't a matter of transvestite or transgender. In those days, everyone was a transvestite. There was no variant. In those days, no one differentiated between transgender and trans, because there was no trans. It seemed like the majority of the performers were transgender, because most of them lived as women, or as much as they could."

Miss Alex came by the Laguna apartment and Rivera interviewed her about her early life. She told him she'd been 12 or 13 when a tour bus of transvestites came to perform in her village. Late at night, after the show, they all went to the park to turn tricks. When they were discovered, armed, angry residents ran them out of town, threatening to kill. Hating his life in the town and having nothing to lose, Alex left with them, and arrived in Mexico City, where she became Alejandra. But it was 4 a.m. when they talked, and then she left, so the story stopped there.

One night, Rivera took his Mexico City friend, the photographer Armando Cristeto along to the Silverlake Lounge to see Miss Alex perform. "I was like, oh, I want you to go see this person I know, I think it's fun, blah blah blah. And when we got there, he was stunned. He said, oh my God, that's Miss Alex! You don't know this, but in Mexico, she's huge—she writes a column for La Jornada, 'Letters From Hollywood,' and everyone over there thinks she's living this Hollywood lifestyle. If only they knew! Well, in a way she's telling the truth. Her letters were from Hollywood. East."

"Armando told me the story about the muscle builder. By the time he knew her, she'd become the toast of the town. She was in her late teens, very well known. And she was gorgeous. She met a photographer, was also very well known over there. He was photographing a muscle show of body-builders. And one of the guys that he photographed, what's it called? Adonis? It's a very famous photo of his. But this guy, Adonis, is apparently who she fell in love with. And they had

Cindy Gomez, Echo Park (1992)

this romance. She was head over heels. And they were both at the top of their game—the *crème de la crème* in certain social circles in Mexico City. Then he moved to the US to compete, and she followed him. And that was the last anyone heard of her, except for these 'Letters From Hollywood'. But at a certain point, this Adonis obviously dumped her. She was friends with Carlos Medina, and I think he got her the La Plaza gig. And she ended up staying here, and resorted to—what most of them do (p. 129).

"You would never have known about her past. That she was a writer, or knew all these super famous people in Mexico City. All the stuff that was between the pages...I mean, the lives some of these girls had had, you would never guess. She was gorgeous in the mid-'80s, but by the time I photographed her in 1990, she was a mess. But still a star. Even after she started getting fat and swollen, she navigated the world like a person of importance. All I knew at first was at face value—that she was a little messy and crazy and interesting. But interesting in, like, a jacket is interesting—in a very superficial way. But as I got to know her, and all of this stuff, I found it just very deep. It was not like the cliché.

"Most of the trans population resorted to prostitution. That was the real 'tragedy.' Everyone always viewed this section of society as tragic. Even within the so-called gay community, they were always viewed with disdain. And in a way, they had tragic lives. But it all stemmed from their social, financial, situation, from not being able to get work. Who would hire a transvestite in those days? They couldn't get a job pumping gas, you know what I mean? And so what are you supposed to do? It was their inability to get financial stability that was the tragedy. It made for a very unstable life. And when you live this kind of life, you have a lot of crazy shit happen to you.

"I realized, by the end of the '90s, that almost everyone in these photos was dead. Angela and Laura are the ones who did well. They lived like women, and they didn't have tragic endings. But the others? Melissa del Llano went to Mexico to get injections that would get rid of the wrinkles in her face and give her cheekbones. She ended up looking like a pin-cushion, totally deformed. She had an allergic reaction to the silicon they injected her with, and she suffered with this until she died. Paloma died, Olga died. And it wasn't any long, drawn out sickness. One day they're here, the next, you hear they died. When I went back, they were like, oh, she had a heart attack. Miss Alex ended up dying at County USC. She had a stroke. She smoked a lot of crack."

Rivera, and his Silver Lake friends Luis Bauz and Carlos Medina, started going often to the clubs. It became their derive. The clubs were Mexican and gay, and a lot more entertaining than artist bars or the bourgeois homosexual scene in West Hollywood. Their credibility at La Plaza was cemented when Rivera brought his mom along one night to see the show. Rogelio, the main waiter in charge of seating, had always harbored a particular dislike for Rivera and his friends. When his mom and Rogelio saw each other, they embraced and wept. They were old friends from the gay scene in

Untitled, Echo Park (1992)

the 1970s. He'd been afraid of coming out, but she helped him and even wrote a song for him and talked him out of getting married.

Rivera gained the trust of the performers by taking photos of their shows and making prints for anyone who wanted them. He made everyone look the kind of "good" they most craved, even when they normally didn't. Photographed between sets at La Plaza, Olga is a stocky, older man who looks like Félix Guattari (p.59). In his images of her performances, Rivera sees through the literal physical evidence of Olga's gender to the spirit that animates her. Her arms may be hairy, but wearing a blonde wig tousled into a bubble-cut she projects the spirit of a little girl. Her key-lit eyes are soft and limpid. Or, more accurately: Rivera isn't documenting what is literally before him. He's documenting Olga's inner life, her dreams and fantasies. His photographs transform dissonance into glamour.

The performers saw him as a friend, and within two years, he gained access to the dressing room, which was where he knew he had to be. "For me, the most interesting part always happened between closed doors in the dressing room. That's where all the interesting shit was going on. The stage was like the outcome. It was almost like a come down, at least for me. Almost all my images from then on where taken in the dressing room—that's where you heard all the gossip and the fights.

The backstage photos taken at La Plaza in 1992–1993 are of an old-fashioned theatrical or dance production put on by a troupe of traveling performers who know each other well. The scenes recall the backstage life in Paris music halls Colette describes in *The Vagabond*. Olga sits alone, writing at the dressing table in a bra and panty hose (p.56); Melissa del Llano adjusts her ostrich boa while Olga, dressed as a man, strides darkly by, and Gabi combs her wig, looking in the mirror (p.50). Wearing a vest and a long-sleeved white shirt, the waiter Rogelio perches on the make-up table. Angela, wearing a tight crushed velvet dress and heels, sprays her hair, while Olga, un-costumed, still wearing his round rimless glasses, looks on. Rogelio looks like a kind of impresario; Angela's a showgirl, and Olga projects the aura of a European intellectual. Garments larded with feathers, taffeta ruffles and sequins spill out of an open closet. It's girlie heaven.

