Review:


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*Femmes of Power: Exploding Queer Femininities* pushes at the boundaries of the coffee-table book genre. Its large, glossy, full page photographs are radical, not conservative, and its text moves beyond the function of explanatory captions to provide informed analysis of the relation between academic queer theory and personal experience. The book is the product of a collaboration between the visual artist, photographer, and gender theorist Del LaGrace Volcano, and the Swedish ethnographer and femme-activist Ulrika Dahl, and introduces over sixty photographic and textual portraits of subjects ‘from twelve different cities and seven countries’ (p. 20) who either identify or engage with the category of ‘femme’.

The term ‘femme’ has been in circulation since the 1950s, and is most often used to signify the other ‘feminine’ partner to the ‘butch’ in lesbian relationships. It seems misleading, and almost misplaced, to begin with such a blank definition of femme as the overriding aim of *Femmes of Power* is to abolish such a monolithic interpretation, but the cover blurb for the book raises such assumptions in order to explode them: ‘What is femme? French for woman? A feminine lesbian? A queer girl in a frock? Think again!’ By collating so many different subjects, images, and stories, Volcano and Dahl draw a fuller and more complex picture of femme than simply as part of the butch/femme binary. *Femmes of Power* documents images of individuals in a way familiar to readers of Volcano’s popular previous photographic monologue, *The Drag King Book* (1999), which was also the photographer’s first collaboration with a queer theorist academic. *The Drag King Book* became not only a radical visual representation for the queer and gay communities, but also for popular culture at large (the book was referred to in an episode of *Sex and the City*).

Though similar to *The Drag King Book* in form, *Femmes of Power* required Volcano to adopt a different approach in terms of artistic methodology. His own drag king identity made him an ‘insider’ (p. 13) when shooting portraits for *The Drag King Book*, but when it came to photographing femme subjects for *Femmes of Power* he confesses, ‘I actually didn’t know how to queer femininity, photographically speaking without providing more fuel for
heterosexist fantasies of feminine lesbians waiting for a real man. I also asked myself if the
world needed any more images of ‘pretty women’ since proud, powerful images or portrayals
of masculine women are still so rare on screen or in print’ (p. 11). While Volcano’s candid
commentary introduces the conservative counter-point for the images displayed in Femmes of
Power, it also contextualizes the book in terms of the politics of the gaze and the relation of
artist to subject and vice versa. Indeed, it is the vice versa, the relation of subject to artist,
which most interests Volcano, as he is ‘committed to making images with (speaking) subjects
rather than taking images from passive or silenced objects’ (p. 14). Volcano’s position as
artist is complex, and as an ‘off-white self-proclaimed hermaphrodyke’, it is hard to define
which side – if any – of the male/female binary his artistic gaze would fall. ‘Would they see me
as a man?’, he asks, ‘Or worse, a “wanna-be white man” aiming his phallic lens at their
already over-objectified bodies?’ (p. 13).

Paired with Volcano’s photographs, Dahl’s textual portraits take a mixture of forms,
but consist predominantly of queered ‘Dear John’-style love-letters and informal interview
transcripts. Consistent with Volcano’s approach, subjects are also given the opportunity to
‘speak’ directly. The performance artist Krista Smith, who goes by the stage name of
‘Kentucky Fried Woman’, Itziar Ziga, a Catholic Latin femme in Barcelona, and Pratibha
Parmar, a self-proclaimed ‘queer trans-national, desi femme-inist’ provide their own
autobiographical writings. These three narratives in particular engage with issues of race,
age, and religious divisions as well as those within gender(s), and widen both the brevity and
the complexity of the book. Though most of the profiles are of individuals, group shots are
allocated to members of the Atlanta-based sisterhood ‘Femme Mafia’, and a number of
femme performance artist duos, often shot mid-act. The overwhelming variety (in narrative
form, and visual economy) means that that the femme voices multiply as the book
progresses, resulting in the cumulative impression of a powerful femme tour de force.

