

ART



PHOTO BY LINDA KLIEWER

## Opposites attract

Two Portland artists explore their own butch/femme dynamic

BY HERON

How many really good art shows have you seen with lesbian themes? Well, here's one. And a really good one, at that. Two artists have collaborated to present a close look at the traditional butch woman.

Meg Rowe displays soft sculpture using the butch's everyday gear, while photographer Linda Kliewer exhibits huge black-and-white images of a woman in the essential male attire a dedicated butch loves.

*A Very Tailored Look: Undressing One Femme's Desire* is on view through Nov. 25 at the Pacific Northwest College of Art.

Rowe, an accomplished professional with a master's degree from the School of Art Institute in Chicago, uses mostly found objects to make sculptures. The 39-year-old has shown her work nationally and in many Portland galleries, including the Portland Art Museum. Most of her work expresses her interest in marginalized family structures including queer culture.

Rowe, who identifies as femme, always has admired butch women. She respects "the courage of the women who carry their full butch presence in the world." She notes such women are always "out" and must face the homophobia some of us can choose to dodge by simply passing.

Rowe artfully has arranged a plain black dresser drawer with men's underwear shaped and arranged as if each pair of white briefs were a rosebud. A second piece is a box of ties rolled and sewn tightly, giving the whole a cellular effect. These pieces are altars to the strength, sexiness and courage of women who dare to be who they really are.

Rowe's work is beautifully complemented by photographs taken by Kliewer, her partner of 15 years. The former *Just Out* staff photographer has her own studio, Out and Out Productions, in Portland.

Kliewer identifies as a butch and says she always knew she was a dyke. "I know exactly where the lines were drawn," she explains, referring to lines of safety in the larger society.

Kliewer has spent her life exploring those lines and admiring people with the courage to cross over them by being honest about who they are. "We choose which lines to cross on which days," she adds, knowing that the farther

out some are, the easier it is for the rest of us. "I honor those farther out than I am."

This show is about the dress and attitude of those women at the extreme edge of the line. In her photos, Kliewer zeroes in on tight sections of a woman's torso showing only the essential curve, the optimal shadow of her subject. Each scene reveals the archetypal clue that screams who this woman is inside.


For example, in one we see a woman's waist and hip from behind. We get a glimpse of a Levi's stud and a man's white Banana Republic shirt. Perfect. And, just inside the waist, we are treated to a peek of the waistband of a pair of men's white briefs. Excellent.

We see just enough of her to know she is standing with her weight on her right hip, giving her that studied yet careless look we all have seen at a dyke bar. That look that says: I am so cool and I look so great I don't even care if you notice me.

Another shot is a rear view. Same jeans. Same shirt. This time, we see the woman's hand just casually dangling from the hip pocket. No nail polish, of course. And clean, short nails (a lesbian necessity). We are treated to a subtle fold of denim coming from the woman's crotch. Sexy.

Kliewer says she wanted to suggest the sexiness of the woman but only in the most subtle ways. Each photograph is larger than life, with a strict, formal format. No frills and nothing fancy. Just the way a traditional butch would want it, don't you think?

But is this work for us or for them? Both.

It's for us because, like everyone else, we love the chance to see ourselves in erotic expression. And it's for them because, as Rowe says, she wants the larger community to "question their experience of seeing a woman in male clothing." I loved it as a rare chance to see a reflection of ourselves proud and beautiful. 

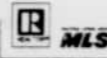
A VERY TAILORED LOOK: UNDRESSING ONE FEMME'S DESIRE is on display through Nov. 25 at the Manuel Izquierdo Gallery inside the Pacific Northwest College of Art, 1241 N.W. Johnson St.

HERON is a Portland free-lance writer and artist who paints and makes wood furniture.

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