# IN HER CLOSET HOW TO MAKE A DRAG QUEEN

When you hear "drag queen," what comes to mind? Perhaps pink feathers, sequins, sky-high heels, corsets, impossible proportions, duct tape, a pound of stage makeup, and a healthy portion of sass? The popularity of drag has exploded in recent years, and so have the questions and curiosities related to drag artistry.

This exhibit takes a step into the closet of the drag queen and highlights the aesthetic practices of costuming and styling that make her fabulous. How do drag queens get "that look"? Is it just her attitude and fierceness, or is there strategy and intentional craft involved? In Her Closet explores these questions and curates a selection of costumes and materials loaned by drag performers connected to the local area.

Drag is that wonderfully queer, effervescent performance art form that brings to life the fantasy of transformation and the joy of play. Drag, as we understand it today, is almost always connected to the LGBTQ community, and it has held an important role in queer culture, well before the advent of RuPaul's Drag Race. Feminist philosophers and scholars of performance might look to drag as a way to explain how gender itself is a kind of ritual—an aesthetic endeavor that you learn over time. But to most queers, drag queens offer a certain promise: the promise that you could become fabulous with the right wig and the right attitude. Drag offers queer folk the chance to play with the lines of gender and to use their bodies as a canvas to create a unique persona for the stage.

Large metropolitan areas like New York City and San Francisco have perhaps the best reputations for staging drag shows in a variety of settings. But drag queens have been performing in smaller cities and even smaller towns across the United States since the early 20th century. New York City may boast theater and performance spaces where drag queens can produce shows with high production value, but most drag queens perform in more intimate and DIY settings—like the local gay bar.

Gay bars became the centers for queer life in the midto late 20th century, where LGBT patrons would go to socialize, have drinks, and meet potential partners for sex or dating. Gay bars became spaces where drag queens entertained queer audiences while building reputations as local or regional performers. Local drag queen competitions are also frequently staged in gay bars, and they mirror the structure and prestige of beauty pageants in the "straight world." Even the most famous contemporary drag queens started performing in pageants or open-stage nights at their local gay bar. For instance, Sasha Velour, of RuPaul's Drag Race fame, started performing at open stage nights at the Chester Street Lounge in Champaign.

Cities and towns far away from the east and west coasts have rich and storied histories of drag queens performing in gay bars. In Champaign-Urbana, there have been gay bars in our community going back over 40 years to the early 1970s, and these venues were no exception in hosting and supporting drag queen performances.







Gown by Andrae Reves and
Stoned4Filth
Fur by JTs Originals of
Des Moines
Wig by Tena Marie, Texas
Jewels by Mona Monclair

Gown by Andrae Reves and George Keck Wig by Tena Marie, Texas Jewels by Mona Monclair

Gown by Morgan Wells Wig by Tena Marie, Texas Jewels by Mona Monclair

#### How did you start getting involved with drag?

I got my start in drag right out of high school. The gay bar in Springfield had burned down and some people were building a new one. I made friends with some of them and was invited out to help with the rebuild: pulling nails, painting, etc. When it came time for the bar to open and put a show together, a couple of the local drag queens thought I might make a good one, so they painted me up. I thought I looked terrible, but opening night at Bobbys, my name was called and out I went to do Stevie Nicks's "Stand Back" to the biggest ovation I'd ever heard and I was hooked. I decided then and there I loved performing, to be able to hold an audience....

# What is the strangest/worst place you've ever readied yourself for a performance?

Too many answers: basements, kitchens, cars.... We used to have a company called Drag o Grams: Drag for a Gag. We did birthdays, anniversaries, etc., and we were once hired

to perform at a used car lot in Springfield for someone's birthday. They took us out and put us in the back of a pick-up truck while the business of the day kept driving by and honking their horns. I still look back at that one and laugh.

# What specific memories are attached to the garment(s) you loaned?

Well, probably the most memorable are the white text gown and the pride gown, both worn different pride parades here in town. It really makes me choke up sometimes when I think in my lifetime how we were once looked at as outcasts, people pulled their children away from us because we were monsters, and now those same people applaud us as we come down the street...it really is moving.