This rather catalogue approach to femme might seem to put the volume at risk of
drawing attention to existing stereotypes – the bearded lady; the fat lesbian; the queer
mother; the Gothic vampire Queen; the 1950s housewife – all of which do feature in the book
in one way or another. Yet such stereotypes are all too familiar to the self-aware subjects
themselves, as performer Trina Rose describes: ‘We are all only “passing” as a gender. I am always aware of the stereotypes attached to my body’ (p. 172). Despite the differing accounts of femme within Femmes of Power, what unites the voices it contains is a shared knowledge that the real dynamite for exploding queer femininities lies in the potential for parody within those stereotypes. Mistress Morgana, whose femme portrait shows a demure 1950s housewife holding a tray of glistening just-iced cupcakes, hints at the parodic processes at work in her construction of femme when she explains: ‘To me femme is about taking the things that oppressed me and using them’ (p. 130). Another participant, Itziar Ziga, describes how exchanging outfits with her butch friend is demonstration of the way that the femme can even ‘parody that which we never wanted to become.’ (p. 73) These parodic processes are in a certain sense aped by the book’s own construction, as where Dahl invokes stereotypes in her reductive titles for each femme (‘Parliamentarian Pin-Up’, ‘Danish Pillow Queen Femme’, and ‘Beard-Adorned Lady’), Volcano’s portraits explode these labels in their radical sincerity.

Throughout thematic chapters focusing on drag, performance, ‘coming out’, and the ‘bad girl’ concept, the book raises questions which are both timely and perceptive. ‘What does it mean that a femme identified female born woman gets mistaken for a drag queen?’ (p. 54) ‘Can women taking their clothes off be subversive?’ (p. 148) ‘Can there be sisterhood between bad girls, or riot grrls?’ (p. 170) ‘Can you be straight and “femme”?’ (p. 180) While partial answers to some of these are provided (‘Good girls don’t need a gang’ (p. 170)), Dahl’s answer to the last is ‘it’s up to you’ (p. 180). This is perhaps the best exemplar of the books approach, as its biographical focus maintains the emphasis on the importance of individual experience. Each participant provides a different interpretation of ‘femme’, ranging from the radical to the liberal, from the theoretical to the political – and there is no shying away from the personal, either. Many of the interviewees draw attention to importance of the ‘me’ within fem(me) for formulating their interpretation of how femme should be applied and read. As Rosi Lugosi, a theatrical ‘femme vampire queen’ and performer, offers: ‘To me, femme dares to stand at the boundary of what’s normal and what’s queer. At first glance she might pass. But she’s the double take. The square peg in the round hole.’ (p. 127). As Lugosi’s metaphorical description makes evident, despite its epistolary-coffee book identity, Femmes of Power is a complex, and at times, very literary text. The ‘femme tales’ it tells (the phrase is
also a subtle play on the concept of the *femme fatale* include descriptions from contributors which are reminiscent of the dark fairy tales of Angela Carter, or the mythical subversions of Patricia Dunker. One femme describes her childhood fantasy in hauntingly Cartesian terms: ‘I was the Big Bad Wolf, and my innocent prey? An angelic blonde girl, all sapphire eyes and naivety set in pure alabaster flesh. Flesh that my fake fangs hungered to devour. Flesh pronounced as beautiful as the feminine ideal’ (p. 49).

*Femmes of Power* states it is not concerned with performing ‘academic aerobics’ (p. 21), but the book engages fully with academic debates, and plays with them too. Those interviewed use the discourse of queer and gender theory, and offer their own terms, such as ‘ex_woman’, and ‘plumage’ (to express their display of overtly feminine accessories) as well as discussing emerging terminology and trends, such as ‘flicka girls’ and ‘hyper-femme’. Many of the contributors to the volume are femme academics or gender theorists, and subsequently there is not an overtly pronounced shift in tone between the participants’ writing and Dahl’s commentary. Demonstrating their shared discourse and referential frame, Dahl’s chapter titles frame the profiles within some of the most influential gender and queer theorists and their texts; Judith Butler provides the reference point for chapter 2, ‘Copies without originals: On Femme Drag’, while the late Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) is the sub-text for chapter 3, ‘Epistemology of the Femme Closet’.

The discussions in *Femmes of Power* have their (acknowledged) precedents in a number of edited volumes documenting ‘femme’ experience including Laura Harris and Elizabeth Crocker’s *Femme: Lesbians, Feminists and Bad Girls* (1997), Michelle Gibson and Deborah T. Meen’s *Femme/Butch: New Considerations of the Way We Want to Go* (2002), and Chloe Brushwood Rose and Anna Camilleri’s *Brazen Femme: Queering Femininity* (2002). While *Femmes of Power* is a continuation of – and a valid contribution to – writing in this vein, the addition of Volcano’s portraits shift Dahl’s debates on the subject of lesbian and femme identities into a new, and powerfully more *visible* light. It is through the fluidity achieved in the combination of arresting visual photography and the ‘speaking’ dialogues of those portrayed, that *Femmes of Power* challenges multiple binaries – not only between
butch/femme, but between man/woman, gay/straight, and masculine/feminine – with greater immediacy than is arguably possible in a non-illustrated, single-medium text.