

FISHNETS & DESIRE: PERFORMING THE NEOBURLESQUE

by

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Abstract

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Fishnets & Desire: Performing the Neoburlesque is a reflection upon the art installation and performance piece of the same name, and reflects upon neoburlesque performance genre, through the lens of the author's primary research of creating these works. Written as a piece of performative scholarship, this paper outlines the creative process of the author's project, and the theatrical history, theory, and methodology behind it. *Fishnets & Desire* is a reflection of performance and queer theories, meditating upon the specific art forms of burlesque striptease and drag, and how they enact gender performativity. Neoburlesque is a tongue-in-cheek and satirical form of expression, which lampoons gender stereotypes, and societal expectations. The current art form draws upon cultural nostalgia for the kitsch of burlesque striptease that was performed in theatres, and gentleman's clubs from the 1920s-60s. Through the use of comedic exaggeration and hyperbolic gender presentation, burlesque seeks to undermine conventional notions of femininity, and deconstruct them. The author's performance piece also sought to engage with the energetic relationship between the audience and the burlesque performer's reciprocal gaze; and neoburlesque as a genre of carnivalesque spectacle. As an integration of live performance, projected video, and photography, *Fishnets & Desire* created a space in which the audience simultaneously experienced the feeling of being on stage, as well as actively watched (and thus, participating in) a burlesque striptease.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	ii
Abstract	iii
1 Exhilaration	1
2 Body of Work	1
3 Doubt and Surrender	4
4 Conceptualizing Burlesque	8
5 <i>Fishnets & Desire</i>	15
6 Ritual and (Trans)formations	17
7 Gender, Drag and Female-female impersonation	18
8 Carnavalesque	24
9 Reciprocal Gazes	27
10 Creative Processes and Products	29
11 Conclusions	40
Bibliography	43
Appendix: Images	45
DVD of Fishnets & Desire	51

1. Exhilaration

There are only two moments I distinctly remember and those are what framed the performance. I remember walking into the gallery space, and in the next moment I can remember feeling in my own skin, I was walking out again. The performance that occurred between those two moments can only be described as an entirely depersonalized, out of body experience. Muscle memory took over as I danced and I was floating somewhere at the top of the room looking down on myself performing, along with both of the audiences – the one projected behind me and the live one which was present in the gallery space.

As I entered the gallery's office and shut the door I found myself softly shaking. I thought to myself: *did that really just happen?* The fact that I was stripped down to fringed panties, rhinestone nipple pasties and 5-inch high heels would seem to suggest so, as would the pair of ostrich feather fans that I held in my hands. I was hit with a sudden rush of pure bliss and outpouring of love and support from my peers, my friends and even complete strangers the likes of which I'd never experienced before. There is usually a post performance rush, but nowhere near this—this was untouchable, no other performance up to this moment had such a huge high or endorphin rush associated with it. Bliss.

2. Body of Work

The performance and installation piece I created for my MA project is entitled *Fishnets & Desire: Performing the Neoburlesque* and it was first mounted at the Fleishman Gallery from May 4-25, 2012. The project consists of four self-portrait photographic prints on cotton vellum (two of which are life-size and the other two are approximately ¾ scale), a video

collage projection, set dressing, and a neoburlesque style live performance. The tangible parts of this project's various components were mostly realized through my own effort, with some technical support and assistance from the individuals noted in the acknowledgements. However, I should make special note of Dani Vulnavia's costume designs, which were the result of a collaborative process based upon my overall artistic vision for this project.

Fishnets & Desire: Performing the Neoburlesque is the culmination and marriage of my academic work over the past two years, and my passion for performing burlesque. The creation of this project was largely informed by my readings of cultural and feminist theory, as well my on-going performances of burlesque throughout the creative and writing processes, and additional academic guidance from my professors. It was additionally informed by a number of non-academic sources on the topic of burlesque, and views written or expressed in secondary sources by some of the performers I admire most.

For the exhibition, my series of self-portrait photos were suspended from the ceiling using fishing line and transparent poster spines, and hung between 1.5-3 feet from the wall, so they were surrounding the perimeter of the room, with one positioned roughly in each corner. The gallery entrance faces North, so this meant a photo in each the NW, NE, SE and SW corners of the space¹.

The majority of the south facing wall was taken up by the projection screen, which was framed by red velvet stage curtains. The video, a collage of stock footage of various audience reactions from the 1950s, began to play for the first time with my dance performance, and continued to play on a loop throughout the remainder of the opening and for the duration of the exhibition's run. The soundtrack to the video, which is also the music

¹ Please see the appendix to see the images.

I performed to, remained on loop with the video for the duration of the exhibition. I selected two contemporary jazz songs by independent musicians, both of which are performed in upbeat vintage-inspired styles, but the lyrics are ripe with allusions to seduction, financial desperation, and unrepentant hedonism. The first song “Why oh Why” was written by an old friend, Infamous Bajcar, and was recorded by his band The Grim Preachers. The second song “Devil with the Devil” by The Underscore Orchestra, I came across online while specifically searching for Creative Commons licensed music to use for this project.

This project’s overarching themes were formed through praxis, in so far as rehearsing and performing of neoburlesque, for the last several years have been integral to my formulation of theory around it. The broad themes I wanted to address with this project include: gender representation and satire in neoburlesque – particularly the high femme burlesque performer as an enactor of hyperfemininity as a kind of female-female impersonator; neoburlesque parodying gender as a mode of carnivalesque; and the energetic relationship between the audience’s gaze, and the burlesque stripper’s reciprocal gaze. Taking these general concepts into consideration, it was my intention to create a multifaceted creative performance and art installation.

The performance I created for the gallery opening reception drew upon elements of previously performed acts, but was new choreography designed with the spatial components of the installation specifically in mind. This paper is a reflection upon the entire process of this project, from its inception through attempting (the admittedly difficult task of) addressing my own artwork and performance in a scholarly manner. My aim throughout this process has been to critically engage with, and to interrogate burlesque from the specific standpoint of performance and queer theory, meditating upon burlesque striptease as an

empowering, subversive feminist act. Through my research and practice of this art form, I have come to understand burlesque as a satire of gender and sexuality, and thus opens up the possibility of deconstructing and subverting societal expectations on those issues.

3. Doubt and Surrender

I reached for the teapot to pour myself another cup, and was disappointed to find it had gone cold. Had I really been sitting there that long, blankly staring at the cursor mockingly blinking in front of me? I was beating myself up in my head, “Write something, just write anything, goodamnit. You’re overthinking it.” Burlesque is performance – it is about feeling the music, stepping into a character, trying on a persona other than your own, it’s about the exchange of energy between audience and performer – but above all, it’s satire and it’s supposed to be fun, it’s play! I had gone through the creative process, experienced euphoria, and then the inevitable let down afterward starts to set in. I felt like the creating process is the important part, whatever it is you’ve created becomes secondary, and even lower down on the same ladder is explicating about what you’ve created.

To create art about the body and that also about a sensory, ultimately a subjective, embodied experience, and then to have to be cerebral about it and to try to address it in a meaningful and scholarly way seemed daunting at best. I was angry with myself for not taking better notes in Core Issues in Cultural Theory class. My mind had been elsewhere, I had been spending my nights rhinestoning costumes, rehearsing or performing and obsessively watching YouTube videos and archived footage of other local performers and international burlesque superstars (both contemporary ones and the queens of yesteryear).

So much for the afterglow of performance! Mentally I'd moved on to other new and exciting projects in my head and yet the requirement to see this project through to the end, the writing of this paper you are currently reading hung over my psyche like a guillotine. I was resisting writing it with every fibre of my being. I had to surrender to the writing process, and just let it pour out. Surrender means to let-go of striving for perfectionism, to let go of attachment to a specific outcome, and to just let it become what it will be. A yoga teacher I studied with sometime ago would come around the class during challenging *asanas* and push her students further into the postures, telling us that we had to give up resistance and surrender to the experience. A former employer articulated a similar sentiment when I worked as a receptionist at a tattoo shop. I was having a hard time sitting still and was fidgeting while he was tattooing the outline of the phoenix that covers my back; the spine is a particularly tender spot. He told me to surrender and accept the pain, rather than resist it. He claimed it would make the pain more tolerable and the ink would set into my skin better, I believed him and it seemed to work. Buddhism teaches that to surrender, to relinquish control, and to lose attachment, is an important step towards enlightenment. In order to write this, I had to surrender to the process of addressing my own work, and applying the theory that I had in mind as I created the art.

I empathically feel that it is difficult to address your own art at such a close distance without making the writing itself into a piece of art. The creation of the project itself, and then writing this paper were modes of primary research through experiential learning. Writing this paper was at times an exercise in frustration, at other times a delightful experience. In truth, when I first started I had no idea how to bring form to the multitude of subjects addressed herein. Inspiration finally struck somewhere between my

well-thumbed copy of my supervisor, Shannon Bell's book *Fast Feminism*, which has largely informed the ethos of this writing and creative project, and rereading some pieces of performative writing that I found especially inspirational, Jon D. Rutter's "Dismantling the Face: Toward a Phenomenology of Boxing" and Della Pollock's "The Performative 'I'".