What are the most important things to you when you put together a "look"?

The most important thing you have to remember as a drag queen is that MORE IS MORE...and we always need more. Honestly, I try and balance my look; my taste comes from the movies of the 30s and 40s, technicolor wonders with beautiful women in gowns and furs. I always remember at shows that people pay to come see us, and you need to give them something to see. You'd better come correct or don't come at all.

# Can you name a time you've had a "wardrobe malfunction"? What was the response when that happened?

Houston we have a problem. It was my very first show at the legendary Faces show bar in St. Louis, and it was my first time at 19 doing a show with the BIG NAMES I had looked up to, scared to death and then some. At Faces you had to do 2 numbers back to back. The DJ calls my name, the curtain opens, I raise my arm, and the snap breaks holding my dress on. I had to stand there for 2 numbers holding the top of

my gown up ready to cry, but they all tipped me and helped me fix it. I double pinned everything else I wore that night...yeesh!

# How did you develop your drag style? Who or what inspired it?

My drag style was inspired by the technicolor goddesses of the old film studios like MGM and Warner's—all the greats. Strong women with beautiful clothes and jewels. The only bad thing was I wasn't as pretty as the rest of the girls, and that was fine—I just had to go a bit farther with my personality. I became sharp witted and sharp tongued, and through the years became a pretty darn good emcee. For years I hosted the shows here at Chester Street bar, which was the gold standard for gay bars bar none. I realized you didn't have to be pretty if you were funny, so Mona is a little sassy, a little brassy, with the costume sense of Edith Head and the onstage presence of Phyllis Diller. If you don't know, Google them!

## **Ceduxion Carrington**



# GiGi Mayonaé



Community Co-Curator Paul Michael L. Atienza sat down with Brenda Webb, mother of GiGi Mayonaé, to discuss her child's love to dance and their dreams of stardom.

September 6, 2019.

GiGi (Giselle) Mayonaé was also known as the Twirling Diva. "Dancing has always been the thing. Always loved to dance. For a big girl, she can do all the moves—splits, death drops," said GiGi's mom, Brenda Webb. "She didn't get her moves from her mom. GiGi got my curves, instead."

"I always have been someone who encouraged them to be who they are," explained Brenda when we asked her about the first time her child dressed in drag. GiGi, also known as Jherrion Correll Bates, came out to his mom as gay through text message two weeks prior during the summer of 2016. "I have to admit it was a real shock. I knew he was gay, but when

he started dressing and sending me pictures I didn't imagine him that way."

"He would come visit me in outfits," Brenda said. "Each day is a new outfit. I asked 'Is this going to be our everyday look?' It took me awhile to embrace it. I always told him what I liked and what I didn't like. He couldn't stand my critiques. I would tell him the truth. If he couldn't take what momma said, then how could he take anybody else's? I was worried about his safety and what everyone else was going to say. When GiGi step, then I step."

Brenda recounted the first time GiGi went out into the world. She accompanied GiGi and some friends to Fatman's Warehouse, a local bar near their home in Danville, Illinois. "I went out with him the first time. I remember there was a couple. That was an experience. The man kept snickering at GiGi. You can see his body language and how he was looking over at GiGi. You can tell the man was bothered. I was ready

to bring out momma bear but GiGi leaned over and told me 'Momma, I'm not worried about it.' GiGi is more laid back, but I'm not about to let it happen. I wanted to protect him. That's still my child no matter what. It took me a long time to accept that."

"Jherrion was very shy," Brenda added, "but when he became GiGi, he was a different person. Sometimes GiGi passes as a woman. Brenda shared an experience when a man propositioned GiGi at a bar. "When GiGi changed into his deep voice, it shocked the guy. Street smart, GiGi was not. So, I followed them and looked out. Made sure they were okay. I was like that with all the queens and her friends."

GiGi made her performance debut at Champaign's former Chester Street Bar during one of the Sunday talent nights. "She would compete every chance she could. She mixed her own songs. She knew all the dance moves. Anytime it was open. She was on that stage. She achieved so much in such a short period of time. I went with her to performances in Texas, Iowa, Ohio, and plenty of times in Indianapolis. One time, she paid a lot of money to see one of her favorite performers Bob the Drag Queen in St. Louis. We were a bit late for the meet and greet but I made sure she got her time with the queens. They were crying and ecstatic."

