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The “Terrorist Drag” of Vaginal Davis

By Grace Dunham, December 12, 2015

The most comprehensive archive of the artist Vaginal Creme Davis is on YouTube, where fans have uploaded hundreds of clips of her videos and performances. “That Fertile Feeling,” a video from 1986, follows Davis and her close friend, Fertile LaToya Jackson, after Fertile’s water breaks while the two women are watching television. At the hospital, Fertile is turned away because she doesn’t have state health insurance. Eventually, at the apartment of Fertile’s boyfriend (who is always naked), Davis coaches Fertile through giving birth to eleven-tuplets. After a successful delivery, Fertile rides away on a skateboard down a Los Angeles street, Davis calling after her.

“Fertile!” Davis yells, “You’re so fertile! You’re the first woman in the world to give birth to eleven-tuplets!”

Fertile’s delivery is an ambiguous miracle: both because of the large quantity of babies, and how Davis and Fertile perform an uncertain womanhood. Are they mocking the fact that they have bodies that may not be able to give birth, and that are turned away at hospitals? Or are they mocking a cultural fixation on pregnancy as the marker of womanhood? Either way, the two artists parody an entire epoch of divine births. Maybe Mary was a virgin; just as possible, perhaps, is that she was trans.

Davis’s new exhibition at Invisible-Exports, “Come On Daughter Save Me,” includes sixteen blood-red wall sculptures. Like her performance and video work, Davis’s sculptures do not ascribe to distinctions between artist and hobbyist, sacred and amateur. She made these objects in Berlin, where she has lived for almost a decade, out of quick-drying clay and whatever else was lying around: red nail polish, hydrogen peroxide, perfume, witch hazel. Some are melted faces; others look like genitals that you’ve never seen before. All could be the work of an ancient-maker or an obsessive child. She doesn’t consider herself “a sculptress like Louise Nevelson” but has always made objects to keep herself amused.

The show’s title, “Come On Daughter Save Me,” is taken from a phrase the artist’s mother said to her often when she was a child. According to Davis, her black Creole mother—then forty-five years old—met her twenty-year-old Mexican-American father only once: under the table at a Ray Charles concert at the Hollywood Palladium, sometime in the early nineteen-sixties. The artist was born from this encounter.

Davis was born intersex, at a time when doctors assigned children with her anatomy a gender of “male” or “female” through surgical intervention. (These procedures persist today, though at lower rates.) Her mother refused to let doctors operate. So Davis grew up with the word “male” on her birth certificate but with her mother and four older sisters referring to her by female pronouns. Their household in South Central Los Angeles, Davis said, was a “Druid Wiccan witches’ coven” where her identity as a daughter was not questioned but affirmed.

Davis got her start in L.A.’s predominately white punk scene as the front woman of an art-punk band called the Afro Sisters, where she referenced and drew inspiration from iconic black radicals like Angela Davis, after whom she named herself. Throughout the eighties, Vaginal Davis developed multiple personas and performed incongruous identities. She was a black revolutionary drag queen, a teen-age Chicana pop star, a white-supremacist militiaman. These characters often referred to one another: against her better judgment, Vaginal Davis pined for Clarence, a rabid white supremacist; Clarence, too, harbored secret affections. Their dynamic caricatured that illicit desire that exists despite—or, perhaps, because of—racism. This kind of political critique, simultaneously absurd and hyper-real, made Davis a muse to a generation of queer writers and critics, like the late José Esteban Muñoz, who died in 2013.

Muñoz was the first person to use the term “terrorist drag” to describe the work of Davis—in particular, the way she interrogated rather than



“I was always too gay for the punks and too punk for the gays. I am a societal threat,”
the artist Vaginal Davis, seen here in 2002, said.
Photograph by John Vlautin

obscured her cultural otherness. Referring to herself as a drag queen, a hermaphrodite, and a “sexual repulsive,” Davis used her performances to critique the many contexts in which she was undesirable. “I don’t fit into mainstream society, but I also don’t really fit into ‘alternative culture,’ either,” she told me recently. “I was always too gay for the punks and too punk for the gays. I am a societal threat.”

“Terrorist drag,” as performed by Davis and theorized by Muñoz, feels especially relevant in a security age when people continue to be surveilled due to their gender identities. In 2003, amid post-9/11 overhauls, the Department of Homeland Security warned the Transportation Security Administration that “male bombers may dress as females in order to discourage scrutiny.” In airports, trans people continue to be pulled aside at far higher rates than cis people: body parts like a trans woman’s penis or a trans man’s chest-binder register on body scanners as “anomalies.” Just last week, the Republican Presidential candidate Ted Cruz incorrectly suggested in a press conference that the attacker behind a recent mass shooting at a Colorado Planned Parenthood was “a transgendered leftist activist.”

Concurrent with this rhetoric and policy, a generation of gay Americans appears to be benefitting from rights and protections that were an impossibility for previous generations. The laws that didn’t save the elders, it seems, are going to save some of the children. The title of Davis’s show, “Come On Daughter Save Me,” is a bittersweet plea, and a cautionary warning. As she told me last week, “You can’t change institutions from the inside, as they always wind up changing you.” This is why she is content with her place as an outsider of the institutional art world, and of culture at large. She does what she wants, makes what she wants, and mocks who she wants; she rejects inclusion, and its limiting factors.

Davis continues to be prolific: in addition to the sixteen wall sculptures, “Come On Daughter Save Me” included a radical re-staging of Mozart’s “The Magic Flute” at N.Y.U.’s 80WSE Gallery, in collaboration with the director Susanne Sachsse. “The Magic Flute” was the first opera Davis saw, at the age of seven, at the famed Shrine Auditorium, in South Central Los Angeles. Around this time, she was an active youth member at the Theocratic Ministry School, a division of the Jehovah’s Witnesses. There, she learned what she liked (the historical significance of the Bible, the principles of rhetoric) and rejected what she didn’t: namely, any doctrine that did not make room for her entire existence. Davis is not religious, but her work is a sacred mythology for the outsider.