Except for Miss Alex, the performers didn't move around from club to club. Rivera began connecting with performers from the other clubs and photographing them. At Club Mugy's, an Asian, Filipino and Latino drag bar at Hollywood and Western, Rivera made friends with Ou (also known as Tina), a Thai performer who did a show impersonating Michael Jackson: a man, dressed as a woman, impersonating a man. Photographed at Rivera's home on Laveta Terrace (p. 205) Ou is a slight, slender man. In drag, his stature seems to double. His repertoire included a Japanese geisha in kimono, a Chinese dragon-lady in a beaded gown and diamond choker, and a Marilyn Monroe emerging from the shower wrapped up in a towel. By day, Ou worked at a hair salon on Hollywood Blvd.

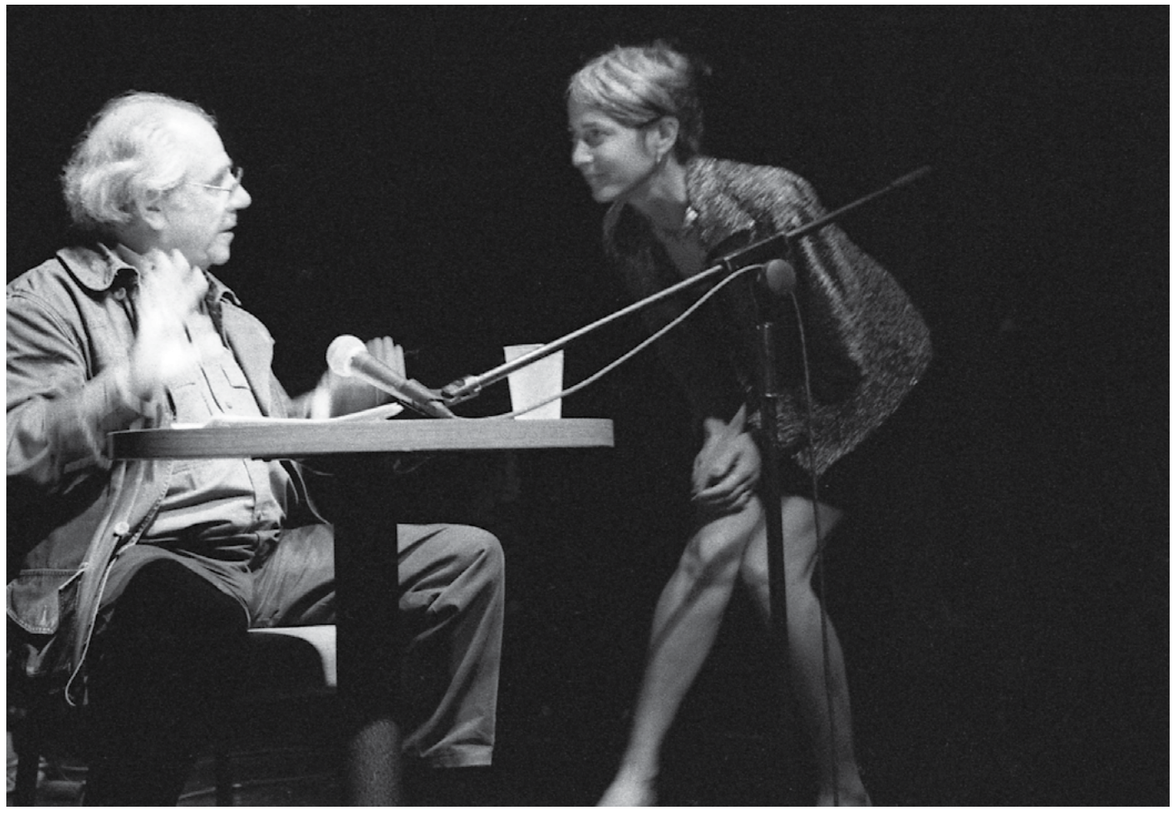
Club Mugy's had a different, more artistic spin than La Plaza. "It was a shit hole, pretty much. You can see that in the photos. There was just a little stage. Unlike the Latino drag bars, where everyone was trying to be really glitzy, the girls at Mugy's were much crazier." Yoshi, the bar-owner, was best known for his kabuki flamenco routine.

Rivera first exhibited the club photographs in 1995 at Julie Rico. "I was careful not to use the word transvestite anywhere. Because I didn't want that kind of sensationalism. Because I didn't see that, there. They were beautiful photos of performers, who were performing. There's a whole social layer going on, behind this. The period when they were taken was just before all these big transvestite movies came out. All of a sudden, they became popular. They were still fucked, but they were in the media.

"The gallerist really wanted to push the sensationalism, a 'transvestite show.' A guy from Jane's Addiction really liked the work. But I just got turned off with where they were going with this. I didn't want any part of it. I've never wanted this work to be about that. In my mind, it was never the intention. When I photographed these people, I was just documenting a moment that I found beautiful and interesting.

"When I had the idea of doing this book, I saw it as a way of leaving a kind of document, saying, We were here. We were once here, and this was once a very ethnically diverse city, with Vietnamese, Mexicans, whatever. We were all mixed in together. All these neighborhoods were ethnically diverse. I mean we were all there, everyone. It was just Latino, obviously. Most of us were poor, but then again we were living in a different time, where you could live with a minimum wage job. You could quit your job to go out for lunch, because you knew you could just get another shitty job. You weren't afraid of losing your apartment. At Laguna Avenue, I paid $375. The place was a dump, but it was cheap. It was a cool place to live in.

Thinking about putting together this book, I wanted to leave a different story. There's so little written by Latinos here in the southwest, for us, by us, or about us. There's such a small trace of us. That's why we always feel like we just got here. Because we can't seem to connect to this past, ever."



Jean Baudrillard and Chris Kraus, Chance Event (1996)

Los Angeles Times

ENTERTAINMENT & ARTS

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

Los Angeles Times

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

Los Angeles Times

By CAROLINA A. MIRANDA | COLUMNIST

FEB. 4, 2021 7 AM PT

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)

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 clienteles. 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."

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 clienteles 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.

“I wanted a book about us in L.A. where we are not the footnote.”

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.