Brenda supported GiGi's vision to be known and to perform at the biggest stages. "I helped with stoning outfits, patching holes and rips. I learned how to put garments together with bobby pins. I learned to carry a needle and thread to performances. The biggest wardrobe malfunction was keeping the wigs on. We fought all the time about the wigs. You know the momma. Tons of tape and bobby pins. Sometimes the wigs are glued on her head so much that when you try to take them off her real hair gets torn off."

"It was so hard to decide what to bring [for the exhibit]," Brenda shared. "I thought to myself, 'What would GiGi want?' So, I picked the suit because she's known for her dancing. The suit has lightning to represent her sharp movements."

GiGi recently moved to Chicago to pursue her dreams of performing. Before leaving Danville in April 2019, GiGi organized a "Drag Queen Story Hour" at David S. Palmer Arena with drag daughter Hunny Mayonaé and PoisonIris Carrington. GiGi was on her way to perform at Charlie's Nightclub on the evening of July 18 when a drunk driver struck her vehicle. She suffered serious injuries and was taken to a local hospital. Three days later, GiGi passed away from complications during surgery. Many who knew her were shocked of her passing. Drag communities in Chicago, East Central Illinois, and other places paid tribute to GiGi through various events to help raise money for

her family. Performers and event hosts donated their tips and some of their sales.

I asked Brenda what was GiGi's most memorable performance. "Do you know the movie, Camp?" she asked. "She performed a song from that movie at C Street." Camp (2003) was about the lives of young people attending a summer performing arts camp in Upstate New York. The song she referred to was "Here's Where I Stand," a gospel ballad sung by a character dealing with her father's disapproval of her body weight. She performed the song at the end-of-the-summer show and confronts her father with the moving lyrics that speak of vulnerability and strength in accepting who we are. It closes with a call to the listener to "stand up and be counted." The song's declaration of humble self-love is a great way to remember GiGi Mayonaé.

## **Peach of the Midwest**



## **Peach of the Midwest**

**Jewels by Mona Monclair** 

#### How did you start getting involved with drag?

I started within the art form in 2008. It began as a bet—LOL. Since 2008 I have been off/on but I have been consistent since 2011.

# What is the strangest/worst place you've ever readied yourself for a performance?

I believe it has to be a commercial kitchen! As a performer, I think we'd take anywhere, especially if you're passionate about it!

# What specific memories are attached to the garment(s) you loaned?

The current garment showcased on the mannequin is a gown I modeled from my first pageant about 4–5 years ago at Miss Gay Illinois State.

# What are the most important things to you when you put together a "look"?

The fit!!! The overall look has to flow, match, and fit just right! I'm big on investing in my craft and bettering the looks every chance I get! Hair is a BIG plus as well—my hair HAS to be to the 9.

# Can you name a time you've had a "wardrobe malfunction"? What was the response when that happened?

SEVERAL. There's times back in the day wigs would fly off, heels would break, zippers would bust, and the list goes on. As an entertainer, I was always mentored to keep going and that's when you really SHOW OUT because some people would be embarrassed—as for me, GET READY because I'm really about to give you a show.

# How did you develop your drag style? Who or what inspired it?

My drag style has changed multiple times! I love gowns, I love to dance, and I love to just sell an illusion! Kelasia Karmikal (Kenneth Johnson) was one of my mentors who taught me A LOT in the art form as our styles are different in some way. I must say she inspired me and still inspires me to this day!

## **Lola Rothschild**



# Lola Rothschild "Tiana"

#### How did you start getting involved with drag?

When I was younger, when I first came out, I was transsexual for about a year and a half. I started with makeup and hair and then dancing of course. Since my mother and grandmother used to be seamstresses, I got into fashion. When you put the fashion, the hair, the makeup, and the dancing all together, it forms a drag queen.

