

Toni Latour  
THE DRAG KING PROJECT

Toni Latour: *The Drag King Project*  
BY DONNA MCALEAR

Artist's Statement (2008)  
TONI LATOUR



**Toni Latour: The Drag King Project**  
by Donna McAlear, 2008

**Your audience is waiting Drag Kings - are  
you "man" enough for them?**

R. Best, 1996<sup>1</sup>

Toni Latour  
*The Drag King Project: Buster Cherry, \$3 Bill, 2005*

transmounted light jet print on Plexiglas  
(93.2 x 62.7 cm)  
SAG 2006.01.01

Image courtesy of the artist

The Surrey Art Gallery recently acquired three portraits by Toni Latour of *\$3 Bill* drag kings *Buster Cherry*, *Luke Wolf* and *T*, just before the 2008 purchase of Latour's entire *The Drag King Project* installation



Toni Latour, *The Drag King Project: Buster Cherry, \$3 Bill, 2005*, transmounted light jet print on Plexiglas (93.2 x 62.7 cm) SAG 2006.01.01 Image courtesy of the artist

by the Portrait Gallery of Canada. The installation includes large-scale photographs of performers from the Vancouver troupes *DK United* and *\$3 Bill* taken by Latour over a two-day session in 2005. Twenty-six transmounted photographs and a 40-minute video of drag performances form the visual elements of the installation. Quotes from Latour's recorded interviews with troupe members are wall-mounted in vinyl text to reveal behind-the-scenes complexities of gender identity politics experienced in lesbian and trans communities, especially those that are unique to the drag king sub-culture.

"The Portrait Gallery of Canada's mission is to honour, commemorate and celebrate those who have shaped this country, while redefining "portrait" for a new century."<sup>2</sup> It is significant that a body of work about queer culture has quickly found pride of place in Canada's official, visual and historical record. The swift recognition accorded *The Drag King Project* by these national and regional cultural institutions validates Vancouver-based Latour's foremost intent to "elevate drag kings to the level they deserve" in mainstream society.<sup>3</sup> These acquisitions also represent the artist's realization of her stated goal to connect her art world community with her marginalized queer community. Latour says, "I want to contribute to local queer history."<sup>4</sup> She is motivated to create greater understanding and acceptance of queer lives, and explains that:

**[Butch lesbians] threaten mainstream ideas of how women should look and behave, to the point where they are often the target of violence. They are almost invisible in mainstream culture and I think that's part of the problem. The more we see drag kings, butch dykes and trans men represented, the less fear and ignorance there will be.**<sup>5</sup>

Prior to the Surrey Art Gallery and the Portrait Gallery of Canada acquisitions – where *The Drag King Project* will certainly be introduced to diverse public audiences – the work was presented in marginal exhibition spaces. In 2004, before the project was complete, the images alone were presented at onepointsix gallery in Vancouver in a group exhibition called *Art Positive*, where partial proceeds went to support children in BC living with and affected by AIDS. The second full exhibition was at Vancouver's Gallery Gachet in September 2006, a gallery that "strives to provide a focal point for dialogue amongst outsider/dissident artists."<sup>6</sup> It traveled to Edmonton's Harcourt House, an artist-run-centre, in May 2007. It returned back to Vancouver for a group exhibition during the International Drag King Extravaganza and Academic Conference (IDKE9) in October 2007. The project also gained Latour a nomination for the 2007 Visual Artist of the Year award "for shining a spotlight on this city's drag kings" in an *Xtra West* readers' poll.<sup>7</sup>

As part of her practice, Toni Latour is a performance artist.<sup>8</sup> She is usually the sole performer in her interdisciplinary works that involve video and photographic documentation, but also include drawing and mixed media installations (*No Such Animal*, 2003 and *Dog Eat Dog*, 2003) and public art events (*Queers on the Move: The Make Friends Project*, 2003 - 2005). She delves into self-identity issues, documenting her ever-shifting social relationships with the art world, the queer community and the intimate realm of home. Latour says that her work "deals with the drives, desires and anxieties bound up in my own art production," especially the "self and social scrutiny" that go hand in hand with "staying motivated, maintaining appearances and honing survival skills". These examined states operate