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

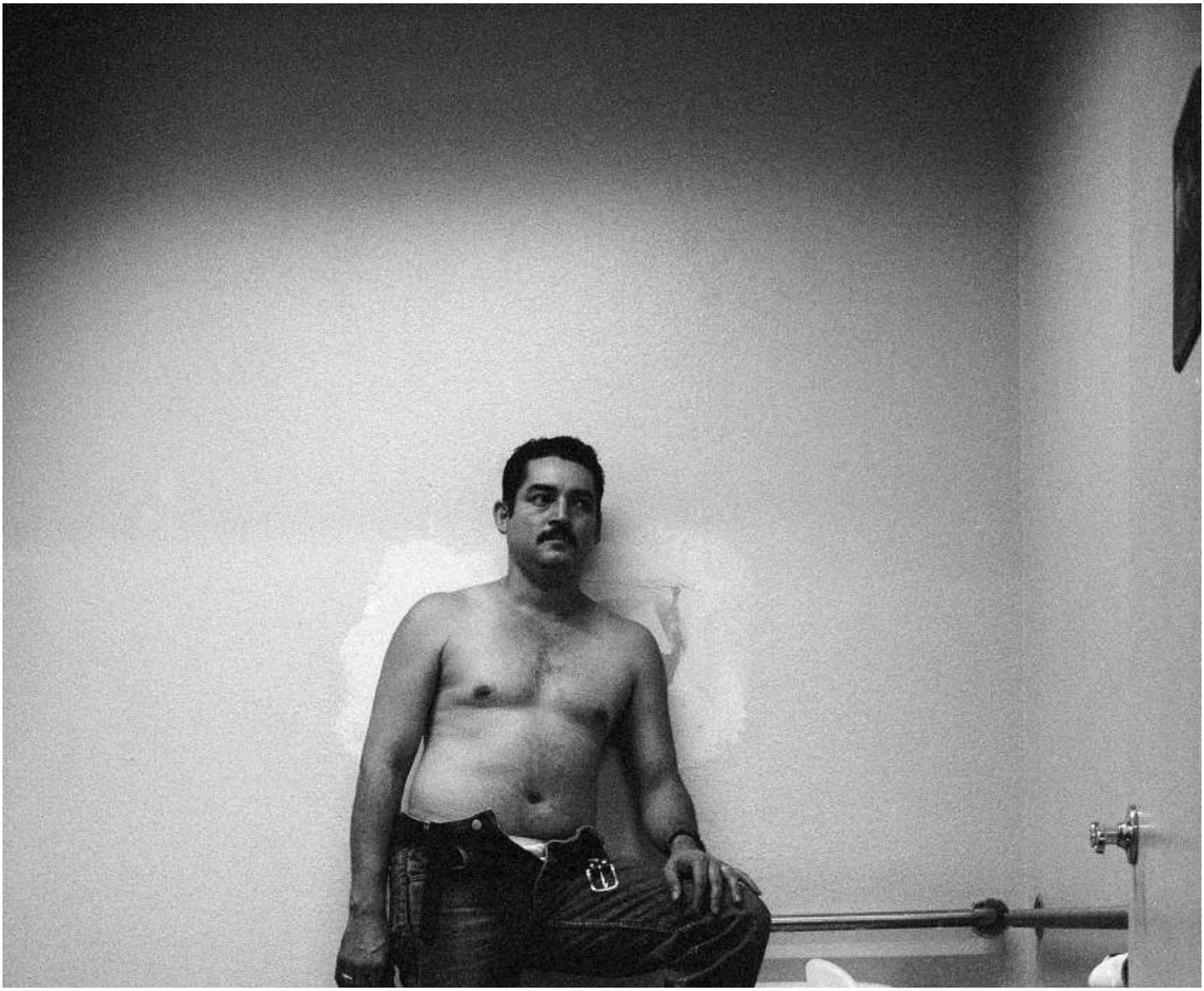
Nov. 10, 2020

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

Got unable to pay its 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 Kholti 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.”

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

ENTERTAINMENT & ARTS

A new way of seeing the architecture of Paul R. Williams, through the lens of artist Janna Ireland

Jan. 14, 2021

ENTERTAINMENT & ARTS | BOOKS | CALIFORNIA | ARTS

PHOTOGRAPHY CALIFORNIA BOOKS & THE ARTS

The Vanishing Queer Underground of Los Angeles

Reynaldo Rivera's photos of the city's nightlife document a time of cheap rent and possibility.

By Kate Wolf

YESTERDAY 5:45 AM

Gaby and Melissa, La Plaza (1993).*(Photo by Reynaldo Rivera)*

Before the Covid-19 pandemic forced it to be temporarily shuttered, La Plaza was one of the oldest running gay bars in Los Angeles. A fixture in the city for over four decades and serving a mainly Latino clientele, the club was a favorite of the late queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz, who described it in his book *Cruising Utopia* as having a "kind of gay Mexican cowhands feel." When he visited, Muñoz took in the spirited, folksy drag shows that were staged at the bar. The Spanish-speaking performers, running through lip-synched routines of Latin anthems and English-language pop songs, helped transform the dingy space. Their songs and the bar conjured stories of "migratory crossings, both legal and illegal," where the sea of bodies onstage and in the audience, so often in the process of flux, finally seemed on the cusp of belonging.

Another audience member was photographer Reynaldo Rivera. Charmed by La Plaza's atmosphere and its two-for-one margaritas, he was a habitué of the club for years, all the while documenting its culture and those of other underground drag bars throughout the city's Eastside in photographs from 1989 to the start of the new millennium. Little seen or exhibited since their making, his artful and accomplished black-and-white images conjure a shimmering, emotive world of performance and communion achieved against a backdrop of modest means. While they occasionally

present recognizable figures such as the musician Alice Bag and the performance artist Ron Athey, the pictures document lesser-known subjects for posterity. The photographs affectionately observe people—from performers whose notoriety was limited to that moment and impeded onerous circumstance to Rivera's group of vibrant young friends—whose lives don't often find this level of representation and close attention. Given that gap, it's predictable that Rivera's work is emerging only now, when so much of the environment it portrays has fractured and faded away.

This year Rivera's photos appear in the Hammer Museum Biennial, "Made in LA," and 200 pictures from his vast archive are collected for the first time in a monograph published by Semiotext(e) and edited by the exhibition's cocurator Lauren Mackler and Semioxtet(e)'s Hedi El Kholti. The book is interspersed with essays and stories by the writers Chris Kraus and Luis Bauz and the multi-hyphenate performance legend Vaginal Davis, all of whom knew Rivera when he took the pictures in the collection. It was a moment, the book stresses, when LA was different: a halcyon city of cheap rents and cultural multiplicity that is little remembered or memorialized, in part because—whether in the physical city or in the narrow confines of collective memory—there are so few traces of it left.

