

PEOPLE

Community found

Artist and activist Seda Rhodes found community by making it

BY SUSAN DETROY AND LISA BRADSHAW

Seda Rhodes has always defined herself as an artist. She was passionate about art, even as a kid, always with the goal of using that creativity for political statements. Growing up in Ithaca, N.Y., she attended the public Alternative Community School, which, she says, helped shape her liberal viewpoints. "I learned history from the perspective of the oppressed rather than the oppressor."

Then "I made the mistake of going to art school," the Eugene lesbian says. "Everyone was focused on abstract art with no substance, and it was about talking and giving the best critique." She wasn't given any real opportunity to draw, she notes, "which had been my main art form for a long time."

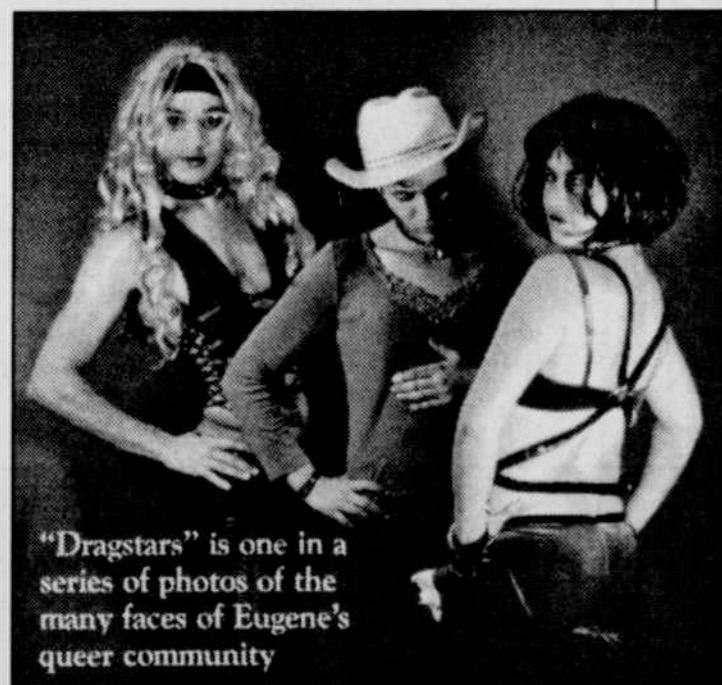
Dropping out of that misguided attempt at college in 1994, Rhodes road-tripped through almost every state for two years before arriving in Oregon, where, the 29-year-old says, "I was overwhelmed with the sense of home."

The artist started a clothes-making business called Wudu Maer. "It was amazing," she smiles. "People in the community really liked my stuff."

She sold the "beautiful yet utilitarian" garments at Eugene's Saturday Market for six years, until a serious car accident in September 2000 left her unable to work. The ongoing recovery process, though, has opened up a new world of time to commit to other kinds of art and activism.

Sept. 11 was further impetus. After the injury, Rhodes explains, "everything had been falling into place. I was available to do other things. I was prepared. I had been living on little money. I became vegan. I was biking instead of using a car. Time became more important than money. After Sept. 11, I just immediately started being active."

She began attending events sponsored by Justice Not War, an outreach of Eugene Peace Works, and is the only out queer participant.



"Dragstars" is one in a series of photos of the many faces of Eugene's queer community



"You want guns and dildos; I'll give you guns and dildos"—Rhodes' response to a controversial Eugene Weekly editorial

During this time, she also helped form a women's action group focused on feminist issues.

In November, members spearheaded the protest and teach-in at Eugene Weekly in response to an editorial comparing Eugene's porn shops and gun stores. The title on the newspaper's cover—"Guns and Dildos"—sent Rhodes over the edge. She followed the drama, she says, "for weeks in frustration and disgust."

Ultimately, she responded with her dual saviors: activism and art. She created her own "Guns and Dildos" cartoon to communicate how she felt and got busy helping organize the Against Patriarchy Conference held in February at University of Oregon.

Having been dissatisfied with last year's gathering, Rhodes says, "I knew I couldn't sit around and complain about it not being what I wanted if I wasn't getting involved." Along with four queer friends, she helped the conference reflect what she did want: more discussion around oppression within the feminist community.

"Just because people are activists, anarchists, feminists... doesn't mean that they have dealt with all their internalized oppression or how they oppress others," she says. "Seems that there is even less space to call people on their sexism and racism in the activist community."

