

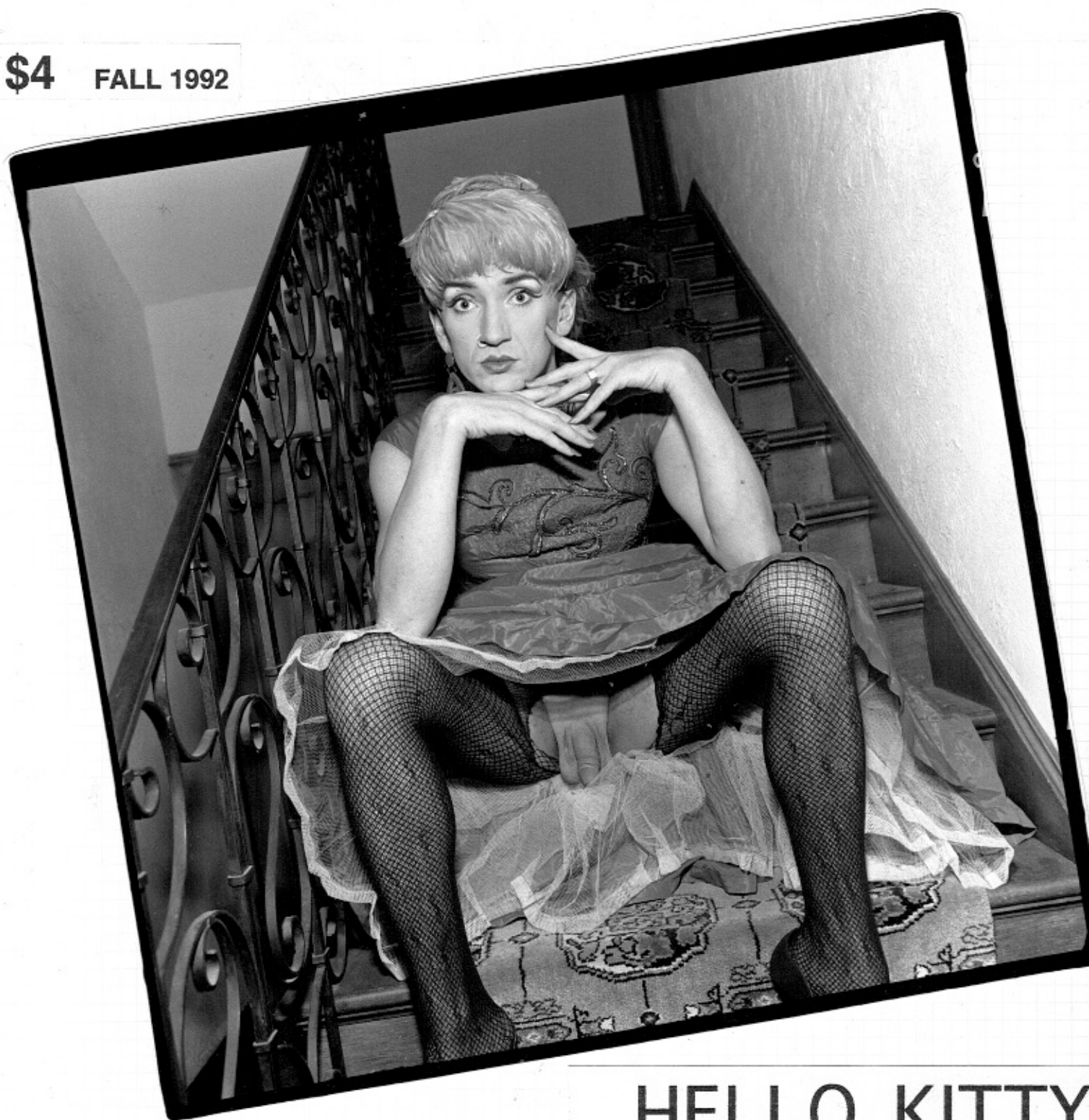
T h e A r t O f G e n d e r

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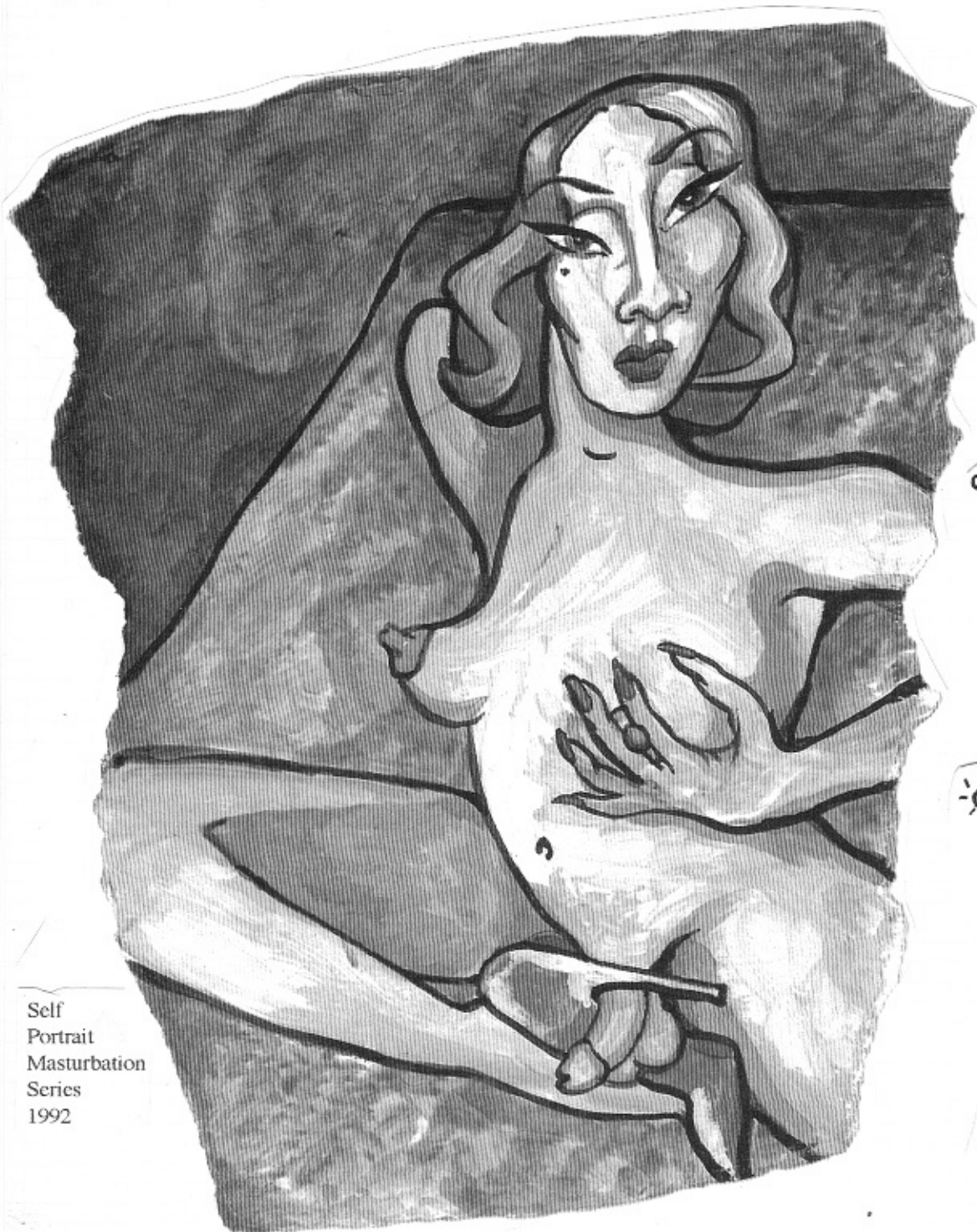
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**FALL 1992**



## HELLO KITTY

AN INTIMATE INTERVIEW



Self  
Portrait  
Masturbation  
Series  
1992

Intimate  
Moments  
with  
Kitty  
Litter

Every few months or so, in nightclubs all over San Francisco, an excited murmur spreads through crowds of drag queens and the beautiful people. Suddenly the city seems brighter, more complete.

**"Miss Kitty is back!"**

Following her last trip to the Land of the Rising Sun, the staff at Venus wanted to find out what this incredibly special Queen is up to as she travels through Asia. In the interview that followed we discovered aspects of Miss Kitty that we had never dreamed existed and it is an honor and a pleasure to share her with you now...

**How does it feel to be back?**

I love it. Everytime I come back I don't wanna leave you know, I totally totally love this city. I feel so nurtured when I come back here. I feel like my relationships (here) are real relationships. When I come back I go, "OH, that's right, this is what it's like to have a real friendship."