Born in Mexicali in 1964, Rivera was brought to Los Angeles by his mother at the age of 5. He spent his youth shuttling between the borderlands of Mexico and Southern and Central California. As a young teenager, he followed his father's map of itinerant work, joining him in Stockton to pick cherries in the orchards during the spring and some years later at a Campbell Soup cannery job. Another way Rivera's father made money was by moving stolen goods between Stockton, LA, and Mexico, and it was in a pile of fenced merchandise that Rivera found his first camera. Barely in his 20s, he got his start professionally as a chronicler of

LA's live music scene, selling concert photos of bands like Sonic Youth, Depeche Mode, and Siouxsie and the Banshees to *LA Weekly*, where he once worked as a janitor. But he was discouraged by some of the homophobia and monochromatic hue of the punk and rock scenes. The balance of immigrants and the unrepentant, outsize glamour of the drag bars, which friends introduced him to, proved more compelling.

He began to photograph the performers of La Plaza (the majority of whom lived as women) in the late 1980s. In his book they appear gliding spotlit through the seated crowd, with fans of dollar bills swirling at their hips, or illumined on stage mid-song, enveloped by a cool darkness. Rivera befriended many of the performers—like Miss Alex, a boy from Veracruz turned "It" girl in Mexico City, who penned a column on an exalted version of her life in Hollywood for the newspaper *La Jornada* back home—and offered them copies of his black-snd-white prints. Eventually they granted him access to La Plaza's dressing room: a bustling space, fertile not just with the drama of primping and quick changes (as well as a pleasant jumble of costumes, mirrors, and oblique angles) but also with the sense of emergence. Rivera captures the quiet interlude of becoming as the performers put on their faces and style their expressions for the stage (and perhaps, in some way, their lives). He tells Kraus, for her introductory essay, "The stage…was almost like a come down [after that]…. the dressing room—that's where you heard all the gossip and the fights."

Echo Park (1992).*(Photo by Reynaldo Rivera)*

As a photographer, Rivera is partial to the portrait. His tight frame focuses on the interior life of the individual, dispelling any sense of critical remove or irony. Indeed, his closeness to his subjects is literal: He often turns up in the mirror alongside them, his willowy frame leaning in to take the shot. A student of old Hollywood films and golden age Mexican cinema, he has a preternatural ability to make people look like movie stars, which is part of what drew the performers of La Plaza to him. His pictures are replete with a warm, untroubled intimacy.

In one photo, friends gather, their arms draped across one another at a candlelit dinner party. In others, bodies braid and enmesh in dressing rooms and pack tightly into the hallway of a house party. We see Athey, known for his extreme, endurance-based body art, tenderly embrace the artist Elyse Reger on her wedding day, holding her hand to his chest. In another picture, two young women lean close at a bar, their faces meeting in a crescent moon of shadow. Whereas other documentarians of nightlife such as Nan Goldin and Wolfgang Tillmans often portray the scene as a debauched form of dissolution, with blurry focus, trailing light, and hollowed-out, ghostly looks, Rivera is more formally restrained, composing his work in soft, contrasting tones. The people in his photographs project attitude more than oblivion, and the emphasis falls on a distinct sense of joy and the seductive power of fantasy. In his photographs, whether his partiers are posing in a toilet stall, a makeshift dressing room that resembles a utility closet, or even in one case with what look like bloodstains on the floor of a club, nearly everyone is smiling.

Drag, of course, takes from a pantheon of female icons, and the elements of showgirl glamour—taffeta, sequins, wigs, and feathers—have been fairly unchanged over at least the past century. This lends a timeless quality to Rivera's work. Muñoz detailed his experience at La Plaza as one of temporal displacement, as if he had been transported to "Guadalajara in the 1950s," and Kraus smartly compares Rivera's scenes of the backstage life there to Paris music halls described by the Colette in her novel *The Vagabond*. At the same time, Rivera's images document a specific moment of Los Angeles's history. Of all the clubs he photographed in the 1990s, La Plaza happens to be the only one that hasn't closed or completely changed demographics. The Silverlake Lounge; the Filipino-owned Little Joy; Mugy's, whose proprietor, Yoshi, was known for the flamenco-kabuki routine he performed; the kitsch paradise that was El Conquistador Mexican restaurant, with its gay folk paintings on the walls and giant paper flowers hanging from the ceiling; and even the house parties in Echo Park that Rivera threw and attended all represent an area of the city that was once defined by ethnic diversity, a queerness that was sometimes in harmony or at odds with it, and inexpensive rents. In the intervening years, these areas have become a few of the most expensive to live in LA. "It's amazing how many of these neighborhoods that now look so chic, were once, not that long ago, Latino," Rivera tells Kraus. "They completely wiped us clean."

Vanessa, Silverlake Lounge (1995).*(Photo by Reynaldo Rivera)*

The story of erasure is not new in Los Angeles, where entire neighborhoods of poor and Black and brown people have been readily bulldozed in the name of office buildings, freeways, and stadiums. But in the case of the Eastside neighborhoods where Rivera lived and photographed, the change has been more insidious. “We were never seen as a multicultural city,” Rivera writes in an essay included in the book. “It seems that everyone that came here or critiqued the city always did by the west side or the white folk they met without acknowledging that the majority of the city was not white and was not here to be a star…. The majority of us were either born into this dream world or ended up here for other reasons.” This type of oversight must be a part of why the enormous shifts that have taken place in the city over the past 20 years have never quite registered on the scale of those in New York or San Francisco, where a lost, mostly white bohemianism regularly finds eulogy.

Even as rents have increased 65 percent over the past decade, according to one study published by the *Los Angeles Times*, and as LA has ascended to the third-most-rent-burdened market in the country, the fantasy of it as a cheap, open haven for artists and creatives of all types—as opposed to a town where longtime residents can no longer afford to stay in their homes—has taken too long to expire. (Though the comment was instantly derided, the assertion in 2018 of the curator Klaus Biesenbach when he took his post as director of the Museum of Contemporary Art Los Angeles that the city was “becoming the new Berlin,” which itself has recently been remade by gentrification, seems indicative of the way many still view LA, or at least did pre-pandemic.) The lack of awareness makes

the mournful note of Rivera's book and the bread crumbs that his pictures provide all the more vital.

The work is also haunted by the knowledge that many of the performers Rivera photographed are no longer alive. While his project seems, in part, about returning to a more carefree and integrated, if perilous era (he writes, for instance, not without a little longing, of the Suki Suki club in Echo Park, which "served murder like margys on tap"), he is less nostalgic for the plight of people like Miss Alex, who, for lack of better options, engaged in prostitution and became addicted to drugs. "They couldn't get a job pumping gas," Rivera tells Kraus. "It was their inability to get financial stability that was the tragedy. It made for a very unstable life." Then there is Rivera's cousin Patricia, a stunning, daring young woman, also from Mexico, who introduced him to a fashionable milieu of other photographers and record industry types, as well as cocaine, speed, and heroin. "She ended up killing herself at the turn of the Century," Rivera writes. "I don't think she would have been able to deal with getting old; I don't think she knew how to do old and ugly."