Toni Latour, *The Drag King Project: Luke Wolf, \$3 Bill, 2005*, transmounted light jet print on Plexiglas (93.2 x 62.7 cm) SAG 2006.01.02 Image courtesy of the artist

within the competitive world of contemporary art production and distribution.<sup>9</sup>

Latour's early performance works – recorded in video and presented as single channel works and multi-channel installations – demonstrate the mundane and frustrating processes and pressures (self-imposed and external) that we endure to achieve success through public work. The day-to-day grind related to the twinned concepts of improvement and recognition is the subject of *You Can Do It* (1999), *Dog Eat Dog World* (2000), *Still To Do List* (2000), *Smile* (2003) and *The Race* (2004). Latour's choice of clichéd titles is a direct reflection of her subjects and illustrates how making art accessible to a wide audience is vital to her practice. She uses humour (inclusive of silliness and wit) as a bridging strategy, one that corresponds with how we often cope with life's tenuous moments. Although her tongue-in-cheek performances focus on her artistic labours, Latour stands in for us, demonstrating the commonplace experiences that precede failure and success alike. No matter what kind of work we do, we can relate to Latour's portrayals of the variable emotional states we all share in the process of finding (or losing) ourselves through work and in public life. This characteristic comes into play most directly in Latour's collaborations with lesbian and trans communities.

Art as social activism is a feature of Latour's queer projects where she transfers private concerns into the realm of public appearance. She wants to raise the visibility of queer culture, take it out of the shadows, and celebrate it. Therefore, she is motivated to engage the broadest audience possible. This mission is the foundation of her artistic strategy. *Queers on the Move: The Make Friends Project* is an ongoing public art piece that exemplifies Latour's decidedly lighthearted and optimistic approach.<sup>10</sup> She has fun

with activism and she hopes that her enthusiasm catches and spreads.

First performed in conjunction with *Out on Screen*, Vancouver's Queer Film and Video Festival, Latour and her partner, Rina Larsson, performed a song and dance act outside theatre venues for festival patrons (2003). Wearing trademark T-shirts and caps with pro-queer slogans – such as “Queer people can be both friendly and approachable” and “Queer people contribute to the economy” – the duo performed an amateurish parody that mingled rap lyrics and beats with cheerleading chants and choreography. Their song invited the audience to “make friends, make friends with lesbians.” Afterwards, the pair circulated among street audiences and served them cupcakes on trays. Later, in a friendly parody of rock-star culture and identity branding, Latour sold *Queers on the Move* merchandise on her website, further penetrating the market with their queer-friendly message.

Drawn to parody and performance, Latour was captivated when she attended her first drag king show in 2001. She recalls her impressions of this lesbian and trans sub-culture and its form of camp entertainment:

**It was sexy, it was seductive, but also there was a real sense of freedom and possibility there, a deconstruction of masculinity, a poking fun at masculinity, and also an embracing of masculinity.<sup>11</sup>**

Drag, in both its queen and king forms, is a means of parodying gender through cross-dressing and performing on stage. In addition to unique performances, it sometimes involves channelling popular entertainers of the past. Judy Garland, Marilyn Monroe, Mae West and Diana Ross are drag queen mainstays. Drag kings parody Barry



Toni Latour, *The Drag King Project: T, \$3 Bill*, 2005, transmounted light jet print on Plexiglas (93.2 x 62.7 cm) SAG 2006.01.03 Image courtesy of the artist

White, Andy Gibb, Prince and Anne Murray, to name a few. Yet as Latour's aforementioned statement suggests, the context of today's lesbian, feminist culture is diverse, inclusive of queers who identify as "butch," "femme," "lesbian," "trans-gendered" or "trans," the latter sometimes called "female-to-male" or "ftm." Exploring the complexities of drag king culture is beyond the scope of this essay.<sup>12</sup> Suffice to say that a drag king who performs a hyper-parody of the macho male likely offers more than the obvious stereotype that meets the eye. He might also challenge the masculine symbols he ridicules and, simultaneously, honour a reinvented "masculinity" in ways that are unique to that particular drag king's experience. Alix Dobkin describes lesbian drag as subversive and celebratory at the same time: "girls taking everything."<sup>13</sup>