Performative writing is a genre of scholarly writing, or rhetorical style, that sees the text itself as a mode of performance. As a tool of phenomenological research or autoethnography, performative writing seeks to relate the personal to a wider perspective and vice versa, but it does not claim to hold absolute truths, nor does performative writing seek to impose a specific world view on its audience. As Ronald Pelias states in a paper in support of performative writing as a legitimate mode of scholarly expression, "...performative writing is a highly selective camera, aimed carefully to capture the most arresting angles. Each frame is studied and felt; each shot is significant...Everyday experience, then, is not scholarship, but the shaping of everyday experience into telling and moving tales can be."²

Both of the aforementioned papers by Rutter and Pollock opened up my eyes to what creative scholarships can be, and how to write about subjective experiences. In my writing of this paper, I have also attempted to embrace the fast feminism philosophy, which draws upon Paul Virilio's speed theory:

- 1) Critique the world quickly.
- 2) Interrupt intellectual scholarship.

² Ronald Pelias, "Performative Writing as Scholarship: An Apology, an Argument, an Anecdote", *Cultural Studies <=> Critical Methodologies* 5, no. 4 (2005) : 418.

- 3) Position the body as the basis of intellectual work.
- 4) Write theory as art.
- 5) Do art as theory.
- 6) Do theory from non-obvious points of departure.
- 7) Do violence to the original context.³

This paper is a creative experiment in trying on this approach in my scholarship, as much as it is about the actual topic at hand. My subjective experience of this entire process is laid out on a silver platter, as this text itself becomes another type of performance. Neoburlesque, as a sensual mode of presentation is inherently about the expression of sexuality through the body, the strategic veiling and unveiling of skin, and the evocation of desire. As a form of theatrical spectacle so focused on the body, neoburlesque absolutely engenders fast feminism's third precept to "position the body as the basis of intellectual work".

My writing style in reflecting upon this creative process has been substantially influenced by the aforementioned sources, but I believe the voice to be very much my own. By speaking to my own experience of creating a performance art and gallery exhibition, and now writing this paper, it has enabled me to bind all the elements together as this text becomes a secondary mode of performance.

I have never been one to follow rules, or at least I like to push boundaries and see what I can get away with. My very first post-secondary assignment received an F, because I was being a smartass and tried to make it into a creative writing piece. Since

³ Shannon Bell, *Fast Feminism* (Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 2010), 174.

then, I hope, I have learned the “right” way to be creative in my scholarly writing, and write theory as art, and do art as theory.

4. Contextualizing Burlesque

The beginnings of burlesque go back to the 17th century, as a style of literature, music, and theatre that satirized other well-known works. The term “burlesque” has broadly come to describe a form of theatrical spectacle, which at its root is a satirical exaggeration of human sexuality and gender. The etymology of the word indicates that it comes from the Italian word “burla”, which means to joke. American burlesque began in the late 1860s, growing out of the British (Victorian) burlesque tradition. Both the American and British shows featured comedic elements in a variety show formats, closely aligned with the vaudeville tradition. Since these early incarnations, burlesque performance has been tied to questions of the feminized spectacle, women’s sexual morality, and onstage depictions of femininity versus those in the “real world”⁴.

In the early days of American burlesque the shows featured satirical song and dance, but the striptease now nearly synonymous with the art form would not enter the burlesque tradition until decades later. The exact date and originators of striptease in the burlesque tradition is a contested subject, but best guesses place its beginnings at circa 1928⁵. The origins of striptease’s inclusion in the burlesque genre grew out of the seeds sown by the early pioneers of American burlesque, whose shows and acts set the tone for

⁴ Robert C. Allen, *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 21.

⁵ Ann Corio, *This Was Burlesque* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1968), 72.

what was to come after it, in all of its tawdry glory.

In 1868 renowned dancer Lydia Thompson and her troupe The British Blondes came to New York from London. Risqué for their time, The British Blondes performed parodies of popular stage plays and classical Western mythology along with variety numbers in opaque, but skin-tight flesh coloured stockings and tight-laced corsets, even when portraying male characters on stage. Lively dance, comedic bits and song characterized their shows. These women were true Victorian rebels in every sense of the word. Their allure was not just their onstage personas but also their offstage behaviour and the popular public personas they cultivated. For example, Thompson and two other members of her stage company were charged with assault for horsewhipping and holding at gunpoint a newspaper editor who wrote a series of scathing reviews and moral condemnations of their show⁶. After being convicted and forced to pay a fine, their notoriety only grew and their shows became increasingly popular. As Jacki Willson notes of Thompson and the British Blondes,

Their desirable femininity incongruously jarred with their aggressively 'masculine' behaviour. They smoked, were loud, bawdy, independent and crude yet seductively drew in men and women like bees to a honey pot. They expressed a gender hybrid that repulsed and attracted, conventionally posing in both masculine and feminine dress with an excess of artifice that played up and hinted at a voracious sexual appetite.⁷

Thompson and her troupe were trailblazers with their provocative performance style and larger than life personalities. After their initial continental success with their adaption of the

⁶ Robert C. Allen, *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture*, 19.

⁷ Jacki Willson, *The Happy Stripper: Pleasures and Politics of the New Burlesque*, (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2008), 38-9.

Greek myth *Ixion*⁸, a lasting lineage of burlesque was established, with burlesques gracing the stages of New York every theatrical season between 1869 and 1938⁹. While the British Blondes were certainly not the only burlesque troupe to make an impact, their innovation in terms of tone, content, costuming and casting sparked much of what was to come after them.

Fast forward nearly 150 years later, and neoburlesque is the spiritual successor of these earlier incarnations of burlesque, with the same balance of tawdry and seductive, its aim to entertain first and foremost, but then also simultaneously push the boundaries of social propriety. The neoburlesque is a pastiche of classic striptease (as was popularly performed in burlesque theatres, music halls, cabarets and later gentleman's clubs between the late 1920s and into the 1960s) mixed with contemporary dance and music, comedy, drama, and often elements borrowed from other performance styles. Burlesque performer Dr. Lucky, the self-described world's only PhDD, (who also happens to be a real life professor of burlesque –legal name Lynn Sally) explains that trying to pin down burlesque's definition is somewhat futile, but cites the neo-burlesque movement as embodying the following characteristics and drawing upon a wide array of inspirations: “[Neoburlesque is] glamorous, campy, parodic, excessive, and salacious. Influences differ for individuals but they may include drag and club culture; pinup iconography and Hollywood glamour; clowning, circus and side show

⁸ *Ixion* could be considered a particularly interesting choice for the British Blonde's first American show, as the myth is the story of a king who performs socially unacceptable behaviours (kin-slaying, later coveting Zeus's wife) and is first ostracized from his community, temporarily welcomed to Mt. Olympus and then eventually cast into the Underworld for eternal torture. In choosing to tell the story of an outlaw, it's possible the British Blondes saw themselves as outlaws and other early burlesque performers, or as operating in spaces out and beyond social laws, in their lives on and offstage as well.

⁹ Allen, *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture*, 21.

acts; the swing scene and rockabilly; performance art, theatre, dance and musical theatre; and striptease, to name a few.”¹⁰

Classic burlesque, based much upon the tease rather than the strip, continued throughout the 1950s and into the 1960s; acts moved from theatres, to gentleman’s clubs, and evolved to become raunchier, more explicit and less elegant. Many living burlesque legends cite two things as the death of the burlesque theatre: the advent of household television ownership and the move towards the more explicit, raunchier (early) incarnations of contemporary strip club peeling¹¹. By the early 1970s, artistic, demure and kitschy burlesque could no longer compete. Burlesque striptease essentially disappeared by the early 70s and into the 1980s.

The revival that gave birth to neoburlesque started in the 1990s, by originators like Catherine D’Lish, Dita von Teese, and Jo Boobs who were headliners at American strip clubs and wanted to bring some old world glamour to their acts. In Toronto, performer, Tanya Cheex, who is the founder and creative director of the local burlesque troupe Skin Tight Outta Sight Creative, sparked the neoburlesque movement. Cheex got her showgirl start as a female-female impersonator at drag shows in Toronto’s gay village. In the late 1990s, she was producing fashion shows for the UK-based latex fetish fashion line, SkinTwo, and because of her love of everything vintage and kitschy, she began injecting burlesque into the shows as a means of making the shows more engaging and exciting. Skin

¹⁰ Lynn Sally, “‘It Is the Ugly That is So Beautiful’: Performing the Monster/Beauty Continuum in American Neo-burlesque,” *Journal of American Drama and Theatre* 21, no. 3 (2009), 7.

¹¹ *Burlesque Undressed*, directed by Allison Grist (2010; London: Nightfall Films), Digital download via iTunes.

Tight Outta Sight was born, and remains the longest running troupe in Canada¹². Since then, Toronto has become a hotbed of burlesque, with over 100 active performers and a dozen or so different troupes, and now hosts the annual Toronto International Burlesque Festival.