Richard Villegas Jr., friend, and Enrique, Miracle Mile (1996).*(Photo by Reynaldo Rivera)*

Rivera seems to see a photograph as a small defense against the torrents of loss most of us face during our lifetimes, and this extends to places as much as people. His work joins that of other artists who in the past few years have sought to record ephemeral spaces of belonging in LA, such as Wu Tsang's film *Wildness*, on the Westlake trans bar the Silver Platter; Leilah Weinraub's documentary about a Black lesbian strip club, *Shakedown*; and Guadalupe Rosales's Instagram archive Veteranas and Rucas, which collects pictures of Latina party crews from the 1990s. In addition to the wealth of his images, Rivera extends this map of the no longer visible through a memoir in e-mails with Davis that is included in the text. Full of gossip and recollection, beyond Davis's especially colorful storytelling, the exchange broadens the context of Rivera's work, filling it out with an impossible register of other clubs, bathhouses, delis, zines, stores, bands, gangs, boys, galleries, musicians, and artists.

Davis and Rivera share many things: an alienation from the dominant gay culture of their youth, when bars in West Hollywood would ask for three forms of identification "to keep out women, femmes, blacks, Latinos, and Asians." They were both autodidacts who learned rather than trained to be artists. They also share a sense of shock over what LA has become, and who could blame them when confronting the depth of the city's inequity? When Davis returns to her old neighborhood, she doesn't recognize it. "The people I passed were either these well-off clueless types or the very ragged and bedraggled, worn down by the harshness of what is life now in Los Angeles," she writes to Rivera. A rising tide of evictions has produced an alarming increase of homelessness in the city, with tent encampments ringing around new development. Then there's the threat of Covid-19 to minority-owned businesses, the recent indictment of one City Council member who worked in the pocket of developers for years and remade downtown in the process—a displacement problem so pronounced that certain activist groups have dedicated themselves to harassing all the art spaces in some neighborhoods, regardless of whom they serve or their history or ownership.

Looking at Rivera's pictures at the moment of pandemic makes the pleasure and community they portray seem that much more remote. And yet the horizon of inspiration remains. Davis decamped to Berlin in 2006 and writes that she could never move back to the States. Rivera still lives in Los Angeles.

Kate Wolf is a writer based in Los Angeles. She is one of the founding editors of the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, where she's currently editor at large and cohost and producer of its weekly podcast.

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11.22.20 / DASH Juliana Halpert

Flowering at Midnight

The Dash column explores art and its social contexts. The dash separates and the dash joins, it pauses and it moves along. Here, Juliana Halpert trails photographer Reynaldo Rivera through a lost Los Angeles by way of his new book, Provisional Notes for a Disappeared City*, edited by Hedi El Kholti and Lauren Mackler, and published by Semiotext(e) this November.*

Reynaldo Rivera, *Le Bar*, 1997. Silver gelatin print from fire-damaged negative, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist.

Roughly two years ago, Reynaldo Rivera emailed his longtime friend Vaginal Davis from his apartment in Lincoln Heights, Los Angeles. At the time, Rivera was putting together his first book of photographs, and the two artists had decided to strike up a written correspondence to serve as one of the book's

companion texts. Over four paragraphs, Rivera began to rove through his memories of a bygone youth spent in a bygone LA: old apartments on Sunset and Fairfax, his mother's "lesbian parties," his family's migration across the city —"kind of like the Wildebeest"—and his own adolescent drift from "gangs to androgyny."

One week later, he wrote to Davis again, newly abashed: "Oh lord Miss Vag," he opened. "I just read what I wrote you and realized it's unreadable. I got real stream-of-consciousness and it's all over the place. Plus," he added, "I went into stuff that I maybe should have just kept it [sic] out." Davis replied the next morning. "Darling Rey," she wrote, "Please don't second-guess yourself. What you have written is visceral and immediate. Don't overthink it. It's delicious and raw. They can clean it up later."

Reynaldo Rivera, *Vaginal Davis, Downtown LA*, 1993. Silver gelatin print, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist.

At last, Semiotext(e) has published *Reynaldo Rivera: Provisional Notes for a Disappeared City*. Thankfully, it does not feel cleaned up—not in the way that Rivera's old LA haunts now do. To write about what happens inside its pages in any way that is not visceral, immediate, delicious, and raw would amount to nothing short of gentrification. The book must be spared the sanitizing treatment of too-taut, overly decorous art-speak. Its own tone is equal parts gritty and glamorous, somehow both tender and toughened, a pair of shiny high heels atop a dirty carpeted floor. Nearly 200 black-and-white photographs by Rivera, an essay by Chris Kraus, a story by Luis Bauz, and that email correspondence between Rivera and Davis, which clocks in at twenty pages, give us all they've got of their now-gone world.

That world was LA in the late eighties and early nineties, a certain east-side/Hollywood, gay/trans, art/punk milieu. I'm sure many remember it well. Many others—newcoming gentrifiers like me—have likely only bothered to learn the basics: rent was cheap, parks were cruising spots, and people actually used to read the *LA Weekly*. It's a different thing to get a proper glimpse, to feel you're flanking Rivera as he prowls Echo Park house parties or lingers in the corners of dingy dressing rooms at Latino drag bars, bestowing big bursts of his camera's flash whenever the whim strikes. There's Miss Alex—you'll learn—and Tatiana, Tina and Paquita, Olga, Gloria, Melissa and Montenegro. There's La Plaza on La Brea, Le Bar on Glendale, Silverlake Lounge on Sunset, and Mugy's at Hollywood and Western in the heart of Thai Town.

Left: Reynaldo Rivera, *Roberto Gil de Montes, Echo Park*, 1995. Silver gelatin print, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist. Right: Reynaldo Rivera, *Francesco Siqueiros, Echo Park*, 1993. Silver gelatin print, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist.

I use the term Latino because Rivera and Davis both do; ditto Luis Bauz and Chris Kraus in their respective essays. Say what you will—language, in these texts, is not squabbled over, nor is it ever squeaky clean. Call it historical accuracy, if that helps. Rivera's book comes to us from a land before *Latinx*. "It wasn't a matter of transvestite or transgender," Rivera explains, as quoted by Kraus. "In those days, everyone was a transvestite. There was no variant." He adds: "It seems like the majority of the performers were transgender, because most of them lived as women, or as much as they could."