# What is the strangest/worst place you've ever readied yourself for a performance?

In a Chicago bathroom, at a bar I was probably too young to be at in the first place. But a lot of times they don't have dressing rooms. The places for you to get ready are places that have food and stuff, and I don't want that to get mixed together. So, it'll be a sad looking bathroom with a crooked mirror and no lighting, and then I'm doing my makeup and someone will say, "Hey, can I wash my hands?" and I'd be like, "Let me stop putting on my lashes."

# What specific memories are attached to the garment(s) you loaned?

The Selena garment is pretty special for me because I've been listening to Selena since I was born. Of course, it's a special person I admire and I know all of her music. She is my favorite female artist. So that one is very close to me. The other one is the first Black princess for Disney and I am a big Disney gay, if that's a thing. I would be one of the darkest people in my family, so that speaks for me.

# What are the most important things to you when you put together a "look"?

The most important thing is to make sure the whole look is cohesive. I hate when people kind of just mix and match things, because then it just makes no sense to what the story is behind the look or the mood of the character they just brought to everyone. So, the one thing I try to do, since I used to do theater, is have a backstory. From a backstory, I get an essence of

where she is going or what she is doing with her song and is telling the crowd.

# Can you name a time you've had a "wardrobe malfunction"? What was the response when that happened?

When I first started performing in Chicago, I was into novellas and movies that were all about big garments and jewelry. But in Chicago, it was more about showing skin a little more. I probably put on the tightest thing I had because it was the first time I performed in Chicago, so I didn't have any of my things close by. And I think I went on stage for two minutes—and the top part of my outfit just ripped off. I was just flexing so hard. I think the song was "Finally" by CeCe Peniston. So, I'm just throwing my hands up and screaming—out of nowhere the top part just breaks off and you can see my chest and I have tattoos everywhere, so it was like one second there was a pretty woman with a bigger chest and the next there was this

guy with tattoos and hair. It was a look—it was interesting. Some people thought that it was amazing, some people were lost, and some were all, "Uh...there is a man under there."

How did you develop your drag style? Who or what inspired it?

## Gioconda



## Gioconda "The Great Empress of the Soviet Empire"

#### How did you start getting involved with drag?

Since childhood, I was an artist. In 2001, I moved to Moscow. The show is the so-called Drag Queen in Russia. I really liked it, because the girls on the stage were real artists and not just men in dresses. Therefore, I began to engage in this kind of art.

# What is the strangest/worst place you've ever readied yourself for a performance?

In Russia, I was already a famous person. I had large venues with convenient equipment. Therefore, any small club in New York was terrible for me because there are never any good dressing rooms or lights and in most cases, the organizers are indifferent to the performance of a Drag Queen. Then I realized that most of the girls themselves were to blame for allowing the organizers to treat themselves as garbage. At first, the organizers or owners of the bars treated me like everyone else. It was unusual for them that every time I asked them to pay attention to organize my performance. In

the end, when I speak, the organizers listen to me and try to fulfill all my requirements because they consider me a real artist. I thank them for understanding this. And they began to show me their respect.

# What are the most important things to you when you put together a "look"?

For me, the most important thing is to inspire people. That people after the performance did not forget this image ever. They say that beauty will save the world, and so I save the world with beauty.

# Can you name a time you've had a "wardrobe malfunction"? What was the response when that happened?

I have very sophisticated costumes. A lot of light and mechanical effects, and sometimes something does not work or breaks. Of course, this saddens me and I try to make it so that there are no misfires when creating a costume.

Let me give you one example: I have a look that uses light bulbs. Once for a performance, I asked the organizer to dim the lights on the stage, but I did not know that the lights on the stage are connected to sockets behind the curtains. Since my costume is powered by a wire, this meant that lowering the electricity to the main lights lead to lowering the luminance of my bulbs. I was very upset when at the needed time the bulbs were not as bright as usual. Now I've redone the costume system, and the luminosity of the bulbs is independent of the electricity in the wires and everything works autonomously. So now I can say that the poor conditions in New York clubs influenced me positively.