By the early 2000s, the neoburlesque scene exploded across North America and into Europe, with thousands of performers clamouring to embrace the art form with reverence and nostalgia for the original, but also pushing into the present with a feminist attitude and making it more akin to performance art. One of the distinctive features of the neoburlesque that sets it apart from the original form is that most performers are seasoned amateurs and it is a very time involved hobby, as most have day jobs or other sources of incomes. (The exception being a small number of headlining, very well-known performers, e.g. world-class people who tour all over, the Roxi D'Lite and Dirty Martinis of the world.) The burlesque performers of the 1920s—until the end of the golden era (1960s)—did it professionally, even if they were in the chorus, and they were paid well for their time. Depending on how established and in-demand a performer was, a touring headliner could command pay of between \$800 to \$1800 a week, but she would also be spending huge amounts of that pay on costumes; the biggest stars could spend up to \$400-\$600 per gown (the equivalent of approximately \$2600 to \$3600 today)¹³. To further contextualize these earnings, one also has to consider that these women were financially independent when the majority of North American women were still relegated to roles of housewives dependent on their husbands as primary breadwinners.

¹² Tanya Cheex, "Looking Back," *Winterplay!*, Winter 2011, 66.

¹³ Liz Goldwyn, *Pretty Things*, (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), 26.

Another key difference between the neoburlesque and the original forms is the creation of the boylesque performer¹⁴. Although there were some male-bodied female impersonators (biologically male person performing in drag) that were often part of the shows in the 1920s-1960s, they presented themselves as female and did not perform masculinity. It's interesting to note that some of these drag performers even had devoted and adoring followings of heterosexual men who would come to see them perform. The same costume designers used by the female burlesque queens often made costumes for these female impersonators. For example, legendary burlesque costume designer Rex Huntington's costume order forms specifically had a designation to check off if the gown was a "garment for LADY or MAN"¹⁵. In her research for the book *Pretty Things*, Liz Goldwyn interviewed many surviving burlesque performers from yesteryear who frequently recounted that once they tired of a costume they would often sell them to the drag performers they shared stages with, who often had similar measurements¹⁶. The inclusion of drag and burlesque on the same bill continues to this day and some performers do both.

The neoburlesque is a pastiche of old and new, as it draws heavily upon nostalgia for early-mid 20th century Americana and kitsch. With its camp sensibility, neoburlesque is delightfully lowbrow, yet self-aware. A particular section in Susan's Sontag's essay "Notes on 'Camp'" comes to mind as relevant to neoburlesque's exaggerated characters and

¹⁴ I'll come back to addressing boylesque in a bit more detail in section 7, later on in this paper, but it is an expansive topic, deserving of a paper and in depth study of its own.

¹⁵ Goldwyn, *Pretty Things*, 54.

¹⁶ Ibid., 49.

aesthetic: “Camp sees everything in quotation marks. It’s not a lamp, but a ‘lamp’; not a woman, but a ‘woman’. To perceive Camp in objects and persons is to understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role. It is the farthest extension, in sensibility, of the metaphor of life as theater.”¹⁷ In style and content, neoburlesque seems to embody the camp aesthetic. It is a throwback to earlier forms of burlesque and the eras in which they were performed, but it also simultaneously lampoons the present. Neoburlesque injects a punk rock devil-may-care attitude into the art of striptease, with individual performers differing in style from the ultra-traditional, elegant and class, to contemporary, raunchy, bumps ‘n grinds, and purely comedic acts. In contrast to pure stripping (as one might find at a mainstream heterosexually oriented strip club) neoburlesque as a performance style is self-aware, self-reflexive and performed with tongue-in-cheek irony.¹⁸ Through the use of satire, burlesque seeks to undermine conventional notions of femininity and deconstruct, queer them and replace them with an empowering spectacle whereby the flaunting of sexuality is freely chosen and fun!

Recently, neoburlesque has moved from purely being a subculture phenomenon and has entered Western popular culture consciousness through mainstream interpretations of it, such as the Pussycat Dolls; the cringe-worthy Hollywood film, *Burlesque* (2010), featuring Cher and Christina Aguilera, (which despite what the title implies has no nudity or striptease); and also through the increasing popularity and undeniably adept marketing skills of artists like Dita von Teese and Immodesty Blaize.

¹⁷ Susan Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp’” in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*, (New York: Octagon Books, 1978), 280.

¹⁸ Willson, *The Happy Stripper*, 4.

5. *Fishnets & Desire*

The various elements in the *Fishnets & Desire: Performing the Neoburlesque* installation came together to create an experience, which reflects upon the neoburlesque artistic conventions and the themes mentioned above, namely in camp sensibility and the performance of gender, verging on the flamboyance of drag. I am, however, also keenly aware of how its presence in a gallery setting is a dislocation and departure from the typical neoburlesque show. For example, burlesque numbers are typically performed on stage in theatres, nightclubs or bars and are usually part of a variety shows with a number of different acts, often also including comedy, vaudeville, live music, clowning, sideshow tricks, stage magic, drag artists and hosts, who are entertaining personalities in and of themselves. By contrast, the entirety of my performance took place on the gallery floor, in the midst of the installation's various components, and only a few feet away from the audience. There was little buffer zone between them and me, I wasn't on the pedestal of a raised stage and the fourth wall was broken. Though interacting with the audience is a regular part of burlesque performance, this particular performance felt substantially different from the ways in which that normally occurs.

Moving the performance from a stage to the gallery floor fundamentally altered the power relations between the audience and myself as performer. Though floor space was cleared for my performance, the audience and I both occupied the same space. The lines between performance space and ordinary life seemed to blur. The gallery felt equally occupied by the audience and the performer and the demarcation of the performance space and the audience space was not clear. The reciprocal gazes (more on this in section nine) exchanged between myself and the audience were at eye level, and I could actually see them

all, as opposed to having bright stage lights in my eyes and only seeing a row or two.

Another fundamental difference between the gallery show and a typical burlesque show was that clocking in at seven minutes; my performance was the sole act of the evening.

My original concept was to try to evoke a feeling of the a burlesque theatre through the use of props and set dressing in the gallery space, but because of time constraints and budget, minimalism won out. I think it actually worked out better this way, especially considering the crowd that assembled for the opening reception. More friends and supporters showed up to the opening than I had anticipated, which necessitated some last minute reconfiguration of the spacing and orientation of my choreography. My original intention in my live performance had been to use all of the gallery space and to perform around and interweaving between the live audience. Unfortunately, that didn't work out logistically based on how many people were present, the placement of lighting, and also a local burlesque scene photographer showed up and set up his tripod in the middle of the space. This lead to some last minute readjustments to spacing and choreography, and I ended up performing towards the back of the gallery, in a stage-like setup in front of the projection screen, and facing the live audience. The performance still worked out with most of my original choreography in mind, though I was happy that I had included some leeway in my fan dance section (the second half of the piece) because otherwise the tips of my fans would have been grazing the audience. Interestingly, the placement of the show in the gallery also created a space in which audience members were initially practicing the decorum of museum or gallery attendees. In order to get a burlesque audience reaction (e.g. cheering and enthusiasm) out of them took a bit of coaxing, but quickly the scene transformed into one where boisterous behaviour was understood to be the norm.

6. Ritual and (Trans)formations

Preparing for a show is a highly ritualized process. It begins before you leave the house with removal of body hair, shaping of eyebrows, facemasks, often aerosol airbrush or light self-tanner make-up to disguise any bruises, cellulite or imperfections on the body. The application of pasties is something I also like to do at home, because I've learned the hard way, and one too many popping off mid-performance, that often the backstage area at shows becomes very warm and humid from body heat of performers and the spirit gum or surgical tape doesn't adhere properly. If you put on your pasties at home, they have enough time to properly adhere and if you put a bra on overtop of them, it also helps them adhere better to your skin. Generally, I like to do a base of face make-up at home first, so I never show up to a show entirely bare-faced, it ruins the illusion of who Loretta Jean (my burlesque alter-ego) is. So in truth, the ritual of (trans)formation in character begins before I even step out my front door. Depending on my act for that specific night, as I make my character transformation, I may move from my own gender performativity into a new space somewhere else along the gender continuum.

Depending on the weather, and my mode of transportation to the venue, I'll often do my entire face make-up prior to arrival at the venue. But if I think there's a chance of arriving looking less than fresh-faced, I'll put on my eye shadow, lipstick, eyeliner, false eyelashes (two pairs layered on top of each other for maximum va-va-voom effect), and body glitter at the venue. Even my "male" characters end up with this ridiculous, exaggerated aesthetic. Once I am in my full make-up, the transformation is still only half done, the costume and atmosphere is what completes it.

When I change into a costume covered in fringe, rhinestones, and other extravagant embellishments my sense of self becomes displaced. In stepping into costume, I step out of myself. The costume becomes a second skin that completes the (trans)formation and ultimately makes the character come to life. The costume reflects, or perhaps even hyper-reflects the persona being seen on stage. Though some of the characteristics of that persona may already reside within the performer, as well as within audience members; the costume acts as signifier of what the character in question is all about. Neoburlesque in all of its glamour, theatricality, and artifice that is intentionally over the top, is an exaggerated version of all that it encompasses, especially the playful vulgarity it embraces. The exaggeration works in the same way as fun house mirror; it simultaneously distorts and brings into focus different elements of the character. Some parts of the character or issue presented are brought into greater focus, while others are diffused through humour. The disruption is just enough to bring real social issues into awareness without disturbing prevailing power structures too much. In this way, the burlesque queen is at minimum the kissing cousin, or perhaps the stepsister of the drag queen.