How *everyone*—I love the way Rivera uses that word—lived, *as much as they could*, is the true crux of this book. It doesn't care to compile a tidy chronicle out of an untidy time. It doesn't index its key players or tamp down its dates. Hard and fast, cemented facts are beside the point. Here instead are pictures taken of friends, *by* friends, with stories unfurled, first and foremost, for each other. Bygone parties and places and people slowly get put back together, anecdote by anecdote, like exquisite (nay, fabulous) corpses. Rivera tended to capture his coterie as they chose to live, and within the personas they chose to *give*, as women or otherwise. In many of his photographs, drag performers lean into dusty makeup mirrors, adjusting outfits and fixing hair, or simply posing for themselves, casting an eye on their own creation. Elsewhere, friends embrace and smile for the camera in cramped bar bathrooms and apartment kitchens, drinking and laughing, eternalized in their high spirits. There are concerts and birthday parties and plenty of other occasions to arrive in costume. Everything happens inside and after dark. Daytime, and day jobs, don't tend to afford the same freedoms.

Reynaldo Rivera, *Self-Portrait, Echo Park*, 1989. Silver gelatin print, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist.

As for day jobs, "Rivera thinks he started picking cherries," writes Kraus in the book's opening essay, "when he was 12 or 13." Longtime friends, Kraus recounts Rivera's early life with particular devotion. It's a gritty, rousing read. The artist spent much of his childhood on the road with his father, who shuttled between seasonal jobs at a cherry orchard in Stockton and a Campbell's cannery in the San Joaquin Valley. There was also less official business "fencing stolen merchandise" back in LA. At fourteen, Rivera cashiered at the liquor store his father had bought in Puerto Nuevo, Mexico, until his father shot a prominent gang member and they both had to flee. Rivera was homeless for weeks. At fifteen, Rivera lied about his age and got a union job at the cannery, which gave him his first taste of financial freedom. One of his first purchases was a camera.

Rivera worked seven days a week during the summer months but spent the rest of the year mingling in LA, entrée'd to a new world of clubs and cocaine and creative people by his glamorous cousin Tricia. He got a job as a janitor at the *LA Weekly* offices and started selling his photos of local fashion shows and concerts to the paper. A few years later, he and his two sisters rented a house on Laguna Avenue, right across from Echo Park Lake. It became a social hub, "one of LA's

most cosmopolitan salons," according to Kraus. The siblings threw "movie nights, discussions, dinners, Halloween galas and holiday parties" on a regular basis. Rivera took pictures of everyone and everything, determined to capture evidence of a life he had, at last, chosen.

"I still remember the intoxicating smell of stale gym socks and poppers," writes Davis, waxing sentimental about an old bath house. "Dialogues" between artists can be dry affairs, but the thirty-eight-message exchange between Rivera and Davis is a mesmerizing, miraculous document. The two friends shirk any sort of performed inquiry into their respective practices, enduring motifs, bodies of work. Instead, they speak first and foremost as friends, and as two stewards of an old scene that has since vanished from sight. It is equal parts dishy, uproarious, confessional, and doleful, a rally of remember-whens.

Reynaldo Rivera, *Tatiana Volty, Silverlake Lounge*, 1986. Silver gelatin print from fire-damaged negative, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist.

"We got the volk who'd been thrown out of prison by Castro—do you remember the Marielitos?" writes Rivera. "I remember Jay Levin, the publisher of *LA Weekly*, giving drugs to the staff," writes Davis. "I remember when the Frog

Pond closed because the owner hung himself after finding out he had AIDS." (Rivera.) "I remember seeing Robert Reed at Numbers. I couldn't believe Mr. Brady of *The Brady Bunch* was a big gay letch." (Davis.) "I remember being at parties in the Mission during the '70s. I was treated like royalty then because I was a cholo from LA." (Rivera.) "Do you remember this butch Latina lesbian named Maria Dumbdumb who circulated in and around the punk scene?" (Davis.) "I always wondered what happened to her. She was a handsome dyke with a great sense of style."

What happened is always a harder question. Rivera doesn't respond. His photographs preserve his people in their prime, a community flowering at midnight. Inside the old apartments and now-shuttered clubs, there's never a glance out the window at the oncoming daylight, the dawn of a city of someone else's creation.

X—

Juliana Halpert is an artist and writer living in Los Angeles. Her writing has appeared in *Bookforum*, *Frieze*, *Art in America*, and on *Artforum.com*.

