

SELLE

featuring Erika Diamond

APRIL 14 -
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2023



FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

The exhibition *Self* explores ideas related to societal expectations of gender, identity, and sexuality; and what type of interactions commence in our lives due to these integral components of our individuality. From the most mundane elements of ourselves to the defining moments that make up our lives – each is intertwined with and cannot be separated from who we are at our core.

My curatorial interest has been immersed in the **investigation of adornment and how objects on the body provide an outward manifestation of our innermost being**; with work focused specifically on gender, the female archetype, and surveying facets of manhood and toxic masculinity. These inquiries have been a daily ritual for me, and I appreciate that art has offered a lens to characterize such an inquisition.

Wanting to provide viewers with an opportunity to also question these constructs all at once and in relation to positionality – the idea for the exhibition *Self* was born.

I have been humbled and honored by the opportunity to work with Erika Diamond and Matt Lambert, as each of their artist practices challenges these notions with breadth and sophistication. Additional gratitude goes to the Contemporary Craft exhibitions team of Yu-San Cheng, Associate Director, and Kate Dockery, Exhibitions Manager, for their earnest partnership in bringing this work to life.

Rachel Saul Rearick
Executive Director, Contemporary Craft

Featured Artist

Erika Diamond

BIOGRAPHY

Erika Diamond is a textile-focused artist, curator, and educator based in Asheville, NC. She received a BFA from Rhode Island School of Design and an MFA from Virginia Commonwealth University. She has exhibited nationally and abroad, and her costumes have been commissioned by Charlotte Ballet. Exhibition venues include Dinner Gallery, Form & Concept Gallery, Virginia Museum of Contemporary Art, and International Museum of Art & Science. Her work is included in the collections of San Jose Museum of Quilts & Textiles and Ally Bank among other private collections. Residencies include McColl Center for Visual Art, STARworks, ABK Weaving Center, Platte Forum, and UNC Asheville STEAM Studio. Diamond has taught at Virginia Commonwealth University, Rocky Mountain College of Art and Design, Appalachian Center for Craft, and Penland School of Crafts. She was recently a juror for New Glass Review 42. Diamond is Assistant Director of Galleries at Chautauqua Institution (NY).

ARTIST STATEMENT

My work questions the fragility and resilience of both the human body and our connections to each other. Exploring the potential for textiles to record and preserve, I leverage their historical functions as protective shields, storytelling artifacts, and signifiers of identity, belonging, and value. I use materials and objects that imitate skin, acting as protective yet permeable membranes that can absorb our experiences and bear the scars of our encounters.

With a focus on the paradox of queer safety and visibility, I make textile objects that address the vulnerability and self-preservation negotiated during human interaction. Often those offered the most protection are not the most vulnerable. *Imminent Peril - Queer Collection* is an ongoing series of fashionable safety vests created with bullet-proof Kevlar material, initially created in response to the 2016 Pulse nightclub shooting. They are specifically tailored and designed to protect and uplift my own queer community, reflecting their individual ideas around personal safety and style.

New mirrored vinyl works reference the disproportionate challenges faced by queer youth today, despite the rise in queer representation and commercialization of Pride. The mirror acts as camouflage, allowing the wearer to blend in as a reflection of their surroundings. These textiles – rigid and reflective on one side, soft and celebratory on the other – embody the contemporary contradictions of queer existence. They seek to provide a portable space of safety and solidarity.

QUEER AND TRANS JOY/ WORLDING

ESSAY BY ALPESH KANTILAL PATEL

Haute Couture, French for “high dressmaking,” refers to clothing sewn with extreme attention to detail and finish and is made to order for a specific person. It is typically made of expensive, high-quality fabric and done by hand, and is therefore, time-consuming. According to these criteria, Erika

Diamond’s exquisitely crafted clothing on display is Haute Couture. Diamond, though, is not making these for the privileged and, thereby, undoes the elitism typically associated with such clothing. Her collection is made for members of her community of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer (LGBTQ+) friends. Moreover, while the vests and hoodies are made of expensive fabric, it is the unlikeliest of materials for couture: poly-para phenylene terephthalamide (PPT or K29), also known by the brand name Kevlar, a component of personal armor such as combat hats, ballistic face masks, and bulletproof vests. Kevlar, not surprisingly, is tough and, therefore, not easy to work with.

Of course, the unusual material and the skills required to work with it only serve to reinscribe the collection as high fashion. Indeed, more to the point, Diamond’s clothing on display is meant to glamorize any outfit worn out on the town, specifically at LGBTQ+ dance clubs that have increasingly and literally come under fire. On June 12, 2016, Pulse, an Orlando, Florida nightclub, became (at the time) the site of the worst mass shooting in the United States. More recently, on November 19, 2022, there was an attack at Club Q in Boulder, Colorado. The title of the collection in this exhibition, “Imminent Peril - Queer Collection series,” references the sobering danger LGBTQ+ clubgoers now must face.

Maison de Haute Couture Erika Diamant (as I like to refer to the clothing) is an expression of her love and desire to celebrate the lives of LGBTQ+ individuals in the present as a foil for the narrative portraits we hear and read about in media only after LGBTQ+ subjects are killed or hurt. Be sure to read the short text accompanying each piece of clothing that shares a few facts about the people for whom the garments are made as well as Diamond’s relationship to them. In this way, I would argue that though the past and LGBTQ+ death haunt Diamond’s clothing, it is just as much about the present and celebrating life: both now and then and here and there.

Also included are two works—*In(Visibility) hoodie* and *#Saygay*, a backpack. These works are in response to the increasing number of bills proposed in state legislatures, where public schools have become the front-line for anti-LGBTQ+ and, specifically, anti-trans bills. In the last two years, 306 bills targeting trans youth have been introduced across the United States with roughly 15% of them having passed. The hoodie and backpack play with the heightened visibility of trans youth that such bills have engendered in schools. The hoodie is cleverly lined with what Jo-Ann Fabrics describe as “ombre rainbow pride celebration fabric.” The wearer privately can enjoy being protectively wrapped up in the warmth of LGBTQ+ pride colors. Banned books can be placed in the book bag—even “queer secrets,” which Diamond indicates is one of the materials of the work.

Looking intently at either will only result in one looking back at oneself

Both items are made from reflective vinyl fabric and provide a measure of safety—or at least privacy. Looking intently at either will only result in one looking back at oneself. At the same time, the reflectivity can also be seen as making wearers a *part of*—rather than apart from—the world surrounding them. While the jacket and backpack (literally) reflect the world, they do not represent it as such. I argue they instantiate a being-with (others). The clothing of the *Imminent Peril* series could be said to do this, too. Though the clothes were not made for me, I still wanted to wear some (even if they clearly would not fit me). Effectively, my subjectivity becomes blurred with those for whom the clothes were made and even Diamond, herself, given her hands were so

intimately involved in their creation (as would be the case for any couturier).

This reconception of the subject challenges the idea that one comes into being as “singular” selves through a rejection of other(nes)s. The subject is not founded in originary violence or as a rejection of a generalized “other,” but in interconnection with particular others in the world. Diamond’s work has the potential to do the vital work of what I refer to as “queer and trans worlding”: creating the material conditions through which we, as viewing subjects, could become response-able for, and thereby agents of, making a more ethical world.

An expression of her love and desire to celebrate the lives of LGBTQ+ individuals