**How long have you been in San Francisco?**

I was born here. I was born in Berkeley. I've been travelling now, on and off, since I was 16. But I keep coming back here. I take some trek for usually a maximum of a year or two years, then always come back here.

**Have you been doing drag very long?**

Yeah, since I was about, well... I've been doing drag since I was about four. (giggle) But doing drag in theater since I think maybe fourteen? When I was fourteen I was in a show. it was called "

The Outrageous Beauty Review" and it was done at the Mabuhay. It was a show directed by a man named Frank Moore... I played a little girl at her first recital and my name was Shirley Gumm. And Shirley Gumm sang "Somewhere Over The Rainbow" while her evil sister did mean things to her on stage. This woman was playing my evil sister, and she took my recital flowers and crushed them up and threw them on the floor and threw cupcakes at me and finally comes and rips my dress off and it's revealed that Shirley Gumm is actually a little boy (laughs). So that was sort of my welcome to drag or drag theater.

**How many times total have you been to Japan?**

First time nine years ago probably six times. The last couple have been real short. This last was from December to February. The longest was for two years and at the end of two years I was just ready to go crazy.

**Do you travel for just the thrill of it or do you travel for work?**

Both. It's really my addiction. It's my drug of choice. The fact that you can get on a plane and nine hours later you're in a completely different reality, you know, that is a permanent reality. It is not an altered state. It's a permanent reality, and after a nine-hour plane ride you are in a completely different permanent reality, and by going into that reality and bringing your drag or who you are, you bend that reality that's permanent and change what's permanent there. So for me that's what keeps me going when I get into a slump. When I get into some kind of "I have no work I'm in San Francisco should I, like, work as Santa Clause or pass out food coupons on the corner or get a word processing job" depression, the way I get out of that is by getting on a plane and going somewhere else and changing my reality completely.

**Where do you work in Japan?**

Originally, when I first went there, I was 20 and I went there to be a male stripper. I answered an ad in the back of the Bay Area Reporter. Someone called me and said (in a Japanese accent, pretty cute) "Can you be on the plane for Japan in two days" and, um, I dropped out of college let my apartment



PHOTO BY K Weinstein



go, which I had rented like a week before, quit a job that I was working in a clothing store and got a passport and was on a plane... in two days! And I had no idea what I was going to, and ended up in a Japanese comedy club called "Banana Power" in Tokyo. (I was) 20 years old, never stripped before in my life, and of course told them I had, told them I was a professional stripper. And it was this very innocent little comedy club where they had Japanese comedy acts, up and coming comedy acts, and in between the comedy acts they had me doing my strip tease. And, um, then the finale was, hence the name "Banana Power," a banana pie show, where everyone got on stage in these banana power jump suits and got pies thrown in their faces-- the stripper and the comedians! So that's what first brought me over there. And I worked there for six months.

...I had been sent over by an agent the first time. The second time I came back to Japan I was thinking, well, what would happen if I brought drag there and tried to see what other kinds of work it would get. So I went back to the club that I worked at at first. They offered me my job back, but I told them that if I did it this time that I wanted to do it in drag, and they loved the idea

and people went totally crazy. The Japanese were so into drag. Then I started getting a lot of publicity at this original place, and my boss said that I could get any other work that I wanted to do and I wouldn't have to pay them a commission or anything like that because they were my sponsor.

So then I started doing freelance stuff, and television, and magazines, and some Japanese bit parts, some in drag and some out of drag. But the best feedback I got there, the best attention was from stuff I did in drag.



Juliana's Tokyo Painting Performance 1992

**But now your drag shows have evolved into performance art pieces?**

Yes. Let me tell you about one of my favorites. I did a painting performance in Japan, in a large disco, very conservative disco, called Juliana's Tokyo, which is a het(erosexual) pick-up joint. I got the job because they were having a performance series sponsored by Coca Cola and they had shitloads of money and didn't have anyone to perform and they heard about me. So I lined up the job on my last night in town, and they just did not know what to do with me! Because I knew how conservative, het and terrible it was so I wanted to do

something specifically to scare them a little bit. Everybody stopped dancing, which never happens in my painting performance. They're usually atmosphere along with the disco, which is why I don't use my own music. But everybody (at Julianna's) stopped and when it was over nobody applauded they just stared.