It is worth noting that, historically, gay drag queens have experienced far greater representation in popular media than have lesbian drag kings. This writer can not think of a popular drag king presence that is equivalent to RuPaul's role in the Hollywood film *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar* (1995) and as the "First Face of M.A.C.," promoting "Viva Glam" lipstick in M.A.C.'s fundraising campaign for AIDs research.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, butch lesbians and trans individuals were largely shut out of women's feminist movements from the 1960s to 1980s, a situation that is poignantly explored in Leslie Feinberg's lesbian novel *Stone Butch Blues* (1993).<sup>15</sup> It was not until the early 1990s that the American lesbian photographer Catherine Opie presented her *Being and Having* (1991) portrait series of tattooed and pierced butch lesbians in art museums. Opie, an avowed leather dyke, told *The Advocate* in 1997: "I'm interested in making lesbian space visible. ... Thanks to Ellen, we're in the mainstream, but I still don't see anyone representing me."<sup>16</sup>

Scholarly literature reports that drag king entertainers began to surface in lesbian communities, mainly in large urban centres like New York, San Francisco, Toronto and Vancouver, in the mid-1990s. Latour's *The Drag King Project* follows the publication of two books that chart the history of the phenomenon: Judith "Jack" Halberstam's and Del LaGrace Volcano's *The Drag King Book* (1999) and *The Drag King Anthology*, edited by Donna Jean Troka, Kathleen Lebesco and Jean Bobby Noble (2003).<sup>17</sup> Rachel Pepper comments on these recent publications and the ascent of the drag king:

**Drag king culture shot out from the belly of dyke society like a high-speed cannonball. It seems like only a moment ago that the first drag king contests were making the rounds through various cities, and an old girlfriend of mine was publishing the first drag king calendar, wondering whether anyone would even buy it. Now, drag kings are everywhere, and drag is an accepted subculture within lesbian society. In fact, to women in their twenties, it probably is lesbian society.**<sup>18</sup>

Confidence is abundant in Latour's compelling and straightforward portraits of queer performers in *The Drag King Project*. They gaze clearly at the viewer in friendly engagement. The portraits are crisp, full-colour and large-scale, lending monumentality and humanity to the sitters. Photographed against a pure white background, their performing identities stand out: the corporate stud (*Buster Cherry*), the lumberjack (*T*) and the militant enforcer (*Luke Wolf*). Despite the theatrical costumes and poses, these drag kings appear relaxed and very comfortable in their skins.

Latour brings life to the portraits by including excerpts from her conversations with them in large wall texts



adjacent to the images. These personal stories give us a glimpse into why they are motivated to perform as drag kings. Their voices are a critical aspect of *The Drag King Project*; they offer cultural and political context and instill the portraits with soul. We come to know that they are a mixed group, crossing age, culture, ethnicity, sexuality and gender. Performers comment about the pleasures of gender-bending, saying, “It’s really interesting just to be in a body that’s not really yours at any given moment,” and “I can touch on my masculinity more, and that feels good. It’s a different feeling to be male instead of female on stage.” We also learn that nothing is simple when another drag king reveals:

**I’m trans and people don’t understand how if I’m trans I can be a drag king. I get called a lesbian all the time and I correct people all the time. I’m the only straight guy in the group. But it’s been interesting. It’s been a bumpy road, but it’s getting better.**

Similarly, a performer recalls private, youthful struggles against society’s heterosexual norms, stating, “I remember my dad taught me to tie a tie when I was about six. I used to get in trouble for it, so I did it secretly when I was a child.” Also, the pure joy of a drag king moment and the popular recognition it offers is declared by many in *DK United* and *\$3 Bill*, who enthusiastically shout, “I got to perform *A Boy Named Sue*, the Johnny Cash classic!” “I just loved when the crowd went crazy,” and “Everybody knows my name.”<sup>19</sup>

The last word goes to Toni Latour, who explains, in “Vancouver’s queer community . . . there is a sense of strength and accomplishment marking the new millennium as we begin to document our lives.” She is committed to making art projects that will further “contribute to ever expanding queer Canadian

representations, allowing “our stories to take their rightful place in Canadian History.”<sup>20</sup> For the majority of us who are distant from queer culture, *The Drag King Project* makes visible and powerful that which mainstream society chooses not to see. The timely participation of the Surrey Art Gallery and Portrait Gallery of Canada in supporting Latour’s project by collecting this artwork will extend Latour’s conversation with the broader public audiences that she seeks and, finally, enter that dialogue into history.