7. Gender, Drag and Female-female Impersonation

Neoburlesque opens up the possibility of critiquing or questioning gender norms, and playing with fluid movement of cross-gender identifications that is reminiscent of drag performance. This is not entirely surprising, given the long-standing tradition of cross-dressing that has been prevalent in the comedic burlesque tradition since its 19th century roots. In many ways, I believe neoburlesque and drag share a similarly playful attitude

towards gender. Though the two art forms have obvious differences, particularly in their origins and subculture communities, there is some overlap as well.

As previously mentioned, Tanya Cheex, who can justifiably be credited with starting the neoburlesque scene in Toronto, was a Marilyn Monroe female-female impersonator in drag shows prior to starting *Skin Tight Outta Sight*. Local shows at queer nightclubs such as Goodhandy's often feature burlesque and drag on the same bill and it's not at all unusual to have varying levels of drag present in a burlesque show. One of the local self-proclaimed 'queerlesque' troupes (the now sadly defunct) The Cinnamon Hearts, performed annually at Pride for several years, and each member also had a drag king persona under the sub-banner of "Meat Pi". At the international headliner level, there are performers such as Coco Lectric, whose drag king persona Tony Kilowatt looks like he would be at home in a touring cast of *West Side Story*.

Like drag kings or queens, the contemporary burlesque performer blurs lines between traditional gender binaries and puts on a new identity with each act she creates. Naturalism is not something burlesque performers strive for. In fact, all of the pageantry and costuming in the genre points towards highly constructed flamboyancy, namely the exaggerated and hyper-feminine, even when acting the part of male character¹⁹. With each sway of her hips,

¹⁹ The majority of burlesque performers have traditionally been predominantly cisgender women and this continues to be true, but there are an increasing number of male performers who do what has been dubbed as "boylesque". There are also a growing number of genderqueer performers, whose identities and presentation on stage are outside the traditional gender binary. For example, Miss Rose Wood, who is a trans woman, calls herself both male and female impersonator, and her particular brand of burlesque as "drag striptease". However, when she competed at Miss Exotic World in 2006 and 2007 (burlesque's highest recognition competition and awards show), she was put in the boylesque category, so certainly there are still some systemic modes of oppression in the burlesque world that need to be worked through. I feel the need to note this bias, because as a cisgender woman/performer myself, I tend to create predominantly hyper-feminine

or puckering of her lips, the burlesque performer is pointing away from herself to signifiers of the gender identity she is embodying. So whether it is my performance of a masculine prohibition-era bootlegger, or Trixi Jones's nun getting drunk on holy wine and smoking marijuana behind the pulpit, or Miss Honey B. Hind's *Dorothy Gale* / "*There's no place like home*" number – they all use culturally inscribed meanings of gender that act as point of reference for the audience to understand the story of what is going on, and who this character is in 3-5 minutes of stage time.

A common trope in neoburlesque is the intentionally unsuccessful or unconvincing cross-dressing of a female-bodied performer; and as a female-female impersonator playing around with stereotypically male forms of dress, which only further accentuates her hyper-femininity. I attempted to incorporate this into the performance I created for this project, by stripping from my male clothes to overtly female underclothes — a frilly set of rhinestoned bra and panties. The photos I chose to display in the gallery also speak to similarly exaggerated notions of femininity, for example, my Batman and Robin act (I play the Dick Grayson to my performance partner, Delicia Pastiche's Bruce Wayne) is a feminized, unconvincing drag version of a well-known comic book character.

In both drag and burlesque performances, Claire Nally points to their camp nature, saying it creates the possibility of "heavy criticism of hetero-normative genders, and ultimately with the queering of identities"²⁰. If we follow Bell's contention that "Queer gets its meaning and its politics from its oppositional relationship to hegemonic norms. To queer

(albeit queer) characters, and this was reflected in my finished project. Certainly boylesque performers often also play the role of exaggerated masculinity.

²⁰ Claire Nally, "Grrrly Hurly Burly: Neo-burlesque and the Performance of Gender," *Textual Practice* 23, no. 4 (2009), 625.

something is to disrupt it, to put it under scrutiny and to attempt to change it”²¹ then it follows that these aims can perhaps be achieved through the instruments of parody and satire, which also aim to put generally held assumptions under consideration and scrutiny. In this regard, neoburlesque and drag seem to be cut from a similar cloth, as both share a love of camp and exaggeration of gender roles for theatrical effect that reveals larger truths.

The political possibilities of drag have sometimes been scrutinized because of the way it portrays gender on stage as so over the top and fantastical. For example, Judith Butler revisits the question of drag performance in *Undoing Gender* (2004), a topic that she previously addressed in her seminal text *Gender Trouble* (1990), and is quite critical in doing so. Butler claims that drag can create a false dichotomy and ontology “which determine[s] what kinds of bodies and sexualities will be considered real and true, which kind will not”, and which presupposes that one performance of gender is more authentic than another²². However, even if we accept this as true, it seems that by playing with the exaggerated, hyperbolic versions of femininity (or masculinity, or any gender identity for that matter) can reveal irony or contradictions within either the performance perceived as fake, or within the supposedly more authentic gender performance. Butler’s further analysis also seems to support this, and the important role drag (and by extension, neoburlesque playing with gender) can play in challenging predominant societal views of gender, through the use of parody or satire:

Fantasy is what allows us to imagine ourselves and others otherwise. Fantasy is what establishes the possible in excess of the real; it points, it points elsewhere, and when it is embodied, it brings the elsewhere home. ... How is it that drag... enters into the

²¹ Bell, *Fast Feminism*, 19.

²² Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 214.

political field? It does this, I would suggest, by not only making us question what is real, and what has to be, but by showing how contemporary notions of reality can be questioned, and new modes of reality instituted.²³

So then ,by playing with fantastic, over-the-top gender performativity, both burlesque and drag create new points of departure from which essentialized femininity can be critiqued, and gender fluidity can be played with. As Bell notes, in relation to drag kinging: “Gender fluidity does not merely imply oscillating between male and female, but also being born bio-female and becoming male or locating oneself somewhere along the continuum between normative masculinity and normative femininity, mixing the codes of femininity and masculinity in he same body.”²⁴ Neoburlesque also opens up this same possibility, of distorting or blending gender, or conversely, resisting the fluidity and playing it straight, “doing a hegemonic gender performance with awareness that this very doing is socially and culturally produced”.²⁵

While certainly many female burlesque performers veer into the territory of aesthetically becoming a faux drag queen, this is not a prerequisite to burlesque performance or is it the prerogative of every performer. Indeed, one of the strengths of the burlesque genre is its plurality of gender representations that can be created for, and be seen, on its stages.

However, I feel there still does need to be an acknowledgement of the difference between a female performer enacting hyper-femininity and an actual transgender person. Though the performance of hyper-femininity may take the character’s gender into the realm of campy excess associated with drag, it is still a form of playful artifice that could

²³ Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 216-17.

²⁴ Bell, *Fast Feminism*, 45.

²⁵ Ibid., 45.

potentially be problematic. As Dr. Lucky succinctly points out, using terms such as “drag queen” or “FTF” (female to female) to describe burlesque biologically female performers should be done with a caution, so as not to drift into the realm of appropriating transgender and transvestite culture²⁶. The female-bodied performer playing at hyper-femininity still enjoys the privileges of cisgender life offstage, generally without the baggage that comes along with gender non-conformity in day-to-day life.

That being said, it does seem that neoburlesque and drag share camp commonalities that cannot be ignored, and should be embraced as they enrich the art form as a whole. Dr. Lucky also sees the inclusion of diverse range of performative gender rebels in the burlesque scene as an ultimately positive phenomenon with: “...the juxtaposition of different stagings of gender on the neo-burlesque stage and the multifarious effects of such collisions. By sharing the stage, the 'femme drag' performers and 'boylesque' performers and the 'monster/beauties' of burlesque created 'dream and phantasmagoria' where a traditional concept of gender is turned on its head.”²⁷ To extrapolate from that viewpoint, the implication is that the satire inherent in both drag and burlesque opens up the possibility of queering these identities and moving into a space of non-heteronormative character creation.

The penchant for kitsch is shared by drag and neoburlesque alike, “The stylistic ideal of the drag queen.... is screaming vulgarity, the overstated look of the balloon-breasted tramp in the leopard-skin micro-mini skirt who strives to be loud, tawdry, and cheap.”²⁸ If this is the visual ambition of the drag queen, it is at least on an aesthetic level, a similar goal of the

²⁶ Sally, “‘It Is the Ugly That is So Beautiful’”, 17.

²⁷ Ibid., 19.

²⁸ Daniel Harris, “The aesthetic of drag” *Salmagundi* 108, (1995), 62.

burlesque performer when performing a hyper-feminine character. In this respect, I believe that all ostensibly female characters portrayed by female-bodied burlesque performers have the possibility of becoming female-female impersonation, regardless of whether the portrayal is elegant, comedic, or verging on the grotesque.

