’A daughter of the house of LaBeija, one of the legendary children, and an icon in the making’

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Kia LaBeija, “24” series, Inkjet Prints

Visual AIDS is thrilled to repost Hugh Ryan’ Vice profile about artist member Kia LaBeija on our website below. Kia’s striking series “24” is currently on view in Los Angeles for the Art AIDS America exhibition. See the article on Vice.

Power in the Crisis: Kia LaBeija’s Radical Art as a 25-Year-Old, HIV-Positive Woman of Color

By Hugh Ryan

Before we start talking, Kia LaBeija slips off her shoes and runs her feet through the grass-green Astroturf at the end of a pier at the Hudson River Park Trust, one of the most brutally, beautifully gentrified parts of Manhattan. It’s the first spring day that feels like summer, not just hot, but heavy, thick. Everyone here wants to be naked. Thirty years ago, everyone would have been.

Thirty years ago, all that was here was cement and skin, cracked pavement and queer brown bodies turning browner in the sun. “The piers” have been a haven for queer people for decades. These days, it’s primarily youth of color drawn to the West Village by its reputation, and driven to its outskirts by its residents. If you watch Paris Is Burning, the controversial documentary about New York City’s queer black ballroom and house scene, the piers often appear in the background. Bound by the West Side Highway on one side and the Jersey skyline on the other, this thin strip of former wasteland was once sovereign queer territory. Now it looks like a backyard in Dwell magazine, that kind of modern, Scandin-Asian design that says nothing about where you are, but looks great in photos. It’s been barely more than a decade since the city erected a fence and began “cleaning” the area. Gentrification moves fast in Manhattan--now all the traces of the old erotic and artistic cruising ground are gone.

The queers are still here though, a little more subdued and a lot more policed, but still pumping down the sidewalk and lounging in the shade. Given both its history and its present, the pier seemed like the

perfect place to talk with the scion of the most venerable house in all of ballroom, the house that started it all: LaBeija.

“That name comes with a lot of history,” Kia LaBeija tells me. “And in respecting that name and that legacy, I’ve made it my duty to know the history.” The legacy she refers to is some 40 years of queer black and Latino culture, organized into groups (called houses) and revolving around balls, all-night social events cum dance battles that began in Harlem and now happen in cities around the world. The balls existed long before the houses, but in 1977, Crystal LaBeija announced that her event was hosted by the “House of LaBeija,” a phraseology that soon caught on. Once you join a house, you can take on that name, which is how Kia Michelle Benbow became Kia LaBeija. And by using that name in all aspects of her life, that history is represented in everything LaBeija does, as a dancer, photographer, and storyteller, sharing her truth as a young person born HIV positive.

LaBeija was out about her status long before she joined the ballroom scene. In the seventh grade, during an AIDS awareness assembly at her Manhattan middle school, she came out for the first time. Publicly. The presenter was running an icebreaker: Stand up if you know someone who’s gay, stand up if you’re gay, etc. When he asked for HIV-positive people to stand up, LaBeija found herself on her feet before she’d even thought through what she was doing.

"I had this oh shit moment,“ she recalls. ”I did not think I’d be the only person." Her friends were supportive, but there wasn’t anyone else who really understood what she was going through firsthand.

Now 25, LaBeija credits the ballroom scene with helping her find a community that allowed her to develop a positive self-identity as a positive woman. She had a long history as a performer before she ever set foot in a ball, having trained at dance Julliard and the Ailey School. She even left college for a year to travel the world as a back-up dancer with a Michael Jackson tribute tour. But the coworker who invited LaBeija to join her first house knew none of that. “She didn’t bring me in to just walk a ball,” LaBeija recalls. “She brought me in because of the connection we had.”

Soon, LaBeija began meeting other young people like her, positive folks who were making art, going out, and living full and fulfilling lives. She loved that in nightlife, “you create your self.” Who and what you are when the function ends matters little compared to what you served on the floor. She loved the costumes and the glamor, the grown-up dress-up life. But even more importantly for LaBeija, her house “acts as family,” a function they serve “for a lot of people.” She refers to the coworker who brought her to her first ball as her “gay mother.”

“I had looked for that for a really long time,” she says in a quiet moment in our interview. “A female figure who could mentor me. Help me through difficult stuff.” Her mother died of AIDS complications when LaBeija was only 14, but through her house, she found a family, many of whom were dealing with the same issues she was facing. It was a place where she could be young and fantastic. But she waited for more than a year--until she’d won a trophy in her first major ball (Women’s Performance, Latex, 2012)--to take “LaBeija” as her name in all public aspects of her life.

“These are the people I call my family,” she says, explaining why she waited. She wanted to prove herself, and not come off like a frontrunner. That meant not just learning how to vogue, but learning the history of her house and the LaBeijas who came before her, like Crystal and Pepper. “I needed to know everything,” she says.