# How did you develop your drag style? Who or what inspired it?

I think that every artist has his own inspiration. As a child, I was very influenced by the video "Frozen" by Madonna. Plus, I was fond of Björk. So I can safely say that these two women had

a great influence on me. To a greater extent, I consider myself an artist. It's not without reason that my creative pseudonym is Gioconda, the painting by the great Leonardo da Vinci, which here in America is called the *Mona Lisa* but in Europe is known as *Mona Lisa del Giocondo*. I didn't just take this pseudonym; I hold the version that Leonardo painted himself in a female form. So I can say that in the picture, that is, on stage, I am a woman—Gioconda, and in life, I am Leonardo da Vinci who draws his Mona Lisa del Giocondo.

Some of the text on Gioconda's garment reads:

To the winner of the socialist competition in honor of the 50th anniversary of Soviet power [authority, governance].

The First State Bearing Plant [factory name] of the Order of Lenin.

#### **Annie Hart**



### Annie Hart "Winter Djinn"

Created/styled by
Annie Hart
Antique Bijoux MG jewelry

#### How did you start getting involved with drag?

I got interested in drag from the kings and queens perfomring in Carbondale. They helped moderate the bar patrons, were an easy way for someone without many friends to talk to someone at the bar, and definitely exuded a motherly aura. I got my first chance to perform when I was in Corvallis, Oregon and a friend who was running a show had people back out last minute and asked me to step in. They promised to paint my face, but needless to say, they did not.

# What is the strangest/worst place you've ever readied yourself for a performance?

I've gotten ready in cars, kitchens, closets—really whatever the venue has to offer. When performing for Humboldt State University in California, we would just go to the bathroom to do any touch ups between numbers.

# What specific memories are attached to the garment(s) you loaned?

This was a look that I created for a winter showcase. My drag mother is in Illinois and comes from the house of Vegas line, where she particularly was good at painting to look like a vegas showgirl. Once I was living in California, my best friend, Charlie Darling, started influencing my drag to incorporate more elemental, goddess, and radical faerie influence. This was one of the first looks I did that veered away from wanting to look female to wanting to look elemental. I spent weeks hand stitching the cloak, made the skirt on a sewing machine, and, when first debuted, I covered my chest and face in symbols that told the passage of time and influences on my life. Winter is a time of closing, but also an opportunity to be reborn, and so it tapped into the cycling of time and the closed and opening chapters of my life.

# What are the most important things to you when you put together a "look"?

Cohesive story telling. I like everything to be intentional rather than thrown together. I also particularly like re-purposing materials. I've taken apart car stereo systems, knitted garments out of grocery bags, or sewn wigs out of yarn for looks. I love creating a look from scratch, starting with nothing (even sometimes trash), and transforming it into something new and elegant.

# Can you name a time you've had a "wardrobe malfunction"? What was the response when that happened?

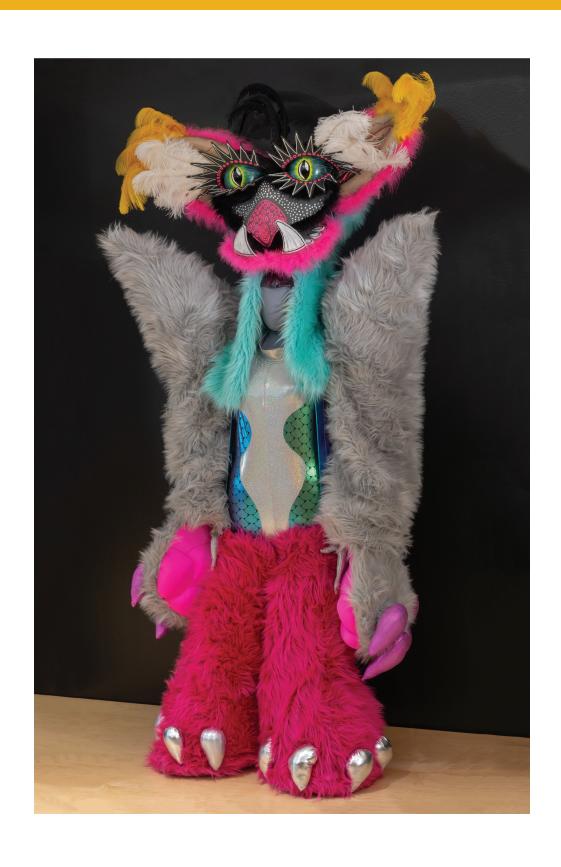
During a pageant in Arcata, California, this particular skirt got caught and the waist came apart. The trick when anything fails is to make it look intentional, so I went with it and the audience just thought that it was part of a reveal and the number.

