



REFLECTIONS OF THE RAINBOW QUEENS

BY ANGELKA DODD

The Rainbow Lounge, formerly known as the Rainbow Cattle Co., is a gay bar in Dummerston where a group of local drag queens performs monthly. In a collection of black-and-white photographs entitled "Backstage at the Rainbow Cattle Co.," Westminster photographer Evie Lovett brings us an intimate look at the preparations and transformations that precede the dazzle and spectacle of drag.

At the Rainbow Lounge, the dressing room is the basement of the bar, a former restaurant on Route 5 between Putney and Brattleboro, and backstage is the kitchen. Through these photographs, we are invited into the dim, crowded basement where water heaters and rusty pressure tanks vie for space with metal shelving packed tight with shoe boxes and handbags, racks of clothing, piles of plastic bins, chipped foam mannequin heads sporting all manner of hats and wigs, and of course clouds of boas. A couple of mildewy-looking rugs run the length of the long, narrow room, and various pipes and tubes hang from the ceiling along with bare fluorescent light fixtures.

This dingy chaos is the backdrop for Lovett's subjects: the drag queens themselves, working their magic. We see the performers shaving, applying makeup, inserting padding, preparing for the grand entrance. The mood of the images is contemplative and focused. We are drawn into a very private space, both cozy and intense, as Lovett's lens reveals the meditative, ritualistic flavor of the performers' evolution from average Joe to Fabulous Queen.

A self-described quiet, modest and private person, Evie Lovett found her work in recent years turning toward costuming on

many levels, from children playing at dress-up, to Halloween, masquerade parties, and now drag.

But when she first approached the Rainbow Cattle Co., it was with some trepidation: "When I first saw the show, I thought, 'these queens will eat me alive!'" But when Evie introduced herself and proposed the project, she found herself welcomed immediately and invited back stage. For about a year she

photographs. It became a give and take. [The Queens] have an ease with themselves, which was good for me because I am very modest. What I learned about myself was quietly revealing. Whenever someone is open with you, it causes you to deliberate on your own openness. It cracks you open in some way."

As someone who has been to many shows at the Rainbow Lounge, danced to the same techno remixes many Saturday nights as

opening. She has a husband and two young kids and says she doesn't really like to hang out in bars.

But as I looked over the pictures in "Backstage at the Rainbow Cattle Co.," something quite amazing began to happen. I could feel Evie's tenderness called out in her subjects, and I could feel their wildness resonating in her. This show is as much a story about the photographer as it is about drag queens, and probably more so. There are a couple of pictures, both images of reflections in a mirror, that illustrate that reflection. The first shows a performer, fully made-up and bedecked with sparkling choker necklace and wrist cuff, tenderly brushing her hair. She looks like her kids are tucked into bed and she's getting ready for some elegant party. The second is another performer, hair tousled, in her bathrobe pulling a smoke out of a pack of Newports. She looks like she's been slinging coffee all night at a truck stop, and you better not give her any lip.

It would be easy to watch the Rainbow's queens on stage and never see what Evie has captured so lovingly in her photographs: the seriousness with which they approach their work, the depth of devotion to their art. What struck me most as I looked at the images was that here was a true collaboration, a testament to the way we reflect ourselves back to one another and grow closer and more connected as a result of that process. Both the photographer and her subjects took risks in order to make this happen, and embodied in that risk is the tension and depth of feeling that makes art speak. These beautiful images speak volumes. ▼

Angelka Dodd lives in Westminster with her partner Adrienne and loves to grow vegetables and walk the land when she's not dancing at the Rainbow Lounge.

"When I first saw the show, I thought, 'these queens will eat me alive!'"
Photographer Evie Lovett

went to the monthly shows and hung out in the basement dressing room taking pictures, and it was there that she found her connection with this rowdy, raunchy bunch.

"On the one hand, they were totally welcoming, and on the other hand they completely ignored me, which was great," Evie says. "Eventually, I found myself crossing the line between photographer and participant. Someone would say 'Oh, can you help me with this, can you carry this tray on stage?' And I was always coming back and bringing

various exes and their exes and theirs looked on, cheered and hooted as the drag queens strutted and worked their lips to the vibrato of some diva's defiant howling and got sloppier and more sloshed as the night wore on, I was especially curious to see this set of photographs.

I was curious to see what my friend Evie Lovett would make of this crazy scene. She is a friend you might meet for a walk in the woods, or run into at a bowl-a-thon for Big Brothers/Big Sisters, or sip wine with at an art

Backstage at the Rainbow Cattle Co.
Hooker Dunham Theater and Gallery
Brattleboro, February 6-29.
Opening drag show (\$10) February 6, 9 p.m.
Proceeds benefit the InSight photography project.