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#### Notes

1 Best, R. “Drag Kings: Chicks with Dicks,” *Canadian Woman Studies* Volume 16 Number 2, Spring 1996, page 58.

2 “About Us,” Portrait Gallery of Canada, Library and Archives Canada <http://www.portraits.gc.ca/009001-4000.01-e.html> Accessed August 20, 2008.

3 Toni Latour cited in Shanti, Ghassan. “The Drag King Project: Toni Latour celebrates the butch side of dyke,” *Xtra West*, Wednesday, September 13, 2006 [http://www.xtra.ca/public/viewstory.aspx?AFF\\_TYPE=4&STORY\\_ID=2107&PUB\\_TEMPLATE\\_ID=2](http://www.xtra.ca/public/viewstory.aspx?AFF_TYPE=4&STORY_ID=2107&PUB_TEMPLATE_ID=2) Accessed August 20, 2008.

4 *ibid.*

5 *ibid.*

6 <http://www.gachet.org/> Accessed August 20, 2008.

7 Perelle, Robin. “And the Nominees are... HEROES 2007: Presenting the finalists for the 2007 Xtra West Hero Awards,” *Xtra West*, Thursday, April 26, 2007 [http://www.xtra.ca/public/viewstory.aspx?AFF\\_TYPE=4&STORY\\_ID=2962&PUB\\_TEMPLATE\\_ID=7](http://www.xtra.ca/public/viewstory.aspx?AFF_TYPE=4&STORY_ID=2962&PUB_TEMPLATE_ID=7) Accessed August 20, 2008. *Xtra.ca* is a newspaper dedicated to the coverage of queer issues.

8 Toni Latour was born in 1975 in York, Ontario, now included in the GTA as Toronto. She received a Bachelor of Fine Arts from the University of Windsor (Ontario) in 1998 and a Master of Fine Arts from the University of Western Ontario (London) in 2000.



She moved to Vancouver in 2001. Since 2003, Latour has worked as an instructor of Media Art in Capilano University's Studio Art Department.

9 Latour, Toni. Artist's Statement <http://www.ucfv.ca/visualarts/faculty/latourt/ArtistStatement.htm> Accessed August 20, 2008.

10 See Toni Latour, Projects, *Queers On the Move: The Make Friends Project* <http://www.ucfv.ca/visualarts/faculty/latourt/QueersontheMove.htm> Accessed August 20, 2008.

11 Toni Latour cited in Natasha Barsotti, Video Interview, *Xtra West On-line*, Friday, May 2, 2008, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZHRp1rcNHSI> Accessed August 20, 2008.

12 See Noble, J. Bobby. "Strange Sisters and Boy Kings: Post-Queer Trans-gendered bodies in performance," *Canadian Woman Studies* Volume 24 Number 2-3, Winter/Spring 2005, pages 164-7. Noble discusses lesbian gender identity issues and drag king culture, and reviews the work of Toronto drag king performers Anna Camilleri and Deb Pearce (aka "Man Murray" and "Dirk Diggler").

13 Dobkin, Alix. "Pirates, Anarchists, and Drag Kings," *off our backs* Volume 29 Number 10, November 1999, page 15.

14 RuPaul reports: "I had been using M.A.C cosmetics since 1992 and I knew it was a great product. So when Frank Toskin and Frank Angelo asked me to join the company and become the "First Face of M.A.C," we all knew we were going to make history together but no one could have known how much of a dream come true this was for me. Over the course of six years, I launched store openings in ten countries and helped raise over \$22 million dollars for the M.A.C AIDS fund." <http://www.rupaul.com/bio/index.shtml> Accessed August 20, 2008.

15 For a review of Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues*, Ithaca: Firebrand Books, 1993, see Ann Decter, "A New Red Dress and Dad's Blue Suit: Writing Butch, Femme and Gender Freedom into Feminism" *FUSE* Volume 17 Number 4, May/June 1994, pages 37-8.