8. Carnavalesque

Burlesque's power to critique is very much the same as the court jester's of the Middle Ages, e.g. to say something in a playful and humorous manner; thus, its underlying message is not seen as threatening to prevailing social values, despite its biting commentary. It also is reminiscent of Mikhail Bakhtin's literary concept of carnivalesque, in the festive spirit of subverting social hierarchies:

The law, prohibition, and restrictions that determine the structure and order of ordinary, that is noncarnival, life are suspended during carnival: what is suspended first of all is hierarchical structure and all forms of terror, reverence, piety, and etiquette connected with it - that is, everything resulting from socio-hierarchical inequality or any form of inequality among people... Carnival is the place for working out in concretely sensuous, half-real and half-play-acted form, a new mode of interrelationship between individuals, counterposed [sic] to the all-powerful socio-hierarchical relationship of noncarnival life. The behaviour, gesture, and discourse of a person are freed from the authority of all hierarchal positions (social estate, rank, age, property) defining them totally in noncarnival life, and thus from the vantage point of noncarnival life become eccentric and inappropriate.²⁹

By turning the world upside down in the spirit of carnival, neoburlesque is a powerful opportunity for a creative event, which turns the world upside down through the use of satire

²⁹ Mikhail Bakhtin, "Carnival and the Carnavalesque" in *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*, ed. John Storey (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1998), 251.

– those who traditionally have little formal or social power (i.e. women, strippers, gender non-conformists etc.) hold their audience’s attention and desire captive.

The spectacle of neoburlesque moves outside of the bounds of socially acceptable sexuality, and what constitutes beauty and sexiness. One of the defining features and a way in which it embraces the world of carnivalesque is in the acceptance, and active inclusion of many different body shapes, types and sizes, against the grain of what society at large labels as sexy or even appropriate for women who don’t look like high fashion models, or the cheesecake pinup models from whom so much of the burlesque aesthetic is borrowed. For example, performers Selene Luna and Viva La Muerte are both little people. Luna stands 3’10” and in addition to performing burlesque also does stand-up comedy and film and TV acting. Her burlesque acts are classic and glamorous to their core, but her small stature and remarkable stage presence is what makes them unique. Of her burlesque performance Selena Luna says, “I’ve been stared at, gawked at, teased at my entire life. This is my opportunity to be stared at and gawked at on my terms!”³⁰ Viva La Muerte’s is a self-described “pint-sized powerhouse”³¹. Her acts tend to be dark, moody, verging on Gothic and she dances almost exclusively to heavy metal rock songs. Both Selena Luna’s and Viva La Muerte’s acts are innovative in that they challenge, “socially accepted notions of feminine sexuality through the calculated use of

³⁰ “A Short Subject: The Secret Life of Selene Luna,” YouTube video, 4:41, posted by “JaneCantillon”, October 17, 2011, <http://youtu.be/mhTZZ9mw9aA>.

³¹ Viva La Muerte, “About Viva La Muerte”, *Viva La Muerte* (blog), undated entry, http://www.vivalamuerte.us/?page_id=2

her size and body type.”³² Their acts expose typical constructions of feminine normalcy as “narrow, confining, and stale”.³³

World Famous *BOB* is known her voluptuous 47 ½ F - 34 -45 measurements and her signature act involves shaking a martini shaker between her ample breasts and then pouring the drink with only the use of her teeth and gravity. Heather McAllister, the late founder of San Francisco queer and fat-positive burlesque troupe The Fat Bottom Review is credited with saying, “Any time there is a fat person onstage as anything besides the butt of a joke, it’s political. Add physical movement, then dance, then sexuality and you have a revolutionary act.”³⁴ Bringing the spirit of carnival into burlesque makes the spectacle into a something more than just entertainment; it becomes a celebratory romp, which espouses challenges to patriarchal beauty standards, even if only for a brief respite. Both burlesque and carnival are spaces that refuse to be fixed to a particular viewpoint of beauty or grotesqueness, the value of each are mutable and tastes are ever changing. Excess and indulgence at carnival time challenge any system or mode of oppression that aims to create categories of exclusion or through imposing standards of sameness or consistency.

³² Brenda Foley, *Undressed for Success* (New York: Palgrave MacMillian, 2005), 102.

³³ Ibid., 102.

³⁴ Darlinda Just Darlinda, “Feminist Neo-Burlesque Speech from 10/26/07”, *Darlinda Just Darlinda* (blog), undated entry, <http://darlindajustdarlinda.com/darlinda-just-darlinda-bio-and-press/feminist-neo-burlesque-speech-from-102607/>

9. Reciprocal Gazes

The relationship between burlesque performer and audience is a symbiotic one. Their respective desires are dependant on one another; her desire to perform and be seen, and the audience's desire to look at and take in the spectacle. Neoburlesque throws a wrench in the conceptualization of the male gaze, because, simply put, it is not being performed with men's desires specifically in mind – it is a type of exhibitionism and, for the audience, voyeurism. The female burlesque artist is an object of the gaze for her audience and also reciprocates by looking back at her audience, thus becoming spectator herself as well. This also brings to mind John Berger's notion that women split themselves in two, into the surveyed and the surveyor.³⁵ But the burlesque performer does not follow Berger's supposition that in becoming surveyor of herself that she evokes the male gaze – instead, she carefully constructs her own identity as object of desire, as she chooses what to show and how to be seen. She is not passive in her reciprocation of the gaze, she engages with her audience to flirt, titillate and entertain. She often breaks the fourth wall on stage, and “returns ‘the gaze’ through gesture (winks, glances, expressions directed at particular audience members), and thus confounds an audience-driven scopic drive.”³⁶ But it's more than this, as the performer is challenging the audience and throughout the course of her routine the power oscillates between who is in control³⁷. A performer needs an audience, but she is entirely in control of what she

³⁵ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin Books, 2008), 40.

³⁶ Nally, “Grrrly hurly burly”, 639.

³⁷ Willson, *The Happy Stripper*, 138.

reveals, what stays veiled and the speed at which she teases each piece.

In conceptualizing the creative aspects of the video element in the installation, I was influenced by Joan Jonas, especially her video *Vertical Roll* (1972) that specifically plays with the female form, via exposing the midriff and torso of a woman in a rhinestoned showgirl costume. Very slowly, the focus changes, eventually shifting to a silhouette on the wall of this woman's figure and then eventually to her (Jonas's) face, as it turns to address the audience and return its gaze, before fading off-screen entirely. The film seems to suggest the performer slowly coming to awareness of the audience, acknowledging it, and then stepping offscreen (or offstage).

In my video piece, the audience members may be unaware of the camera shooting them, but they are aware of the (unseen) spectacle they are the gazers of. Their position as voyeurs caught on film is perhaps the complete reversal of the part of performer coming to awareness (of audience) seen in *Vertical Roll*. As the live performer in the gallery space, I stand roughly in Jonas's position, becoming aware of the audience and returning their gaze. But I had two audiences, the projected one behind me, and the live one on three sides in front of and beside me. Audience surrounded me and both the recorded audience and myself were also looking at my live audience. As such, multiple layers of gazes and returning of them were created in the gallery space. Stepping offstage, my reciprocal gaze, as well as the project audiences' gazes faded out in a similar fashion to the woman depicted in *Vertical Roll*. The reciprocal looking at can only be sustained when the performer and audience are both performing their roles as such.

As previously mentioned, the gender breakdown of the burlesque audience tends to now include predominantly women. I can't help but wonder if there is a mirroring

happening between audience and performer. Something that I've heard many times from other women after a show: "I want to do that", or "I wish I was brave enough to do that". The artifice of burlesque is essentially one of campy glamour, and its message is empowerment (in so far as the performer has control over herself, and the audience). It seems that appreciation of the female form, may lend itself to what Reina Lewis has identified as the lesbian gaze. Regardless of the spectator's actual sexual orientation, the appreciation of female beauty is something that many women participate in. Lewis has argued that the lesbian gaze is one in which the viewer

...is engaged in a mode of narcissistic identification with the beautiful woman in the image which – relying on the implicit awareness of other lesbian viewers who, like her, gaze at the beautiful woman – produces a desire both to be and to have the displayed woman... I may simultaneously at a fantasy level desire to be like her, and desire to have her and, moreover, desire to be, as she is, the recipient of another woman's desiring gaze.³⁸

The women performers in neoburlesque show their audience members a fantastical alternative to the daily norm; they ooze glamour, sensuality and ownership of their sexuality. The fantasy is a reprieve for monotony and in wanting to become like the performer on stage, or at least to embody the same confident attitude the audience also wants to be idolized by other women in the same way. The reciprocal gaze between the neoburlesque dancer and her audience members can make or break a performance.

10. Creative Processes and Products

The creation of such a multifaceted project began in the fall of 2011, but the seeds of this project were first planted in the spring of 2011 in course work for my MA degree. My

³⁸ Reina Lewis, "Looking Good: The Lesbian Gaze and Fashion Imagery," in *The Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Nicholas Mirzoeff (New York: Routledge, 2007), 656.

second reader, Dr. Pruska-Oldenhof, my instructor for the Technology in Practice foundation class, was instrumental in my decision to further pursue burlesque as a research topic. The majority of the tangible parts of my installation were created between December 2011 until the gallery exhibition's opening in May 2012.