# How did you develop your drag style? Who or what inspired it?

I initially wanted to perform southern traditionals in drag, but then I realized that no folk singers wore makeup (I have since done southern traditional numbers and they are some of my favorite performances). I also got a lot of inspiration from the punk scene, where my first looks, and still some to this day, are influenced by mohawks, leather, chains, safety pins, and just the energy behind not caring what other people think of you. Once I met my drag mom, her influences of more costuming and painting traditionally pretty faces influenced my style, where I appreciated the grunge look, but tightened it to be more intentional and less messy. I then took that style from myself, from southern Illinois, and took it to northern California, where engaging with drag as more ritual, expansive, and inclusive took my drag style to try more outlandish ideas and styles. I'm a big proponent of drag history being

thought of as looks are put together and honoring those that came before through drag, with inspiration from Hippolyta and the Amazonians of ancient Greece, to Coco Peru, Jackie Beat, the punk scene, representations of elementals and deities, to my drag family, predominantly Charlie Darling. It's hard to pinpoint one single inspiration, but I relate drag closely to the role of sacred clowns in a lot of cultures.

#### **Sharon ShareAlike**



# Sharon ShareAlike "Monster"

#### How did you start getting involved with drag?

I went to a drag show in 1996. It looked like fun. I became friends with one of the performers named Lauren Alexander. She thought I might enjoy drag, so she invited me to her home and helped me with my first drag makeup. She talked me into trying my first drag show. I had a lot of fun! Lauren Alexander became my drag mother, and the rest is herstory.

# What is the strangest/worst place you've ever readied yourself for a performance?

Once I got ready and performed in a barn on someone's farm.

# What specific memories are attached to the garment(s) you loaned?

The Monster costume on display was one that I designed for the Illinois State University Pride Show in 2019. I have been performing and

emceeing the show for over 20 years. I try to create a new costume for the show each year. I have also worn the Monster costume in many other Pride shows across Illinois in 2019.

I have been making BoobsForQueens since I started doing drag. The first breastplate I made was my own. I wore it during my very first drag performance. After many years, and people telling me I should sell breastplates, I finally launched a website called BoobsForQueens. com about 10 years ago. It started out slow, but after exposure on *RuPaul's Drag Race* and *The Ellen Show*, making breastplates has become my full time job. Now I sell BoobsForQueens all over the world.

headdress appeal. As a kid I loved making puppets and Halloween masks, so many of my costumes have those characteristics as well. My main goal is to shock and entertain the audience.

# What are the most important things to you when you put together a "look"?

I try to be very creative with every costume I make. I am a showgirl at heart, so many of my costumes have that Las Vegas feather

# Can you name a time you've had a "wardrobe malfunction"? What was the response when that happened?

In 2000, I won Miss Gay Illinois USofA. The crowning of a pageant winner is a very special moment. I had only been doing drag for a couple of years and I had never worn a drag crown that big. When they crowned me, it was so heavy that my wig and crown slid off of my head. I quickly snatched the wig out of the

crown and stuck the crown back on my wigless head. I wasn't going to miss my crowning comment! The audience cheered, and I savored my moment. Now I know how to glue on a wig!

# How did you develop your drag style? Who or what inspired it?

I have seen so many fantastic performers, and I have been inspired by all of them. Most of my inspiration comes from my childhood. All of the things I used to make as a kid have somehow flourished into my drag career. Now I get to create things everyday. I get to play "show and tell" at every one of my shows!