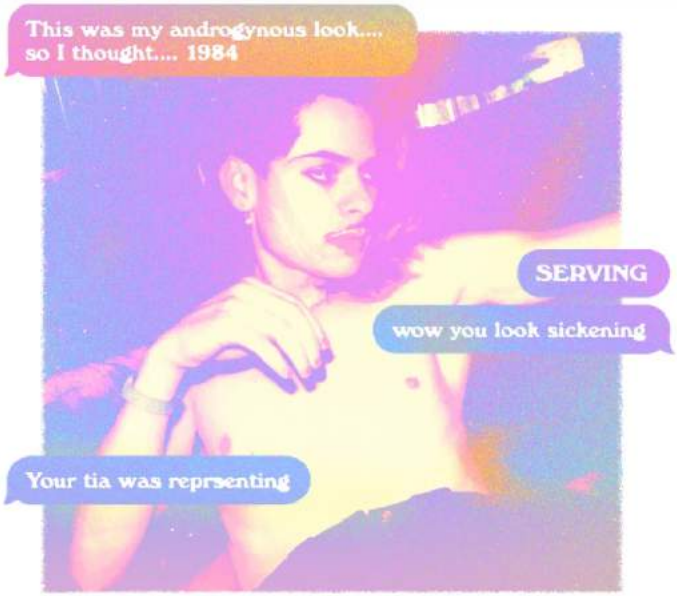
Further Reading

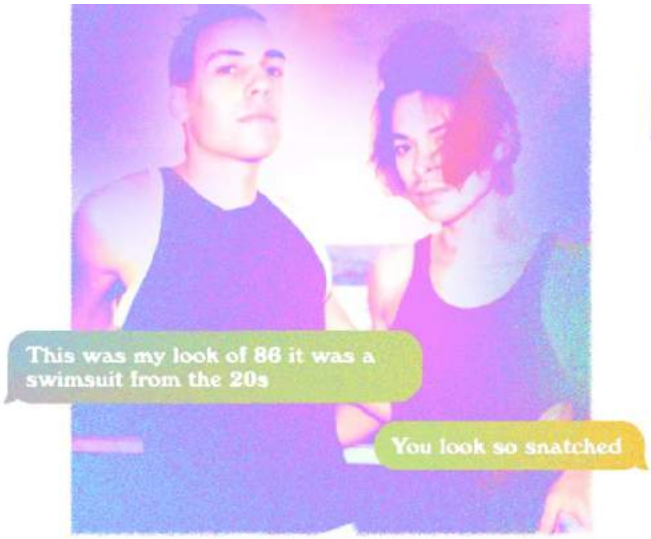
ONLINE ONLINE ONLINE ONLINE ONLINE

REYNALDO RIVERA IS HIS OWN LEADING LADY

Devan Diaz In Conversation with the Photographer of L.A.'s Private Glamour

Interview: Devan Diaz
Images/Photos Courtesy Of: Reynaldo Rivera and Devan Diaz
Illustrations: Skye Oleson-Cormack





Reynaldo Rivera es una gran señora. He prefers to text, but he'll check his email if I insist. He calls to say hello, but never before noon. Beauty sleep is non-negotiable. Our video chats begin in a blur; his webcam trails the living room in search of the right light. In the background is a collection of books, records, and his own photographs on the walls of his Lincoln Heights home. Laughter carries every story, and the most titillating ones demand clarification: "You won't include this part, right?"

His grandmother—a self-identified actress who never saw the screen—laid her dreams to rest in 1920s Mexico City. Decades after her pursuit, the Los Angeles-based artist fell in love with silent film—an industry long gone by the time he discovered it. Unable to direct his own movies, he staked his filmic claim through photography. Though his mother would never call herself a writer, Rivera watched her spend hours by Echo Park Lake, unloading onto the page. He saw poetry in her release. Alongside his sister, Herminia, early years were spent travelling along the Southwest: Mexicali, Stockton, Santa Ana,

Pasadena. “My first camera was an anchor for stability,” Rivera says,“I liked being able to keep these physical sheets of film.”

Rivera’s L.A. was a hideaway for tinselled runaways, Hollywood was limp by comparison. He flitted across venues like Mugi’s and The Silverlake Lounge of the 80s and 90s, casting his lens like a net. Siouxsie Sioux and Sonic Youth were caught in his vision, and they received the same treatment as the queens he saw performing on stage at The Plaza, or behind-the-scenes at Le Bar. Through Rivera’s eyes, we enter a world with cinematic views of its own construction.

For the past 25 years these photos have lived in boxes. They’ve survived fires, final notices, and evictions. Rivera’s new book, *Provisional Notes for a Disappeared City*, is as much a reminder as it is a renunciation. These are Rivera’s characters, his leading ladies, disappeared no longer. Published by Semiotext(e), the collection includes over 190 photographs, an introduction by friend and early champion Chris Kraus, a personal essay by Rivera, and an e-mail correspondence with Vaginal Davis.

Over the course of the winter, Rivera and I stay in touch across modes of communication. Through iMessage, we share photos of our families. Over the phone we talk about clothes. I turn my webcam outward to reveal snow in New York, and in exchange, Rivera shows me the sun.

p. 218 Cynthia & Juan, Downtown (1989) "Halloween of 1989. Cynthia and Juan were actually siblings [*laughs*]. I dated Cynthia for a while. She was so gorgeous. I can hardly remember this night. It's one of the ones I'm glad I have a photo of."

Devan Diaz
Reynaldo Rivera

I've been playing Lucha Reyes for the first time in years, it used to be grandmother's cleaning music. I didn't know her name until you texted me that video.

Music is the bedrock of everything I've ever done. I bought a victrola from a second-hand shop when I was working up north as a teenager. I remember finding Bessy Smith and Billie Holiday. I was a rancho child, I had no idea who they were. All these great women. Edith Piaf. They were like tias, the women who helped raise me. Lucha Reyes, Toña la Negra. They taught me how to suffer, how to cry, how to fall in love. You didn't need an education or any classical training to understand music.

Was this around the time you picked up a camera?

Yes, it took me months to learn it. At first, nothing would come out. I'd get my pictures back and they'd be blank. I continuously asked the employee where I got my film developed for advice. She took the time to explain the camera to me, and what it all meant.

How did you find your light?

It's very important in silent movies, which was my entry into cinema. Photos were the second best thing to making movies. I'm always looking at the gradation of lighting. You start seeing everything as a set. Everything about photography was expensive, that's why it is such a rich kid's hobby. I didn't have the kind of money to keep buying rolls of film. This helped me learn how to edit, knowing I had a limited number of shots. We were buying milk with bags of pennies. We lived life without thinking of a future. If someone invited us to go somewhere, we'd quit our jobs and take off for three months or a year. There was never anything that could tie us down. We could just as easily get another shitty job. We did a lot of shoplifting [*laughs*]. I know I shouldn't say that! Can I still go to jail?

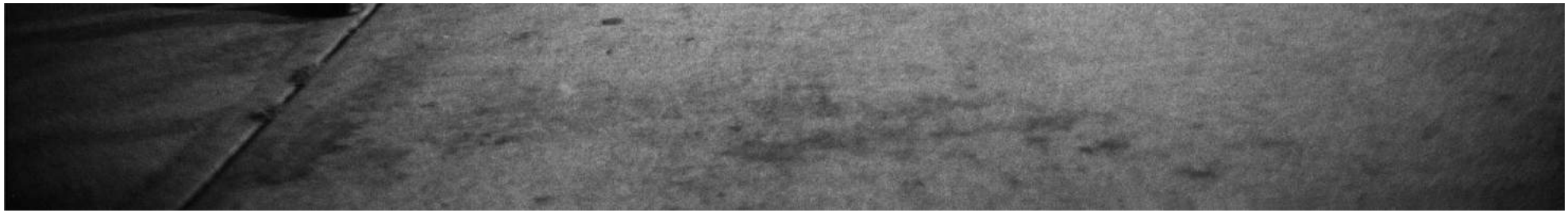
No!

Film was hard to steal, they always kept it in the back. That's why I don't have thousands of photos. I've been doing this since '82. You

would think I'd have so much more. Granted things got lost in fires over the years, and moving around.

These aren't just images, they're physical objects.