The first component I completed were the photographs, undertaken in early 2012. The self-portrait photos were taken in two sessions over one weekend. I then carefully selected the best of the bunch and over the course of another day make a shortlist of the images to be retouched. The original seamless background was edited out using Photoshop, and each image was placed on a transparent background to prep them for printing on vellum. My original concept has been to print the images on an entirely transparent material, such as Mylar (similar to overhead transparency plastic). Unfortunately, I could not find a print shop that could print on that type of material at close to life-size for a reasonable price, so after discussing with some peers who have experience with large scale printing, I decided that vellum would be the next best option, as it would still let some light through. This is a fairly mundane example certainly, but it is just one example of the kind of changes I had to make for feasibility's sake and not for entirely artistic or stylistic reasons.

As self-portraits, is the nature of the photographs fundamentally changed knowing that I was framing my own body as subject of their composition? Would they have been equally effective, or have the same meaning if someone else took them? Do they convey purely narcissism, or is there something else at play? I feel I should have been more explicit in my artist's statement, because many people who I spoke to at the opening reception did not realize they were images I took myself. In some ways, I feel that they represent what vaudevillian comedienne, turned screen actress Mae West is credited with saying "It's better

to be looked over than to be overlooked”³⁹. In the creation of self-portraiture I had the ultimate decisions over which angles I felt were most flattering, the poses I liked most — decisions simultaneously minute but deeply personal. I chose how to frame myself, in the ways that I wanted to be looked at. Of course, an artist has no control over how anyone else will perceive their art, but the only factor they do have complete control over is what they choose to include within the frame of the piece. I wanted my pieces to demand attention, to be life-sized representations of the characters I create on stage. With the photographs, I also wanted to convey a range of emotions, character intentions and costuming variations.

My analysis and feeling about these self-portraits has also been influenced by Nina Arsenault’s recent paper “A Manifesto of Living Self-portraiture (Identity, Transformation and Performance)”, in which Arsenault asserts that all of her various transformative tools, not just her photography are means of creating self-portraiture.

1. I see all of my creative work—documentary photographs, reality TV, autobiographical storytelling, video art, staged photography, literary memoir writings, costumed nightlife appearances, voice/breath/body training, cosmetic surgery, and the daily presentation of my femininity through makeup, fake hair, exercise, and diet—as a continuing practice of living self-portraiture. My life and art are irrevocably entwined.
2. Self-portraiture communicates feelings and ideas, which cannot be satisfactorily communicated in fictionalized artistic forms. The viewer is never required to suspend disbelief, creating an immediate and compelling connection to the artistic works.
3. Self-portraiture creates the opportunity for cathartic emotional release, revealing aspects of the Self which are mythic in scope—both triumphant and tragic. Therefore, no emotion, thought, or expression is taboo. The primary feat of self-portraiture is the depth and vitality of the reveal.

³⁹ Mae West, quoted in *Rhetorical Visions*, ed. Wendy S. Hesford and Brenda Jo Brueggemann (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2007), 1.

...

6. Therefore, what remains unspoken onstage is also an integral part of a performance. What is not within the frame of a photograph also creates the image. ...⁴⁰

By this account of life and art being entirely intertwined in the process of becoming Loretta Jean, my burlesque alter ego, my various appearance enhancing-techniques also constitute forms of self-portraiture, as do the photos that I took for the exhibition. Through the process of character creation for burlesque, Loretta Jean has taken on a life of her own. She is the hyperbolic version of myself, she is the superlative of what I wish I could be on a day to day basis – sparkly, witty, sexy, confident, adventurous, maybe not as graceful as other burlesque performers, but certainly a character with a hell of a lot of heart who is utterly brazen. I am able to express a ridiculous exaggeration of my own femininity through her and exorcise demons around any sort of insecurity. When the crowd is hooting and hollering at the mere removal of a glove, it's a rush of power. Yet, it is also possible for them to turn on you in a minute, or like, every burlesque's performers' nightmare, be the unresponsive audience.

The sixth point in Arsenault's manifesto about framing is also just as relevant to neoburlesque's strategic veiling/unveiling in striptease as it is to the images I chose to display in the gallery, and the remixed stock footage that I chose to use in the video collage component of the piece. I chose four photographs to hang in the gallery, but that says nothing of the over 500 frames I took before choosing those specific images. Each of the images in the gallery is related to a burlesque number I have previously performed and, as

⁴⁰ Nina Arsenault, "A Manifesto of Living Self-portraiture (Identity, Transformation and Performance)", *Canadian Theatre Review* 150, (2012) : 64-5.

such, each photo is named in accordance with the song that accompanies the act⁴¹. Each image also represents a costume in different styles of performance/costuming, from fully-corseted, to nerdy burlesque (also sometimes referred to as nerdlesque, a speciality of mine, as a member of the Nerd Girl Burlesque troupe⁴²), to a sultry prance and peel, to bump and grinding in a fringed shimmy belt. All of those characters are incarnations of Loretta Jean, and thereby, an extension of myself but also different, depending on the context of the specific acts.

Loretta Jean is a persona whose character I have been cultivating since March 2010, though she continues to grow and expand with each performance. Her performance extends far beyond the five minutes I am on stage performing a striptease. If she exists anywhere outside of my body, her own space may be as cyborg through her online interactions on Twitter, Facebook and Tumblr. She/I are members of an underground performance scene and subculture that expects, and demands participation in these activities if you want to book shows, network and gain any name recognition outside of your immediate peer group. I am very self-aware in that I am a relatively new performer in this scene and that means paying your dues and working your way up a highly stratified social environment and artistic field.

My stage name has highly personal origins, it is homage to two very influential women in my life, it is a combination of my maternal great-grandmother, and grandmothers'

⁴¹ See Appendix A for the self-portraits; *Money is the Root of All Evil*, *Little Drop of Poison*, *Bat(tele)phone* and *Addicted to Love*.

⁴² Nerd Girl Burlesque is a troupe born out of participation in the website NerdGirlPinups.com. We define nerd very broadly and we all have divergent interests, and are all somewhat of bluestockings, but our acts tend to be focused around popular nerd culture, such as video games, comic books, science fiction, role-playing games, anime, Internet culture/memes – just to name a few inspirations.

respective first names (my two legal middle names are also Jean Jackson, my Franco-Ontarian grandmother's Anglicized married name). I chose this name as a means of reclaiming my maternal lineage which is otherwise lost to most Western European paternally derived naming conventions and customs (e.g. women taking the name their husbands, being born with a paternally derived last name etc.). The name takes on a double meaning as homage to screen starlets Loretta Young and Marilyn Monroe (who was born Norma Jeane Mortensen). So this character reflects some caricature-like features of my own, but she is also my take on the persona of burlesque performer and its brand of kitschy glamour. She simultaneously is and is not me; although we share the same skin, I like thinking of her as my alter ego but she is also entirely her own entity.

The footage I chose to use for the video is a remix of several different clips of stock footage from the 1950s of various audience reactions to an unseen spectacle. In the gallery space they become an audience to me, as well as audience to the live audience. I know little about the origins of these clips, other than they came from Pinewood Stock Footage via British Pathé. The original intention of this footage may have been as b-roll for a film, or it may have been the recording of a special event, but this is just conjecture. There are also a few seconds incorporated into my in the video from public domain cultural content from the *Jack Benny* television show, made available through Archive.org; in particular, the snippets I borrowed are from an episode guest-starring James Stewart. My intention with the remixing of these sources was to create a new audience, one that plays the part of all being together in one space, namely on the projection screen, in order to act as a mirror audience with a reciprocal gaze for those in the gallery space.

Part of what I wanted to do with the installation was to make the gallery attendees feel as if they too were on stage. This worked out in a way, I believe, because even when my live audience was politely and silently observing, rather than giving me the reaction I was hoping for (e.g. boisterous approving cheers), I still had another audience who were sucked out of their own time (the one depicted in my video) and teleported into the present to react to my presentation. In order to garner a reaction, I coaxed the live audience to cheer a bit, and then they knew that maintaining gallery decorum was not necessary in this case.

Some of the choreography choices that I made had the projected audience's reactions deliberately in mind; others were happy accidents that worked out for the best. In the editing of that footage, I felt like I formed relationships with these nameless, unknowable but extremely animated individuals. A happy accident that greatly amused me was the inclusion of two young women who appear several times in the footage, gleefully looking on at the spectacle at hand. This pair are holding hands, and acting very enthusiastic about what I can only imagine was originally an exuberant meltdown that a teenage girl might have when faced with favourite pop music idol. But when those same reactions are made to be interacting with my performance and their familiarity and the undeniable look of longing/lust in their eyes rings out an unintended but delightful layer of the lesbian gaze I could not have planned out better had I tried. At one point, it even appears that the woman on the right accidentally grabs her friend's breast when she reaches to bring her friends' arm closer to her. It's the displacement of this footage's original context, and because it is stock footage, it is filler for reaction to some unknown thing, there's nothing to say that maybe these women weren't reacting to a burlesque performance in the first place. While that may seem like a bit of an overly optimistic stretch, men and women attended classic burlesque in

nearly equal numbers⁴³. Getting dressed up and going out to a night at the burlesque theatre would have been something that many couples would have done in the 1950s, the gender divide was not nearly as sharp as one would find in a contemporary heterosexually oriented strip club. It's also interesting to note that much of the contemporary audience for neoburlesque is composed of mainly of women; Claire Nally estimates as high as a 70%-30% gender divide in spectatorship in the UK and, anecdotally, I would say it is probably similar in Canada⁴⁴.

