

## Elizabeth Waterman – Gorgeous Drag

Between 2014 - 2016 American photographer Elizabeth Waterman undertook an extensive and ambitious project documenting and portraying the New York Drag scene. The resulting 'Gorgeous Drag' series marks not just one, but two departures.

It was a dynamic and significant time. An increasingly assertive drag scene came out of the shadow of its earlier underground existence - confident of its contribution towards an expanding conversation about gender and sex in the USA.

The Bushwick drag scene - once furtively played out in dingy backroom venues - suddenly produced major stars like Sasha Velour or Aquaria performing at festivals like Bushwig.

The project also marked a departure in the career of Elizabeth Waterman. Before 'Gorgeous Drag,' her portrait work had taken place in the insulated environment of the studio. As a photographer, she felt increasingly restricted and held back by the roles and role play that govern conventional portrait photography - 'I'm the photographer and you are the subject' - further encumbered by unwieldy professional equipment.

Leaving all that behind, 'Gorgeous Drag' proved to be a creatively liberating and seminal experience for Elizabeth Waterman and her work.

Looking for a new milieu - something less scripted, less filtered - was coupled with the realisation that she would have to take some risks herself. Reflecting on that period in her work, Elizabeth Waterman remembers, "and so I set out to explore New York's underground performance world, shadowy and slightly unhinged, where the players flutter like moths to the spotlight of spectacle. A mob of bit-part players and high-profile personalities, people acting out and cutting loose. My equipage? A disposable point-and-shoot film camera."

Elizabeth Waterman's own experience of 'departure' in some ways mirrored what was happening in front of her camera. Preconceived conventional binary notions of gender and sex in society were fragmenting, giving way to a rich and nuanced spectrum. Whereas for her it was an exciting, unsettling act of "tapping into my own subconscious, my own fear of the unknown: of the late nights, of new people and experiences, of the lack of control. It didn't take long for me to get it that I was far outside my comfort zone."

The images she captured on film were as much a reflection and projection of her own intuition than anything else. It is her fundamental realisation that she could approach this undertaking only as a participant - which lends her photos a powerful vibrant and touching dynamic.