

Portraits of a Queen: The photography of Bennett Todd

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Abstract

This historical series of photographs, produced by the photographer Paul Bennett-Todd, selects from the period 2002–03 thirty images taken at the ‘Speed Queen’ night at the Warehouse Club in Leeds. Bennett-Todd has presented this snapshot of the venue at the apex of its vibrancy and popularity; clientele at their self-assured peak. An energetic and inclusive event, ‘Speed Queen’ embodied in its walls an almost poetic celebration of sexuality, transgender, class, race and age. ‘Speed Queen’ ran at the Warehouse from 1998 to 2008, capturing the culture and colours of the new millennium where people, environment and music combined. Like Wigan casino and Manchester’s Hacienda, *Speed Queen* (appearing originally as ‘Vague at the Warehouse’ between 1992 and 1998) occupies an almost mythological place in queer subculture’s own folklore.

Keywords

Photography

Sexuality

Queer culture

Bennett-Todd describes the venue and the night as offering significantly more than just a safe place, as he puts it, for a chance to parade and display. This, he says, was a 'family'. As a family it emanated a relaxed non-judgemental assuredness, which came from being amongst whom Bennett-Todd describes as those you love and trust. These are not individual offerings so much as a privileged glance into an alternative family album. This in no way detracts from the fierce energy of these photographs which capture the visual, the sound and the physicality of the night and, with their fly in amber qualities, re-present to the viewer the marginalized environment within which freedom of expression both celebrated and challenged the legislation and culture of the time.

Bennett-Todd's attachment to Speed Queen came first as a participant and later as a photographer. His aim was to capture how the place felt through the people. He was a familiar figure with his camera, approaching clubbers and asking if he could photograph them under the heading 'Portraits of a Queen', taking around 3,000 photographs over the period. The willingness to be photographed suggests the existence of a relationship with the photographer and many were friends of, or known by, Bennett-Todd outside of the club. There was no attempt, he says, to capture anyone off-guard or be voyeuristic in any way. There was no startled glance and off-guard hesitancy: people knew they were about to be photographed and gave their willing consent. What is captured though, between the brief moment each person has to readdress themselves and strike a pose and the capturing of their image, is the spontaneous authenticity that characterizes these photographs. There is no alter-ego here – inner self and outer self are getting along just fine together.

Drawn to the egalitarian nature of the venue and its people, Bennett-Todd comments on the absence of negative aggression – a feature present in these images. They seize the moment

and cannot be recreated. What they do is punctuate and reinforce the time, the place, the music and the characters. Bennett-Todd references photographer Tom Wood's *Looking for Love* series (1984-7) which illustrates a 'closeness' (Tonnie, cited in Ehland 2007: 321) between photographer and subject in his late 1980s portrayal of the clientele and their emotional exchanges at the Chelsea Reach Night Club on Merseyside. There is none of the 'voyeuristic touch' in Bennett-Todd's images though – this is a display freely given (Tonnie, cited in Ehland 2007: 321). There are reminders too of Bruce Davidson's *Subway* series (1980) which, in a collection of colourful portraits, longingly stalks the edginess and challenging vibrancy of 1980s New York's subway system. In Bennett-Todd's *Speed Queen* series (2002-3) however, there is no sense of violence barely suppressed, no sense of the individual in all their glory at odds with the claustrophobic environment they find themselves in. This collection, Bennett-Todd says, presents a narrative, which he describes as almost universally good and positive. Whilst Davidson captures a fast moving, un-posed jitteriness which is in itself reminiscent of the nightclub genre, Bennett-Todd creates in this series not candid shots but rather eye-contact portraits, a moment of empathy, a celebration and self-realization, the act of photographing at one with the pose of the subject and the energy of the environment. In 'Masquerade in clubland: A safe space for glamour' (2011) *Speed Queen* is described as 'a Technicolor wonderland, akin to Dorothy stepping out of her black and white farmhouse in *The Wizard of Oz*' (Almond 2011: 60). Almond writes of how the night offered him the opportunity to 'analyze the glamorous presentation of self in masquerade and opportunities to adjust and transform my own identity' (2011: 2).

A camera can reveal moments missed in the shadows and a closer look into these images reveals the neon lettering with which words are picked out – Fantasy, Desires, Passion, Wonder,

Destiny, Harmony. Bennett-Todd describes the role of the viewer as that of someone looking through a window into the venue and all it celebrates. When reading these images there are levels of narrative and assumptions of realism, which gradually unfold. There is a revelation of the inner life of both the venue and the clubbers themselves in these images. The eye-contact portraits providing an intimate connection between subject and viewer, mediated by the photographer; but we know, still and always, that these are scenes of self-affirmation which we are reading from beyond the moment.

Photographers capture action through time. The use of slow synchronized shutter speeds captures movement; fill-in flash captures what is there in that instant. These photographs are half body, not full. This is about the environment; this is what the photographer saw, a second captured in a single frame. The subject is both present in the image and past in the light. These are not formal portraits. None of them are cropped, and there is little post-production. This is a window into a world. In the half visible, electric text and the carefully constructed make-up and fashion of the time is the lexical and visual punctuation to the backstory of *Speed Queen*.

Out of this environment came what Bennett-Todd characterizes as a great vat of creativity and 28 June 2014 saw the recreation of *Speed Queen* for one night only as part of the 'Made in Leeds' festival. This event will attempt to recapture the authenticity, diversity and coexistence of the time, as well as showcasing the many vibrant areas of creativity born out of *Speed Queen*. 'Made in Leeds' offers an opportunity for a living intertextuality. In this arena present-day clubbers can reference the glamour and energy of *Speed Queen* circa 2002/03 through their own narrative of self-expression and devil-may-care hedonism. In assembling this series of images Bennett-Todd asks us, what happens to the past when we revisit it? Where does

this energy go? How do we pick up the dialogue that was taking place at the time? How do we address these faces when we meet them again after so long?

A postmodern ironic reading of Barthes's mythologies 'which recognises and plays with the constructedness of myths, is deemed subversive' (Robinson 2011). Subversive is not a word *Speed Queen* devotees are likely to be afraid of. The 'Made in Leeds' retrospective, where a selection of Bennett-Todd's images hung on a playful giant outdoor washing line provided the same emotional links and Proustian memory of lost time. The physicality of the venue may have changed but the essence remains.

At the start of this article it was argued that *Speed Queen* is part of a mythological subculture. But the story is much more complex. On revising the images in 2013 we see that the Deleuzian world-shifts that have occurred through the piling on of experience and time do not easily vanquish *Speed Queen*'s power to connect. The re-appearance of this series of photographs provides an opportunity not to re-create but to create again.

Figure 1: Paul Bennett-Todd (2002–03), *Storm & Simon* [digital image and C type paper].

Dimensions variable © Paul Bennett-Todd 2014.

Figure 2: Paul Bennett-Todd (2002–03), *Jane* [digital image and C type paper]. Dimensions

variable © Paul Bennett-Todd 2014.

References

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Contributor details

Karen's methodology is Narrative Enquiry, which she uses to explore the place of writing in an art college, told through the experiences of students with dyslexia. Working with both undergraduates and postgraduate students at Leeds College of Art where she teaches Research Methods on the MA programme and in one-to-one classes with students with dyslexia, Karen has recently begun to develop student-centred workshops experimenting with the role of writing in creative practice. She also maintains her own practice as a fiction writer. Her teaching, writing and research are close companions and help each other out. Like Laurel Richardson, the great narrative enquirer, she believes language shapes lives and is both a weapon and a gift.

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