In the performance, I'm painting the character that I'm dancing. The character is a very haggard-out Hindu goddess who's gotta do her laundry and get all of her chores done and she going kind of mad and bestial because of all of these prescribed

things that she's told to do. So she sort of steps out of it through the painting.

It's painted mostly with my hands, some with my mouth, and my hair.

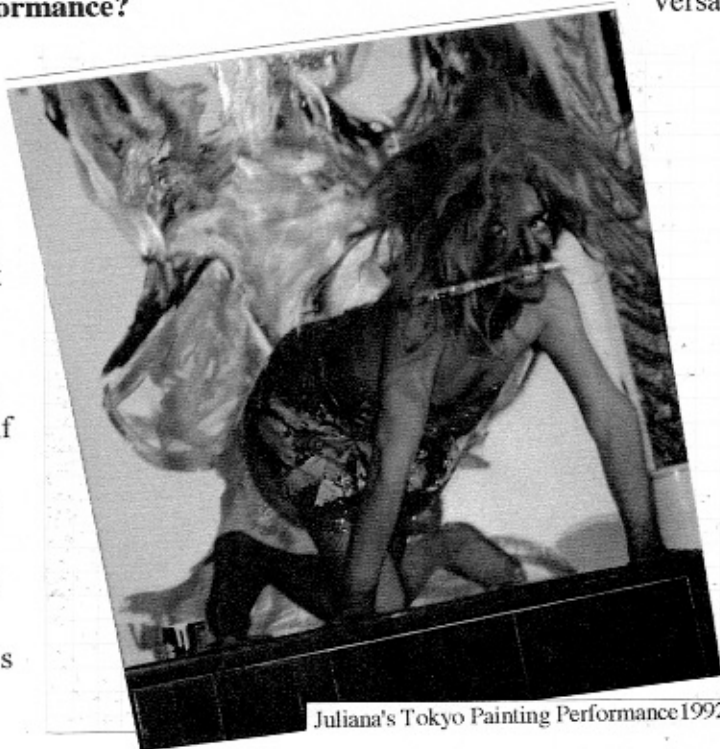
**Do you premeditate a story, or does it just develop through the performance?**

It starts with me putting my make-up on which is where the character comes from. I don't always paint myself... but I usually paint the character that I'm dancing, so even if I'm painting six different figures I try to change character and live the dance as I paint it or it comes out of the dance, you know. The dance is inspired

by what goes on the wall, so it goes both ways. The painting comes out of the performance, the performance comes out of the character. But as far as charting out what I'm going to do beforehand, no, it happens spontaneously. When you are open to letting magic or spirit come into your painting, when you're not letting your ego get in the way and say, "This is going to be a good painting,"... you know, sometimes its not a good painting, but at least it's real... It has a quality that a more finished painting might not have...

I'd never done a painting performance in the Bay Area Jerome's painting and you look

until I did the walls on the dance floor at Uranus, which was great 'cause a lot of my friends here have never seen me do a painting performance. So it was a lot of fun....



Juliana's Tokyo Painting Performance 1992

**It seems like all the drag queens we know are either painters or artists...**

Painting and drag, in a lot of ways, are the same thing. Drag is painting on another side of yourself, and finding that you are another character, there is another character inside of you, and that you can paint that on that you can release that, and be another side that's not there all the time. And painting is the same for me, I always paint people, faces. I always, even when I paint a portrait, I'm always feeling what its like to be that person, or character. What does it feel like to be something that you were not

born, and told by your parents that you are not, you know? And I think that's the pull for a lot of drag queens. You look at Jerome, she looks just like one of her paintings and vice versa. It's the same relationship.

**Tell us about your experience with Tamasaburo.**

When I first went to Japan, when I was 20, I was first turned on to Kabuki Theater, which was originally started as an all women's theatre. And very early on in that, because theater was closely associated with prostitution, they changed it, and it became an all men's theater, where all parts, women and men were played by men.

But at one point, I can't remember what Shogun it was, but a real right wing government came into power...and they were sort of the moral majority, because there was so much prostitution in the Kabuki Theater with the Onigata, who is the man who plays the woman, a Japanese female impersonator, the onigata were prostituting themselves to the Samurais and the Samuri would come to the theater and whoever was the most respected knight would get to sleep with the most beautiful "actress." So this very right wing Shogun comes along and orders all the actors to live in this ghetto,

segregating actors from the rest of humanity. But that wasn't enough, so the Shogun ordered that the Kabuki actresses had to shave their toplocks, which was a style that men wore, where they were bald on the top of their head, and it was considered very erotic for men to ave. After this, the Kabuki actors in order to still be erotic and to still be in drag, started wearing a piece of purple silk on their foreheads as a political statement.