#### Maria Arte Susya Purisima Tolentino



#### Ma. Arte Susya Purisima Tolentino

Made by Johnny Dimavivas, the Philippines

#### How did you start getting involved with drag?

I started thinking about gender performance during a queer community retreat my last year in undergrad. It was a moment during a discussion about trauma and vulnerability that reignited childhood moments when I would imagine myself as a Miss Universe contestant representing the Philippines. I remember taking my mom's bed sheets and tying them into different designs around my body, then walking a runway up and down a hallway. One of the graduate student facilitators, Shakina Nayfack, was an organizer of a drag ball fundraiser at their former school and sparked the same event at our university. Dragalicious Drag Ball at the University of California, Riverside has been a yearly event since 2002. It raises money for both student scholarships and small emergency funds when queer students find themselves struggling with food insecurity, housing, and even paying for school materials.

# What is the strangest/worst place you've ever readied yourself for a performance?

There was a fundraiser for the Archaeology Student Society at UIUC held at the former Mike and Molly's pub in downtown Champaign. There were two drag queens, eight pole fitness performers, and an industrial ice making machine. We made that area work. The organizers provided one full-length mirror where everyone was trying to put makeup on. It was also very hot, and to try and correct the situation we were provided an industrial-size fan. Things were blown around the small space. I ended up keeping my things inside my luggage, which made it tough for quick changes.

# What specific memories are attached to the garment(s) you loaned?

The garment serves as an amalgam of Philippine cultural symbols. A key feature of my performance piece, "Confession: a drag offering," the all-white ensemble consists of a

beaded and sequined corset with detachable butterfly sleeves evoking the Philippine national dress, the terno. On the sleeves, I glued a red cross in homage to the large population of Filipino nurses that are often not represented in TV dramas and motion pictures focused on the lives of hospital staff. The chiffon and organza wrap skirt represents the gowns often worn by Miss Universe contestant. The kneehigh patent leather boots symbolize the sex work industries that both sustain but also take advantage of women. The beaded and sequined veil doubles as an apron to represent not just the purity espoused by Catholicism but also to the dedication of domestic workers. The design is an abstract interpretation of the Philippine national flag. I had this garment made in the Philippines from a tailor, Johnny Dimavivas. He manufactured school uniforms and also performed alterations. Dimavivas is a friend's family tailor. The cost was roughly 4,500 Philippine Pesos or \$100 USD.

# What are the most important things to you when you put together a "look"?

I think about versatility. If I am able to reuse certain garments in different ways then it would be something I would want to add to my wardrobe. I do not sew my own garments therefore I rely on thrift finds or sometimes I'll splurge on a piece. Perhaps what is most important is the idea and concept of the performance. How would the garment compliment the message and vision? Ultimately, I need to feel confident for a look to be successful.

Can you name a time you've had a "wardrobe malfunction"? What was the response when that happened?

The song was "I Am Changing" from the *Dreamgirls* motion picture soundtrack. I planned for a reveal during the part of the song that builds up to a climactic final verse. The final knot was tangled, and I had to finish the song with a half reveal. I tried to see if I could forcibly rip off the garment, but my wig was caught on a different part of the costume. I had to play off the wardrobe malfunction. It was slightly embarrasing but more disappointing since I was unable to perform the effect I planned.

# How did you develop your drag style? Who or what inspired it?

After reading the book Global Divas: Filipino Gay Men in the Diaspora by Martin F. Manalansan IV, the phrase that describes my drag style would be the "biyutiand drama of everyday life." I emphasize the Taglish spelling and spoken enunciation of beauty and drama. The hybrid Tagalog and English describe the complex lives of gay Filipinos dealing with everyday struggles, discrimination and legibility against social norms and limiting categories. My drag style, looks, and ideas serve to highlight the lives of Filipinas, the women that inspire my own concept of strong femininity. I use the performance genre of drag to share the traffic of women's bodies as commodities, as labor, and as imagined stereotypes. I give so much credit to the mentorship of Asian/American Studies scholar and dramaturg Lucy Mae San Pablo Burns for encouraging me to cultivate my performance practice. I also want to show my gratitude to performance artist Ron Athey

and queer theorist Jennifer Doyle for additional support during my early development.