Today, LaBeija looks tired. That's not a read, just a reality. Last month, she vogued--old way--across the stage at her graduation from The New School, and in a week, she and her girlfriend, Lion, will be heading to LA to see LaBeija's photos in the Art AIDS America exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art. Art AIDS America is Jonathan Katz's follow up to 2010's blockbuster Hide / Seek show at The National Portrait Gallery, the first explicitly queer-themed exhibition ever at the Smithsonian. By phone, Katz described Art AIDS America as an historical survey, complete with all the big names you'd expect in an AIDS exhibit (like Keith Haring and Robert Mapplethorpe), but also featuring "younger artists informed by the crisis, as well as artists who potentially would have achieved a great deal of fame had they not died early in their careers."

LaBeija's work fits squarely in the former category. Her photo series, "24," is a set of three large format self-portraits. The photos are beautiful, saturate, and composed, with LaBeija staring frankly out at the viewer. Set in bathrooms and bedrooms, the images are personal, but resist simple voyeuristic appreciation. Her flat gaze reminds us that these "intimate moments" are the staged provocations of an artist, not actual peepholes into her life. Katz, in selecting "24" for Art AIDS America, said he was drawn to LaBeija's "wonderful inhabiting of a persona" and the way she plays with the idea of artifice. Each photo in the series explicates part of LaBeija's struggle to come into adulthood as an artist and a woman born with HIV.

"If you take the right medications, [it's unlikely you'll give birth to an HIV positive baby]," LaBeija tells me early in our conversation, her voice slipping into the measured tone of someone who's done a lot of public speaking on the issue. "But there are still the ones born to untested mothers. Like myself." These are the people LaBeija is most interested in reaching through her work: Positive women and children born with the virus. She has complicated thoughts on the current debates around Truvada as a preventative daily treatment, in part relating to her own experience of taking it everyday and getting very sick. But she doesn't feel ready to talk about it "because my attention is on the children that are still around, and women, because it's so taboo for women to talk about it.

LaBeija finds many of the current conversations around AIDS to be too nostalgic and backwards facing. "In 2015, people feel they're so removed from it," she said, a hint of exasperation creeping into her voice. "But for those of us who deal with it, it's still urgent." When asked to name other contemporary poz artists doing work that excited her, the first name off her lips is Jessica Lynn Whitbread. Last year, she attended one of Whitbread's "Tea Time" events, in which Whitbread invites positive women to come, share tea, and pass on an anonymous letter to another women. "I'm a big fan of hers," LaBeija says.

LaBeija has a deep knowledge about the virus and various responses to it, which seems surprising in someone so young, until I remember that she's been dealing with this for 25 years.

Nelson Santos, the executive director of the art-activism organization Visual AIDS, believes this is part of what makes LaBeija's voice so crucial to the current dialogue around the virus: She complicates our idea of what a long-term survivor looks like. "We often think of an older gay white man," Santos says, "but Kia, a young women of color, has also been living with HIV for over 25 years, and has only known living with HIV, which again is not a story often told."

Our understanding of long-term survivors is, in a very real way, our understanding of the crisis itself. Who we picture today as having survived AIDS is who we picture as having had AIDS. The over-representation of gay white men in histories of the crisis strengthens the belief that they were the only community affected. This enables a dual erasure: Not only are women and people of color disappeared from AIDS

history, but that disappearance is itself made invisible when we believe they were never there in the first place.

Today, women of color, and black women in particular, are often invoked in the aggregate in discussions about AIDS, as some of the “fastest growing” or “most at risk” populations. But their individualized selves, and their thoughts about the crisis, are often absent from those selfsame discussions. LaBeija’s photos flip the script, offering up her experiences for our consumption on her specific terms, and requiring us to look her in the eyes while we do so. LaBeija is still young. Some of the influences in her work--David LaChapelle, Cindy Sherman--lay a little close to the surface. But through her subject matter, she makes these techniques her own. The images in “24” chronicle difficult experiences--her mother’s death, the nausea brought on by her meds in middle school--yet even while lying prone on the bathroom floor, LaBeija’s poise conveys strength, dignity, and power.

LaBeija characterizes her aesthetic as “beautiful and shiny,” but it’s gloss with a purpose. Glamor, after all, once meant magic, and LaBeija’s portraits cast a spell over their subjects, through gorgeousness-giving power. Santos, from Visual AIDS, says she is “a name to look out for in the contemporary art world,” and sets her in a lineage with Nan Goldin, David Armstrong, and Luna Luis Ortiz (another respected photographer to emerge from the ballroom scene).

For LaBeija, it’s about taking “moments that could be considered sad or disabling,” and bringing “them into a positive light.” That’s exactly the kind of transformation she’s made her whole life, in figuring out how to live with a virus that’s been called everything from a “curse” to a “death sentence.” It’s the kind of transformation she had to make to become who she is: a daughter of the house of LaBeija, one of the legendary children, and an icon in the making.

Hugh Ryan is a freelance writer and the founding director of the Pop-Up Museum of Queer History, through which he has organized exhibitions in queer communities around the country. See the article on Vice.

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