So... the first time I saw Tamasaburo Bondo, he was wearing a piece of purple silk on his head. Now, first of all, the Kabuki theater is so totally devoid of any sense of color that we have in the west of color. They use these colors that all mix together and the theater is a mix of 2-D and 3-D and it's like a prehistoric moving technicolor cartoon. With complete hidden emotion that flows out in little places. But my first vision of Tamasaburo sent me into tears ----I had to find out who this person was.



PHOTO BY K Weinstein

He was so like a creature from another planet. Not just femininity, but so much an ultra femininity that it was like goddess quality. So I found his book of photographs. But in the Kabuki theater it's very difficult to get an audience with Tamasaburo. He's the equivalent of Mick Jagger in our culture. He's actually designated by the Japanese government as a living national treasure, which means that he's a living work of art who's sacred to the historic preservation of Japan.

So when he came to New York I was really excited that he was coming to the Japanese Cultural Center and I quilted a portrait of him in fabrics and made it into a makeup brush case. I talked to the manager of the theater there and asked for an audience with Tamasaburo so I could present him with this brush case and get him to sign my book. So I ended up at the front of the reception line and entered through the curtains, and there on the tatami mat was Tamasaburo with no wig, just his white face and his under

dressing kimono, and a white skull cap, so completely bowed that he was pressed to the floor as I came in the room. So I bowed to him and entered the room. In Japanese I said something like, it is the first time I met you and you inspire me on a very personal level. And then I gave him the makeup brush case and he opened it up and he got tears in his eyes and held it to his breast and said, "Oh it's too beautiful to ever soil with a makeup brush."...

For me that was my equivalent of a teenage girl meeting y'know Rod Stewart it was like, wow, I've touched heaven...

### **We want to hear the Thailand stories.**

In the first year that I went to Thailand, it was so incredible



PHOTO BY K Weinstein



PHOTO BY K Weinstein

Miss Kitty and Jerome

that I had to go back two more times that same year. It opened me up so much. There is drag there in every walk of life. You go to a public market and



there's a drag queen selling bananas, you go to a straight bar, where everyone's sitting out front talking and joking and there's a drag queen sitting there with the old men laughing. You go to a small island and you see a couple of drag queens sitting on this very straight beach in their bikinis putting on a little fashion show. The Thai people have such a sense of humor and a sense of camp that they understand drag. Everyone...so you have a sort of bond with people when you go there. When I dress up there

I'm not only treated well, y'know, in Japan I'm treated with respect, but in Thailand I'm treated with understanding. Everyone there knows someone who's a lady boy... And remarkably, people there will

clock me when I'm not in drag, when I'm in my butchest clothes (I know that's hard to believe but sometimes when I'm travelling I can look pretty

butch) and instantly they clock me which I looove. I think it's so fabulous, and they have a sort of musical way of using English they say, "Mmmmm you same-same lady..." And everywhere Jerome went, "Mmmmm she same-same lady olldd." And when Arturo (Patsy Cline) was doing drag there he had fallen in love with this inflatable chicken which he wore as a head piece when ever we went out in drag. But when Arturo is out as a boy you'd never tell, he's such a dude, but people would come up and say

### as the biggest cultural difference between America and Asia?

What comes to mind, what struck me hardest was that there is no violence in Tokyo. It feels safe all the time. There's no queer bashing, there's no violence or negativity, on the whole, towards gayness. Queerness, different-ness, so what that means is that at any hour of the night if you are a woman or a drag queen in an outrageous costume you can walk or take public transit anywhere in the city. There's no place dangerous that you can't walk. So at 20



MISS KITTY HELPS OUT WITH THE COLLAPSE OF WORLD COMMUNISM WITH GRAFFITI ON THE BERLIN WALL (1987 ORIGINAL DESTROYED)

"Oh, why you no wear chicken?"