I used to be named Aloha Tolentino using a popular formula that takes your first pet's name and the street where you grew up. After being called out during an academic conference for appropriating Native Hawaiian language, it took me several years of contemplation and reflection to christen a new name. Inspired by the work of Manalansan and Burns, I decided to change my name to Maria Arte Susya Purisima Tolentino, Ma. Arte for short. Similar to the double meanings of Filipino and Taglish words. Ma. Arte references not only Dr Burn's book Puro Arte but its multiple meanings of over-acting and campy performance. Susya Purisima means slutty and pure respectively. I wanted to represent contradictions from my ethnic and cultural backgrounds growing up in a predominatly Roman Catholic nation where religious moralities are often blindly followed to the detriment of the citizenry as a whole.

### Veronica Bleaus







### Veronica Bleaus "Drive By Drag"

Veronica's looks acquired from thrift stores, styled by Veronica herself, with one of the wigs on display acquired next to a telephone pole on Green Street.

### Veronica Bleaus "Garden Party"

#### **Veronica Bleaus**

worn in the GEO Strike

#### How did you start getting involved with drag?

While in undergrad in Pittsburgh, I began doing drag for Halloween, and some (very kind) friends said that I looked great in drag. I then began organizing the undergraduate drag show at my university, while simultaneously trying to enter the drag pageant scene in Pittsburgh. My drag, at this time, was very unpolished, and I think all I had going for me were a few jokes and a good sense of humor.

# What is the strangest/worst place you've ever readied yourself for a performance?

Soooo many bar kitchens, bathrooms, and utility closets. You can imagine that the lighting to fix one's makeup or wig in a utility closet is less than great.

# What specific memories are attached to the garment(s) you loaned?

The bathing suit/kimono look is part of a public performance series that I do with my drag sister Dani Lamorte, which we call Drive By Drag. In this look I was performing at the center of downtown Pittsburgh with a large speaker, making a spectacle of myself in public.

The vintage beaded piece was worn during a lovely photoshoot in the gardens by Japan House here on campus. It was a lovely summer day to play around in drag!

For the red outfit—this was one of my proudest moments in drag. It was the third or fourth day of GEO's strike in 2018, and I wanted to bring out my alter ego to the picket lines. The goal wasn't to make the picket lines all about me, but to lighten the mood, rally the troops, keep things going. Drag is both highly visible and highly political, so I wanted to put together a look that would help GEO stay strong on what I

remember being a very soggy day of picketing. The memory of leading a march in drag, bullhorn in hand, carries a feeling that I'll never forget.

## What are the most important things to you when you put together a "look"?

My style is admittedly eclectic, so sometimes I think about what not only "goes together," but what deliberately clashes, or creates a jarring effect when it's looked at. I like smashing bold colors together in unwise ways. Or pairing a gorgeous vintage dress with a pastel colored wig. I suppose my style is all about pairing conventional and unconventional pieces or looks together.

# Can you name a time you've had a "wardrobe malfunction"? What was the response when that happened?

My drag career is one long, extended wardrobe malfunction. I've had heels break midperformance. I've had falsies (breast inserts) slide to the middle of my chest. I've had wigs fly off mid- head whip. I've had my bracelet get stuck in my wig. Just about every conceivable problem with my costume or wardrobe, I have experienced. Early in my drag career, I might have panicked or tried to downplay the faux pas, but as I became older and more seasoned, and more comfortable in being a campy performer, the more I began to "lean in" to the mistakes, make them a crucial element of the shtick I'm developing. So, nowadays, if my heel breaks mid-performance, I'll start walking funny so that the audience not only knows my heel broke off, but that it's supposed to be funny.

# How did you develop your drag style? Who or what inspired it?

My drag style is a hodgepodge of high culture and low culture, of camp and glamour, of trash and treasure, and of old and new. I never had the money to spend on expensive drag outfits, so I learned how to style looks from shopping at thrift stores, watching music videos, and learning about pop divas. Padded undergarments and prosthesis are important tools for a performer in order to achieve a desired illusion. Some performers use shape enhancements to put emphasis on parts of the body that society attributes specific gendered meanings. An hourglass figure with perky breasts, curvy hips, and prominent buttocks may heighten a performer's aspirations to perform a specific version of femininity.

Although undergarments such as these are not required in a drag closet, many performers will make and/or purchase these articles of clothing and prosthesis.