16 Opie cited in Glen Helfand, "Shooting Star," *The Advocate* 742, September 16, 1997, page 73.

17 Halberstam, Judith "Jack" and Del LaGrace Volcano, *The Drag King Book*, New York: Serpent's Tail, 1999; and Troka, Donna Jean, Kathleen Lebesco and Jean Bobby Noble (eds.) *The Drag King Anthology*, New York: Harrington Park Press, 2003.

18 Pepper, Rachel. "From Subtext to Subversion," *Curve* Volume 14 Number 8, December 2004, page 52.

19 Drag King Interview Excerpts, Summer 2005, from Toni Latour, *The Drag King Project*, 2005.

20 Latour, Toni. Upcoming <http://www.ucfv.ca/visualarts/faculty/latourt/Upcoming.htm> Accessed August 20, 2008.

## Artist's Statement (2008)

### The Drag King Project

**...many lesbian photographers have photographed themselves, their lovers, and their communities motivated by the belief that photographic self-representations are not only empowering in and of themselves, but, even more important, further the process of political consolidation and mobilization.**

Abigail Solomon-Godeau,  
*Representing Women: The Politics of Self-Representation.*<sup>1</sup>

In 2005, I worked with Vancouver drag king troupes *DK United* and *\$3 Bill* to produce *The Drag King Project*. The membership of both troupes crossed age, culture, ethnicity, sexuality, gender and experience. The result was a project made up of 26 transmounted photographs, video documentation of live performances, and vinyl wall-mounted text derived from audio interviews with the participating kings.

My motivation in conceiving *The Drag King Project* came from a desire for continued queer representations from within queer communities. Giving voice to one's world can be both a declaration and a celebration.

For decades we have seen drag queens represented in popular culture (often as the subject of ridicule, unfortunately) creating a firmly planted image within mainstream consciousness. This is not the case for drag kings, despite their historical and contemporary presence, including appearances on British music hall stages since the early 1900's. Today, in Vancouver and across Canada, lesbian and drag communities repeatedly carve out places where definitions and types are celebrated, mocked and transcended.

Historically, our sisters and brothers fought long hard battles, and as a result, we live in a time that is increasingly open to social transgression, gender manipulation and sexual complexity. As outlined in Smith and Greig's *Women in Pants: Manly Maidens, Cowgirls, and Other Renegades* (2003), Leslie Feinberg's novel *Stone Butch Blues* (1993) and others, in as early as the 1960's butch lesbians and trans men were imprisoned for wearing men's clothing, beaten for appearing 'masculine', and belittled for showing affection to their lovers. Their strength and determination, pre and post Stonewall, provides us with a better landscape to operate in, but the struggle is not over.

Donna McAlear says "Self-definition can be a conscious, lifetime project if one's gender, race and sexual preferences are at odds with society's norms. A strategic counter-position in self-assertion often presents itself in exaggerated performance and over-exposure, with prime examples being drag queens and kings of gay and lesbian culture."<sup>2</sup>

Within the past decade, despite minimal exposure and awareness from popular media, drag kings have exploded on queer Canadian scenes. The drag king troupes I worked with explore constructs and embodiments of masculinity from a variety of perspectives. They provide us with a better understanding of the performativity and fluidity of gender and sexual identities. In addition, they demonstrate that masculinity is not exclusive to biology, as they both perform and live their genders. On stage and on the street, drag kings and butch dykes offer an alternative to the commonly accepted ways of being a woman, and ways of being a man.

Through projects like this, we share our lives, our ideas and ourselves with both neighboring and divergent communities. It is my hope that

*The Drag King Project* will contribute to ever-expanding queer Canadian representations and mark a time of celebration of transsexual, transgender and drag king visibility.

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## Notes

1. Solomon-Godeau, Abigail. "Representing Women: The Politics of Self-Representation." *Reframings: New American Feminist Photographies*. Ed. Diane Neumaier. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995. p.
2. McAlear, Donna. *Rosalie Favell: I Searched Many Worlds*. Winnipeg: Winnipeg Art Gallery, 2003.

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