**Obviously there are many, but can you describe what you see**

years old, here was someone who was bashed at 16 and who went to an integrated High school and got shit from people... even though I was not racist when I was going through

the Berkeley school system, there was so much anti-white racism... coming from a background like that, I just assumed that's the way the world was, and I went to Japan and here's a place where there is no violence whatsoever! So that was the first time that I was able to... say, "Oh, I don't have to walk around like a closed being. I can be myself, I don't have to worry about someone attacking me because I'm myself. You know, I don't have to stay in my bedroom. So I think the big cultural difference that affected me on a personal note the most was going there and realizing that you can be a woman, or a drag queen and not be subject to attack. Those places are few and far between.

Which is interesting because Japan isn't known as a gay Mecca or anything. The gay community there is very underground and is only now beginning to organize itself.

**Are you saying that queerness is openly accepted there?**

Not accepted for JAPANESE people. That's the big distinction. I would hate to be born in Japan and be gay. I know that I would have ended up either in

front of a train or out of a window. I would have been one of the (many) suicide casualties. There is no option to be different in Japan. You're expected to be...well, their expression is, "If the nail sticks out hammer it

from the eligible list or the company arranges a marriage for you and if you refuse you will never get promoted beyond a certain point. If you are a woman and you refuse you will be fired from your job. so

that way they try to homogenize everyone to be the same and establish a family unit. But then if you have a mister on the side instead of a mistress that's fine, accepted, no one would think twice about it. But it's not acceptable to choose that as away of life.

**But for you, a foreigner, it's ok to be out there?**

Expected! Expected. I'm expected to be out there because I'm GAIJIN, a foreigner. Gaijin means outside human. It's not even human, from outside Japan, it's

not even human. So if you're outside Japanese, and are even really outrageous different and are acting out all the fantasies that they can't act out then that's great by them, but that's not acceptable for Japanese.



Miss Kitty at the New Klubstitute Photo by DeAnn Oliver

in." So if you're one of those nails you beat the shit out of it until you get it in line with all of the other nails. Even today they have set ups where if you're a 35 year-old man and work for a company and aren't married you either take a wife



**So you're a celebrity and even the safety that you feel there is a result of their suppression...**

Because to keep people from acting out violently in such a small space... that repression is keeping everyone in line, and everyone's duty to the family and company is in a sense partially responsible for the non-violence.

**So what you're saying is that you have really cashed in on that system.**

Right... all of my work there is acting out a fantasy that Japanese people can't.

**Now, are you a complete outsider there, I mean, you have acquaintances and circles of people...**

Yes, of course. And I know a lot of Japanese freaks who, because of the society they've grown up in, are not freaks because it is fashionable. They are freaks because they were born a freak and somehow they made it past puberty without jumping in front of a train. So they very strong, very special people who I love dearly and respect a lot. At this point in history I think most Japanese freaks are living in New York's East Village...

**So, after having gone to all of these incredible cultures where you're so embraced, what are your feelings about coming back to America where its met with so much hostility and frequently violence?**

Well, my first emotion when you say that is that it makes me very sad that most people's reality is limited to believing that there is a violent world. Most American queens don't know any other way. It makes me very angry that queens here

**"We need a race of total femme spirits to come down from outer space and give us a hand."**

are forced to be less than who we are. But, also, that anger and that fear, as much as I hate it, I also recognize that it gives us a kind of energy and leads us to do things that aren't really necessary in Japan or Thailand.

My initial reaction towards the idea that society needs to

accept is that everyone is an individual, and don't expect them to be you. That applies to everyone who's different or is a freak. In a lot of ways it's the same fight, but minorities don't always see themselves as related to the struggles of other minorities. I think religion really gets in the way of that when it tries to organize spirituality, which is really a joke. I'm very spiritually oriented. I grew up agnostic, so I wasn't fed any lines. I believe that religion is a contradiction, or a hypocrisy, because you cannot

organize spirituality, it's something that is unique for each person. Personally, I believe that our ultimate goal is spiritual hermaphroditism. Ying and yang, man and woman, y'know. I hope that we are working toward becoming balanced beings. I see western religions working against that, and I even see Buddhism working against it. I see paganism and Earth religions supporting that. Supporting an ultimate goal of balance, for the

globe, our mother, and ourselves. Thanks to western religion the world as swung to far far far in the direction of the male. so, we need some help. We need a race of total femme spirits to come down from outer space and give us a hand.

THE INTERVIEW WITH MISS KITTY WAS CONDUCTED BY ROBYN, TAYLOR AND DEANN