That was always the intention, mija. From the beginning. Photography wasn't just a hobby for me. It really fulfilled a need. As necessary as eating, and all the other shit that comes with life. Also, I'm old. When you get to be a certain age you start thinking about longevity. The things you'll leave behind.



p. 93 Ramon Garcia, Monica Canales, Annette, and Christopher Arellano, Echo Park (1995) "That's my husband, the first one to the right. Boyfriend at the time, he's eight years younger than me. We were on our way to see this Colombian band, Very be careful. They were so good! I love that band, they're still around. That was my birthday, and we went to see them perform. We had so much fun. That's one thing I've always known how to do. Enjoy life."

Why'd you start again?

In my teens, 20s, 30s, everything was important. Everybody was my friend. I documented a huge range of people. Now that I'm older, everything has become more singular. I've developed this new interest in portraiture. Capturing the people in my life, and the new people I come across. If you were here I'd take your photo. I've learned that it's these momentary things that matter in the long run. Not the landmark events we give so much importance when we are young.

Do photos replace memories?

No! I remember one time I was like, "I wish I would've gotten to see Etta James before she died! How could I have not seen her?" And then one day I'm flipping through one of my old diaries and I see an entry written while waiting at the Hollywood Bowl with my friends Donald and Cindy, drinking wine, and we're listening to Etta James perform.

But some things are impossible to forget. I remember The Plaza, those shots of the girls backstage, taking mom to see their show. I thought I was showing her something new, and it turns out she already knew the place. She was old friends with this waiter who had always been an asshole to me. After that, he treated me like royalty! She

helped him come out of the closet, even wrote a song about him. What I thought was unique to me was actually just this queer continuum.

We're part of history whether we like it or not.

All those places are gone now. People, too. That's what is hard. Our history got interrupted by AIDS. Imagine where we would be if we'd never lost all these wonderful people of the 80s and 90s. They just got snuffed. In those days it got you fast. If you got it, you were gone in a few months. It was fucking hell. I didn't get to see much of this, even though my second boyfriend died of AIDS. I don't know how I didn't get it. I'm like the black widow. I also wasn't sleeping with very many people, maybe it was my upbringing.

Were you a good girl?

I was a bad girl with lots of fears [*laughs*]. I was also very sheltered. If you were gay it was kept a secret. I didn't even come out until '83, and AIDS had been going around for three years at that point. TV called it 'gay cancer', and I remember thinking I was gonna get it just for being gay! Have you ever read *City of God*? The one by the Chicano Writer, Gil Cuadros?
It's his story as a young gay Latino in the Southwest and how living here shapes your gender and sexual identification. It's a really important book for me. Luckily when I came to the U.S., I arrived with a strong mother and these militant Chicano sisters who were all about going against the white man, always screaming "fuck the honkies!" So I never grew up glamorizing or idolizing whiteness. Thank god for my Chicano Power sisters.

I love the polaroid of Herminia in front of the Hollywood sign. It's one of the only color photographs in the book.

That was a fake fashion shoot we did for *LA Weekly*. A friend of mine was the fashion editor, and she told me to come up with something. She knew I could use the money. We called this look the

"cha cha girls". I love how that photo says we aren’t guests. None of us are illegal here. We're native to this land.

p. 57 Laura, La Plaza (1994) "Laura Leon. She autographed a photo of herself for me, and kissed it with lipstick. I'll let you have it, text me your address."

p. 189 Performer, Le Bar, (1997) "I don't even know who that was. I remember this was at Le Bar. She was a performer that I didn't really know very well, but her beauty caught me off guard. Doesn't this look like a still from a 60s film? This was my Cindy Sherman moment. Do you know how she has those fake movie still images?"

There are so many private moments of glamour in your book, like the backstage shots of the girls getting ready for the stage.

Those women didn't need anything around them to make an interesting photo. It seems to me that any expression of femininity is always under scrutiny. These were places where they could be free from that. It was everything: the perfume, the mannerisms, the way they spoke. I wanted them to be the leading women of my movies.

Was taking pictures a part of getting ready to go out?

I was always a ready girl. Every day was going out. My look was very important, especially once I came out. I shot out. I remember wearing a 1920s swimsuit with wedges. It was fun to put a look together and go out into the world. I figured I was already the worst thing you could be, a fag, so everything else was secondary. I didn't find out how wrong I was till much later. Pulling a feminine look did not get me any play in West Hollywood. No one would look at me, and I thought I was so cute giving high fashion. I was not trying to be a woman, I just wanted to feel glamorous.

I really miss parties!

We chose this selection of images for the book to tell a story of a people that really made use of this city. That's why we used all these party images. I wanted to portray fully formed people, with a range of emotions. It's a story I crave to see in any media, characters that are expressive and dirty. Like my cousin Tricia, who lived so much life. My sister, my grandmother. What made them amazing wasn't money or achievements. They took what they got, and turned it into a life.

My grandmother left behind an abusive husband and her young children to be an actress in 1920s Mexico City. I hated her as a child,

her name was enough to make me shiver. As I got older I found the rest of her life to be so cool. She became a monster, but that's part of the story. A woman who grew up with her told me she was a hooker, which I already knew. She'd throw these legendary parties and invite all the men from the village. Then she'd charge them admission to come into her apartment and dance with them. I guess that's what we'd call a rent party today. My dad had to sleep in the hallway as she tended to her clients. She told them he was her brother. She wasn't a good human being. But her life is such an incredible story. Overcoming poverty, abuse, and public ridicule as a single woman.

p. 73 Grant Krajecki and Tommy Chiffon, Hollywood (1993) "Tommy Chiffon is this gender-bending rockstar of the time. Have you ever seen the movie *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*? Miss Tommy was sporting that look way before, and she likes to believe that it was stolen from her. I believe it, to be honest. We influenced style in ways we've never been credited for."

Does grief ever go away? Or does it become something else?

When you're a sensitive bitch like me, it's hard. There's always a sense of loss. You can never go back. You can never go home. It's a sad thing. I don't feel this as intensely now, time and distance do a lot. I don't let myself go there. Like, right now, I had to hold myself back from going to that place.

There’s a real sense of closeness in these photos.

Most of the people in that book were intimate friends of mine, or of each other. I was never a voyeur in any of these scenarios. The audience can feel like they're there because I was there. I was part of the environment. I was capturing moments I was included in. You can feel it in the work. You can put me in any of these photos. I mean I am in that photo, you just don't see me.

I disagree, I can see you in there.

You know what, I see myself in there too.

Devan Diaz is a writer from Jackson Heights, NY.

Interview: Devan Diaz
Images/Photos Courtesy Of: Reynaldo Rivera and Devan Diaz
Illustrations: Skye Oleson-Cormack
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