

NORTH

Volume 2

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Lauren Jo Kelly

Life's a drag



Images by *Lauren Jo Kelly* Words by *Dale Lately*

The eyes ask the first question. Puddled in shadow, Bowie-streaked, and as bright as the screaming violet lipgloss. Then there's the long, feminine hand, bangled at the thin waist, perched over the top of a pair of stretchy dark tights. They're feminine legs, but the pose is masculine, muscular. Boy or girl? Man or woman? and why are we so obsessed with asking this question?

This is just one of the photos Lauren Jo Kelly, a young Manchester-based photography graduate, took of herself after deciding to check out the city's infamous drag clubs. But when some of the queens told her that she'd never understand their culture she did something nobody expected – she went home, dragged up, and came right back out to the club. Lauren took a gender reversal and reversed it again: she became a girl dressed up as a boy dressed up as a girl.

Dale Lately writes on culture and communication and his work has appeared in the *Guardian*, *Slate*, *VICE* and *New Internationalist*.



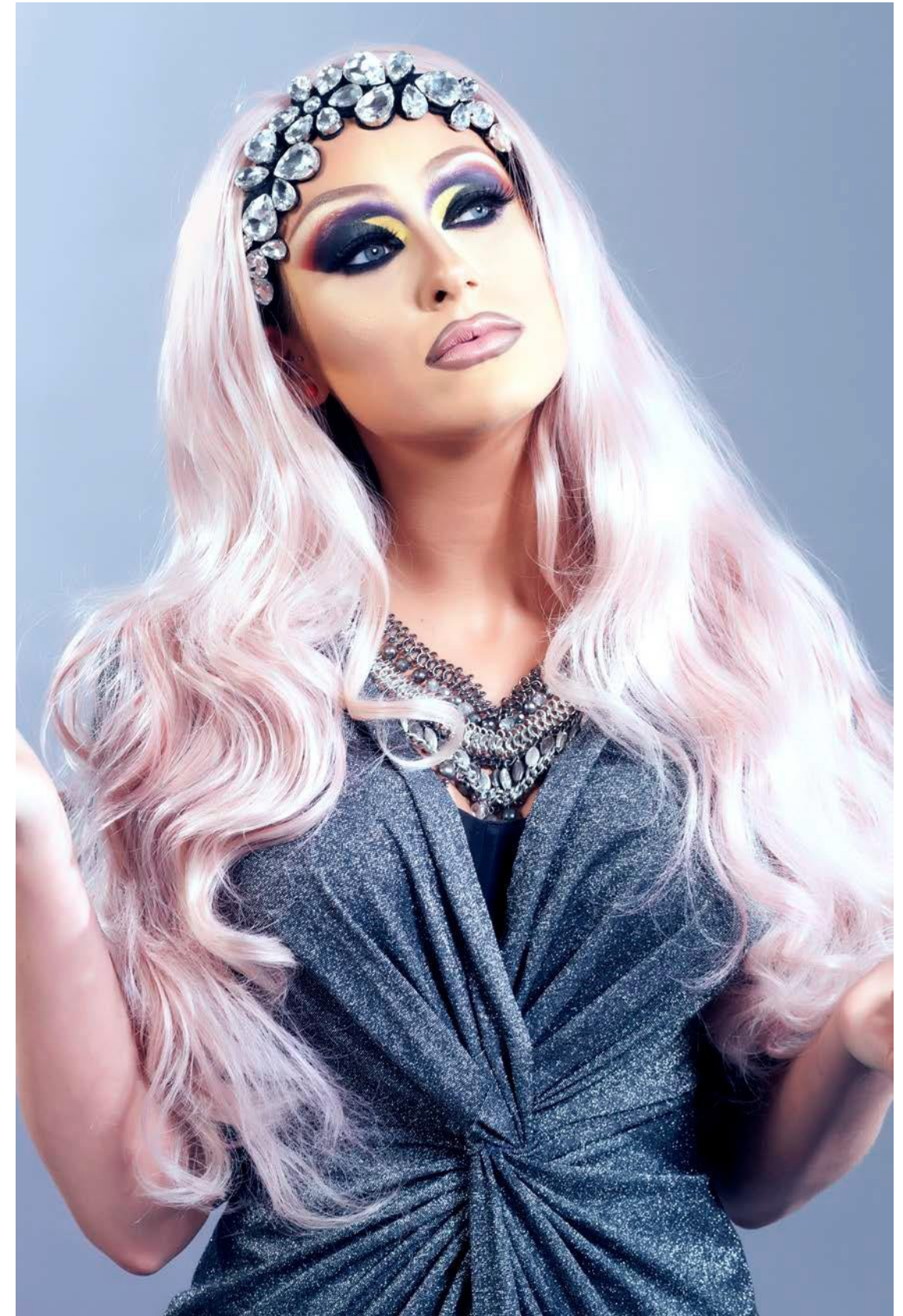
The result was the *Life's a Drag* project, a set of photos which document her travels across the gender divide. It's not the first time that a photographer has "got among their subjects" of course; Kelly's work invites comparison with photographer Nikki S Lee, whose work documented New York street life – a gloved pensioner, a skater, a camera-snapping asian tourist – until closer examination revealed that every photo was one of Lee herself. This is photography as chameleon disguise, dressing up taken to the level of total identity swap. Kelly and Lee become both performer and documenter, raising questions about the nature of both. But does their work also have a deeper significance?

"Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at" observed John Berger in *Ways of Seeing*. Women are forced to become observers of themselves, he points out, so the female self is divided down the middle – the woman "is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself". She's both subject and object, both observer and observed.

This, perhaps, might be key to understanding Kelly's work. When Kelly embeds herself among Manchester's drag queens, a girl-as-boy-as-girl, she is performing both the "masculine" role of observer (photographer) at the same time as performing the "feminine" role (object). In this sense she can be slotted into a tradition of feminist performance art over the last few

decades, where artists such as Valie Export, Hannah Wilke or Carolee Schneemann manipulated their outward appearance in order to take control of how they were seen – in other words, employing the to-be-looked-at-ness of femininity as a tool to expose how they were being looked at. By dragging up, Kelly weaponizes her female role as object of the gaze. What could be more garishly and luridly attention-grabbing, after all, than drag? What could be more defiantly self-objectifying than the peacock world of queens? Kelly exulted in the attention; as she told *VICE* at the time: "People wanted to have their picture taken with me like I was some sort of celebrity."

This suggests another dimension on which we might appreciate these photos. We live in an age when self-documentation is stitched into the daily fabric of life, when the ongoing curation of our identity via digitally mediated images is second nature to an entire generation. We are all, so to speak, photographing ourselves now; Kelly's work serves as a commentary on this age of micro-celebrity. Photography, after all, is by its very nature an invasion of a space, a crossing of boundaries. In an age when digital media is quickly eroding old distinctions between audience and performer, making us all both spectators and participants at one and the same time, this kind of total immersion in the lives of others might be the only way to really feel at home.





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