I believe the exhibition's opening reception and performance was well received. If I could do it all over again, I would do more live performances throughout the course of the exhibition's run, and I would also have a recorded version of my dance performance on loop when I was I not there. I felt that one of the shortcomings of the project overall, was that it made most sense with the photography, video and performance all together, and it lost some of its impact without the actual performance element constantly being in the gallery space. That being said however, in a way it does speak to the ephemeral nature of live performance – even in a documented form, e.g. video recoding, it is not the same as the performance itself. It is a copy of the original, and aims to capture its essence but always fall short. So much of the performance is dependent on the exchange of energies between the performer and the audience. Awareness of the audience, of being watched, and of confidently interacting with that audience is vital to how the performance unfolds. The recording of a performance is one-step removed from what it actually was, and that is part of the beauty of

⁴³ See for example, Robert Allen, *Horrible Prettiness*, 77.

⁴⁴ Nally, "Grrrly hurly burly", 637.

the live performance – its impermanence. When performing on stage, the show must go on, there is no chance to restart if you’ve made a mistake or if you’re struggling with a button, snap or closure, you work around it and go on.

In creating the performance itself, I was influenced by some of my favourite burlesque performers, namely boylesque sensation Jett Adore (from Chicago), Jezebel Express, and Jo “Boobs” Weldon (both from New York City)⁴⁵. Additionally inspiration was drawn from workshops I took within the last year with Coco Framboise, Peekaboo Pointe, and living burlesque legends (performers from the 1950s-60s) April March and Tiffany Carter. Marlene Dietrich and Josephine Baker’s sartorial choices indirectly influenced the costume for my performance, via Dita von Teese’s use of tailored tuxedos in homage to those glamazons of days gone by. I wanted to have my initial appearance in a traditionally male attire (tuxedo pants, fedora hat and suit jacket) to be in sharp contrast to the overtly feminine bra, panties, thigh-high fishnets and heels that I stripped down to. This is a trope with female neoburlesque acts that I have noticed with both local and international performers. Really, it seems to be a common formula for an act – amongst a dozen or so other general premises that are commonly used; donning clothing that would signify masculinity to the audience, the performer lampoons her false masculinity by poking fun at how ridiculous and unsuccessfully she is in her failure to pass as male. This is then contrasted with her stage persona’s hyper-femininity and once she strips down to her overtly female underclothes, the difference is made even more pronounced. Other local performers who utilize this trope in their acts include Ava Noir, Charlie Quinn, Miss Mitzy Cream, the

⁴⁵ Of these three, Jett Adore is the only one I’ve had the privilege of seeing live thus far. YouTube and BurlesqueStars.net are invaluable resources in this regard, for accessing videos of past performances.

troupes Glamourpuss Burlesque and The Harlettes, as well as many others both in Toronto and around the world.

The undergarments in my costume were only briefly shown to the audience at the end of my first song, and then strategically concealed and revealed for the duration of my fan dance to the second song. Fan dance is often associated with the showgirls of the Golden Age of burlesque, and its development is often attributed to Sally Rand, who first wowed the Chicago World Fair with her giant (over 6 foot wide) feather fans in 1933. My fans are considerably smaller, 40 x 20 inches, which is typically considered the starter size because despite their graceful appearance they are difficult to learn how to use properly. I have only attempted fan dance in the last six months, and am still by no means an expert. This show was only the second time I have performed with them in public and I am going to continue diligently working with them in order to improve my technique.

As previously mentioned, the costume itself was a collaboration with my costume designer, who I had several meetings with to pin down the concept, and with whom I started a Tumblr microblog in order to share costume inspiration photos we found online⁴⁶. This is an ongoing project, as we continue to collaborate on upcoming numbers. I am lucky that we have very similar aesthetic preferences and sensibilities, so the collaboration was very fruitful and easy to do. So essentially I came to her with my general ideas about the theme I was going for, my colour scheme and what I wanted to convey and the designer, and her seamstress made it happen. In order to cut down on costs, once the costume itself was made, I hand applied the nearly 1000 rhinestones on the costume with a hot affix gun, a very

⁴⁶ It can be found online at lockedlipsandswinginhips.tumblr.com.

tedious and time consuming process. As I continue to revisit and reuse this costume, I will continue to add more rhinestones each time, until it reaches my desired level of outrageously tacky. As an aesthetic choice, burlesque costume are generally intended to be over the top, they are similar to couture in their theatricality; definitely not something that you would generally see walking down the street. While certain aspects of burlesque costumes will be purchased from stores, in order to make them work, as a performer you quickly come to realize that most of what you have needs to be custom made, or at the very least heavily altered and customized. Again, due to budget and time constraints the costume is not 100% at what I had originally had in mind.

The mantra of the non-professional burlesque performer seems to be make it look good enough to be on stage, and continue to add to it over time. In a costuming workshop I took in November 2011 with Amber Rae, a performer from New York who is world renowned for her elaborate self-made costumes, she showed us some of her seemingly impressive shimmy belts which had been made that way from years of simply adding more layers of fringe each time a layer started to thin out. The result looks dazzling and lush on stage, but the inside seaming couldn't be further from the truth, a mishmash of glue-gunned and jagged layers of stitching – truly a wonderful example of the artifice of glamour.

The tuxedo jacket in my costume was purchased from a popular retail-clothing store and then altered, but eventually I would like to have a custom made, properly tailored jacket. The tear-away tuxedo pants, which were custom, are by far my favourite part of the costume; it was a great reveal that provoked an eruption of approving laughter from the audience. It is not terribly original, many neo-burlesque performers use this, but it's always a crowd pleaser.

11. Conclusions

Neoburlesque is a complex genre; it is tawdry and lowbrow but also political, avant-garde and intelligent. It is a throwback to a bygone era and in many ways a form of cultural nostalgia, but it also is highly relevant to contemporary circumstances. I see burlesque as a creative outlet for myself, but it has certainly not been a moneymaking venture. A common joke in the burlesque circuit is “what’s the difference between a burlesque dancer and a stripper? About two hundred and fifty bucks,” and there’s truth to this. Dancers who work in conventional strip clubs make far more money than the performance artists who perform burlesque. Burlesque is something that I have devoted much time, energy, thought and money to over the past two years but it has been a joyous creative process of art for art’s sake. The thrill of being on stage, interacting with the audience, creating characters and playing with the audience’s preconceived notions of femininity and gender is extremely satisfying. From a theatrical standpoint, the artificial glamour of burlesque is also compelling. In order to make an act seamless and appear effortless takes months of planning, choreography, work shopping and rehearsing. Certainly there is a place for improvisation, and some of the best additions to numbers come out of moments that spontaneously occur on stage, but the prep work is enormous. Taking on this project challenged me to raise the bar for my artistic practice. I’m still quite cognizant of being very new to the art form, but am continuously growing, evolving and learning more about it. This experience was largely rewarding because it allowed me to spend months learning about the history of this craft, conceptualizing it and then hopefully making something fun, expressive and worthwhile from the experience.

The performance component of my gallery show will be a departure point from which I will be continuing to refine the act, and adding it to my repertoire. Ironically, it was the doing of burlesque and frequent rehearsals and performances over the last year and now producing of shows with my fledgling troupe, which contributed to delaying my writing and research process for this project. In retrospect, each performance I have done in the last year has been better than the one before and has helped me grow as a performer, as well as in my theoretical understanding of the genre.

I see my growth as an artist is a survival mechanism, neoburlesque is a cathartic but depersonalized theatrical romp. As such, in burlesque the performer is allowed to exorcise culturally engrained nostalgia; in picking the best aspects of vintage kitsch and reworking them as pastiche, a parody is created that is accessible for contemporary audiences. Burlesque is poignant at time in history, because it tends to see resurgences in popularity in times of global economic and social upheaval⁴⁷. The current social and political climates in both Canada and the United States seem ripe for the carnivalesque and spectacle of the burlesque. The Western economy is still largely struggling to recover from the 2008 global financial crisis and its still-unfolding aftermath. Widespread attempts from the conservative end of the political spectrum to control women's bodies and recurrent attacks against access to women's sexual health has made resistance with one's body increasingly important. There is also still prevailing widespread resistance in the US to sex-same civil rights (not to mention only slightly more veiled bigotry from the Conservative party in Canada) – all of these issue are amongst may other political issues that we might point to as evidence of living in a time of great social change. Perhaps our current era is also seeing resurgence in

⁴⁷ Willson, *The Happy Stripper*, 19-20.

the popularity of burlesque as a means of coping with an often bleak-feeling social climate. In the documentary film *Burlesque Undressed* (2010), star Immodesty Blaize describes the nostalgia implicit in burlesque performance; she states:

In the same way that [the Golden Age of] burlesque rose from the Depression, I think it's an antidote to what is actually pretty bleak right now, and if we look back at the past with these rose-tinted glasses, 'retrospectacles', as I like to call them, we can pick out the best bits⁴⁸.