Rhodes' viewpoint about the capitalist hierarchy of oppressions—such as class, gender, sexuality and race—includes

understanding that we are subject to multiple and disparate oppressions that interfere with our common connections, keeping us from understanding one another fully. "I see that all our oppressions are a product of the same system, and I am looking more at how they fit together."

She feels her work has definitely paid off. "I had so many people coming up to me [saying] how much better it was than last year, what a positive change it was...our extremely queer and gender-

queer group...and people of color really brought some different focus." This same philosophy lends to

Seda Rhodes shows off her new tattoos—which she did herself

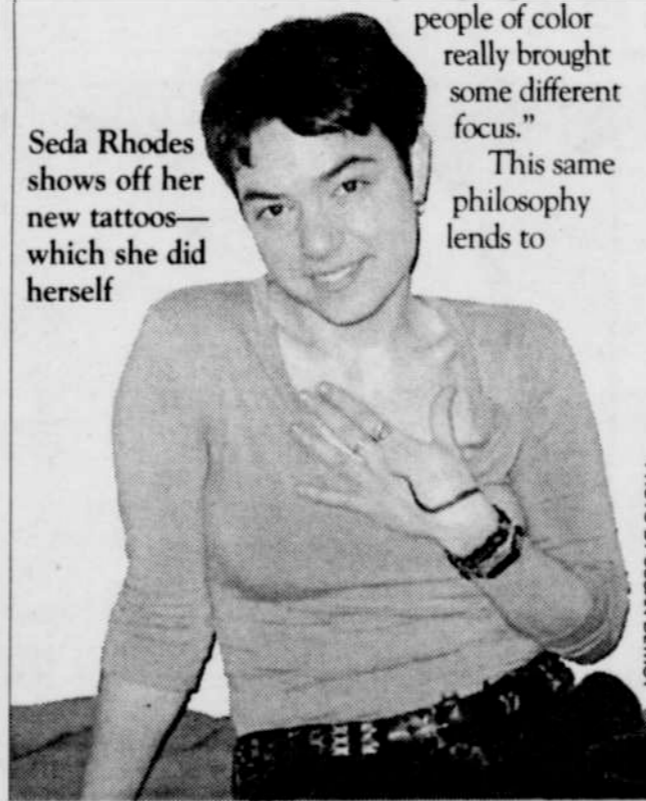


PHOTO BY SUSAN DETROY

Rhodes' success as co-facilitator of the Young and Old Women Circle, intergenerational feminist discussions held at Mother Kali's Books. "I have seen some incredible connections being made between women.... It feels like a subversive thing to be doing. We are trained to think that we separate and have nothing in common."

Rhodes' four-member household works as a collective politically and with creative projects. "We are all sort of crafty," she remarks as she describes "Byketrash," jewelry and rubber products made from recycled bicycle parts—the brainchild of roommate Ami Puri.

Rhodes proudly labels her first piece "a schoolgirl skirt made entirely from bicycle inner tubes." The recyclers will have a booth at Michigan Womyn's Music Festival this year.

The household identifies as a queer separatist home. "It is not about the people you are excluding," Rhodes explains. "It is about the people you are choosing to surround yourself with, where you want to put your energy."

She also sees her housemates as her family. "We challenge each other. We call each other on our stuff, push each other in different ways, help each other grow, encourage each other creatively. It is a really positive environment."

The household is also behind the monthly Queer Night at Out of the Fog Coffee House, which started last fall. "The response was just amazing," Rhodes remarks. "From the very first one the place was packed.... People are starved for something to do and a place to get together."

The evening now includes a regular open mike drag performance, which people are lining up for. After a stint away from drawing, Rhodes is creating all the promotional posters and cartoons for the event.

But the artistically diverse young woman is perhaps best known in Eugene for her provocative photography of lesbians and the trans community. She eventually wants to create a community darkroom space.

During her recent show at Out of the Fog, Rhodes' friend and co-activist Eva D. sat and observed reactions to the exhibit. "I watched them as their minds expanded and their consciousness was raised around gender fluidity," she exclaims, noting this experience actually made her feel empowered.

Now having lived in Eugene for seven years, Rhodes says she is finally feeling her world coming together. "It is ironic," she muses. "I had been planning on moving from Eugene to Portland...after years of living here and feeling no sense of community, suddenly it is becoming cohesive.... It is such a different feeling." □

To commission SEDA RHODES for an art project, e-mail seda_rhodes@hotmail.com.

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