If the best bits come in the package of fantastical, theatrical escapism into a world of carnival, then certainly it can't be all-bad. In Blaize's sentiments, I was also reminded of a section in McLuhan's "Art as Survival in the Electric Age", which reads "One of the peculiarities of the electric age is that we live simultaneously in all the cultures of the past. All of the past is here and all of future is here"⁴⁹. Neoburlesque offers an opportunity for reflecting on the past, as well as the present, it can be seen as pure entertainment, or as having deeper meanings that I have explored in this paper and project. This process of creating and learning about neoburlesque is actually quite incomplete; there is still much more I should like to interrogate, so I consider this just a start, a foundation upon which much more can be built.

⁴⁸ *Burlesque Undressed*, directed by Allison Grist, (2010).

⁴⁹ Marshall McLuhan, "Art as Survival in the Electric Age" in *Understanding Me: Lectures and Interviews* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2003), 213.

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Appendix: Images



Money is the Root of All Evil, by Loretta Jean, 2012

Appendix : Images



Little Drop of Poison, by Loretta Jean, 2012

Appendix A: Images



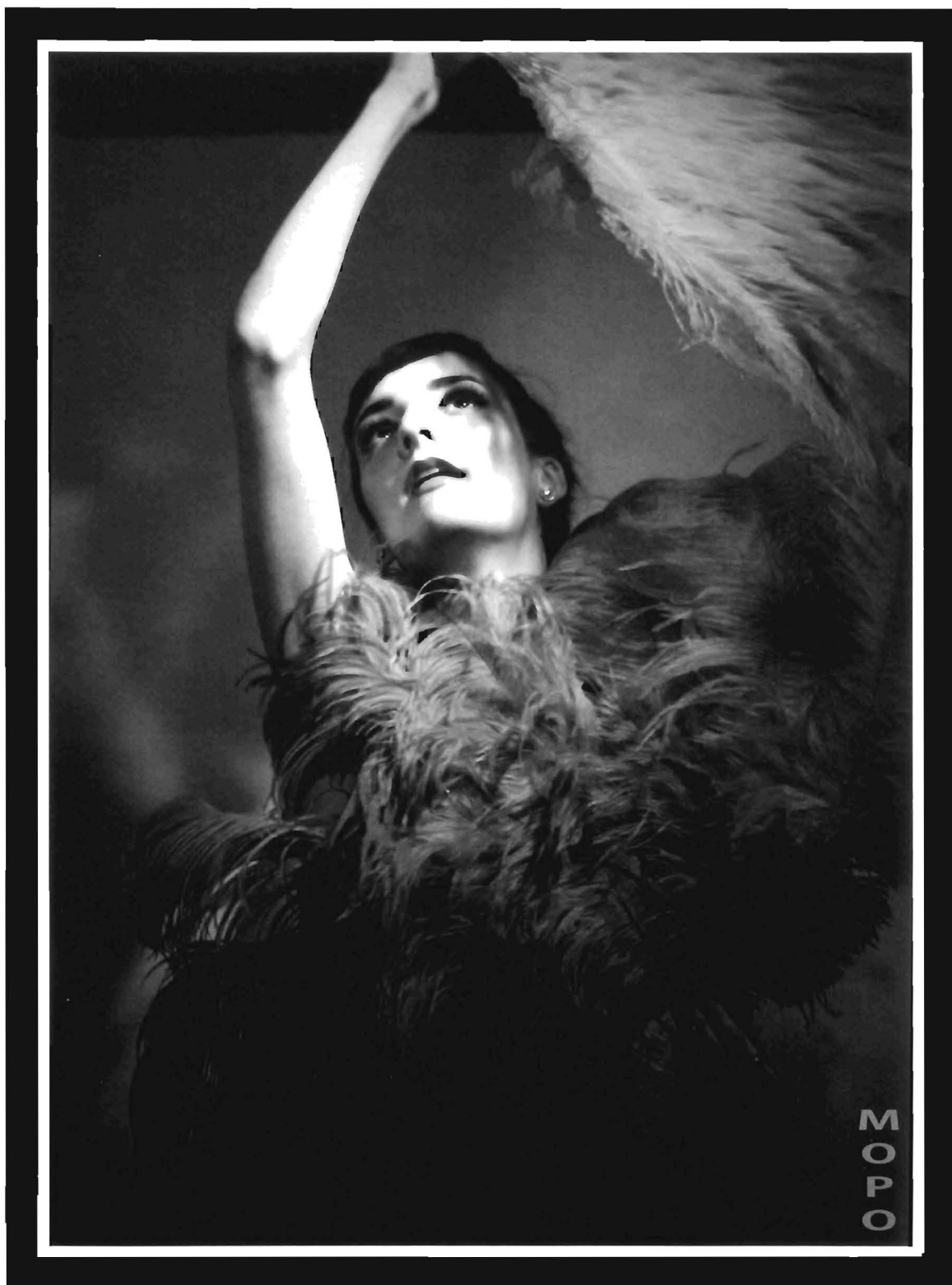
Bat(tele)phone, by Loretta Jean, 2012

Appendix A: Images



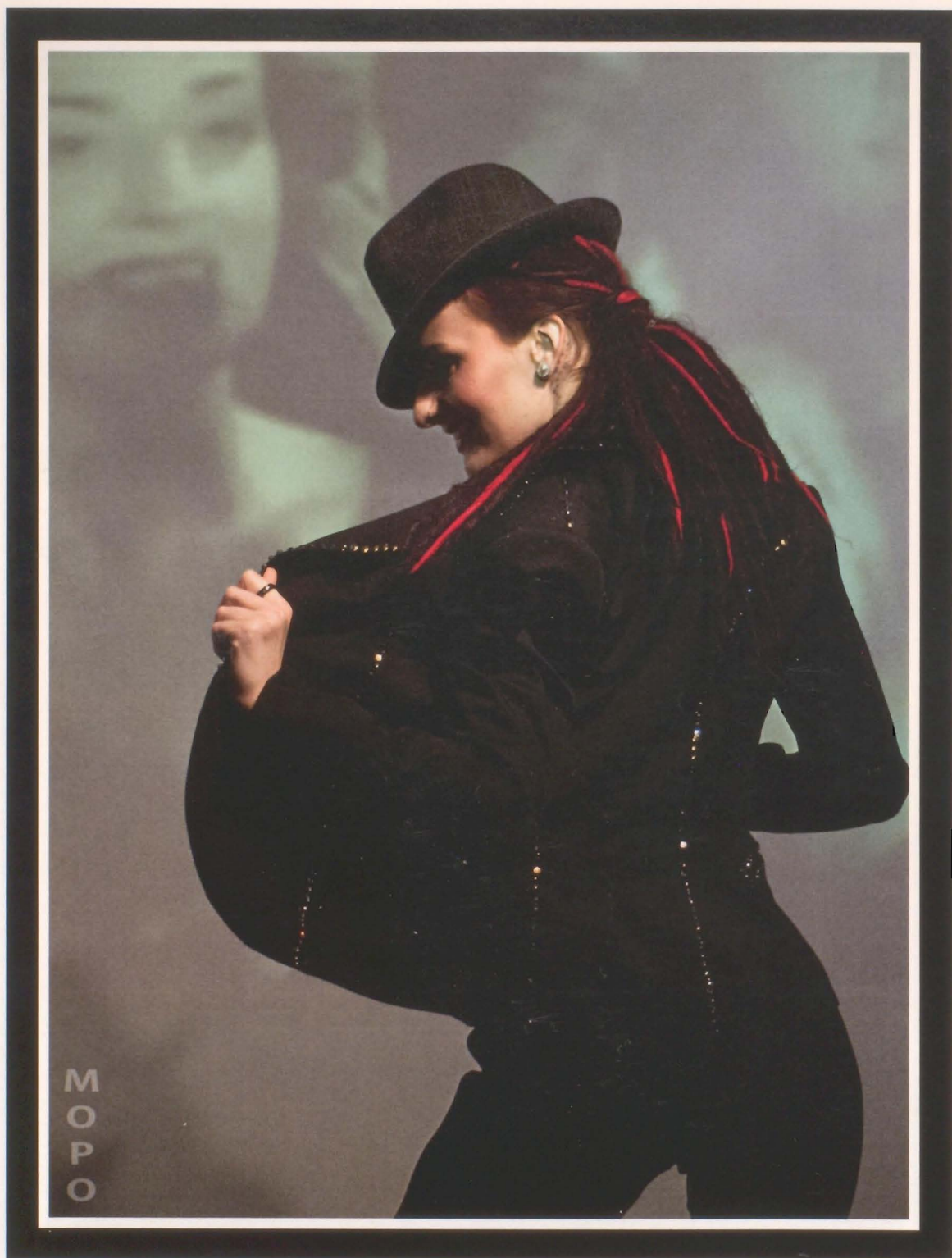
Addicted to Love, by Loretta Jean, 2012

Appendix A: Images



Performing at the opening night of Fishnets & Desire, by Mopo Art, 2012

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Performing at the opening night of Fishnets & Desire, by Mopo Art, 2012