



Jacob Todd Broussard, *Fantasy II In Exile Presents: Bess*, 2020, ink, gouache, cut paper, poster

Fantasy II In Exile

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ACADIANA CENTER FOR THE ARTS
07.10.2021 - 11.13.2021



Exiles in Fantasy, by Martin Pousson

How did we know where to find it? Behind a strip mall, past a cinderblock wall, hiding in plain sight, Fantasy II in Exile called out to us like a face behind a mask at Mardi Gras. Visible and invisible all at once. A rumor troubled the air in Basile & Broussard, in Duson & Gueydan. A scent stirred the loins at Comeaux High & Carencro High. A sound whispered through the pews in Our Lady of Mercy Church and rattled all the hidden coves of the coastal parishes. Down every twisting road, along every twirling bayou, we pressed our faces to the window searching for an exit. Trapped in homes with families whose feet floated above the ground. Trapped in families whose eyes sunk into the past. Trapped in bodies whose skin wrapped around a lie. Where could we go to shed our hide, to shake our feathers, to land our feet on the truth?

All around us the answer rose: in the city, in the disco, in the gay bar. There, in the open-secret club off main street, we stepped through the door at the back of the closet and stared into the mirror-ball of the future. Raised in the South, we'd grown familiar with façades. Raised in Acadiana, we'd grown accustomed to costumes, to carnivals and festivals. The bouncer handed us flyers like church brochures, opening the door to a line of believers. The bartender stood before a well like an altar, pouring holy water into shot glasses. The bar-owner reigned over the scene like a priest over a tabernacle, collecting the relics of patrons. On his table, a dangling earring, a string of pearl beads, a line of courage drawn from a bottle of inhalants. Once we crossed the threshold, we swallowed a key then spiraled into a wonderland.

Harassed at home, stigmatized at school. Bullied on the playground, beaten in the locker room, banned by laws and courts. Plagued by disease. Severed from our own history. Yet we danced alone together, in the grand derangement of disco. We danced in a lonesome fog, with lights pulsing like pending news of our collective release. From towns without a map, from roads without a name, the floor filled with sissy boys & butch girls, with drag queens & kings. Lines blurred, colors swirled, vapor twirled into the air from bandanas soaked in sweat and fantasy. A wig flip, a boa toss, a sequined shimmy. With our legs sawing the floor, with our hands scissoring the air, who could tell the dancer from the dance? Or the singer from the song?

Synching her lips to an anthem of survival, the divine queen of all queens appeared in a flash under a red strobe light with a tiara halo and a blue glow of benediction. All fury and grace, she ascended onto the illuminated stage with arms stretched to the heavens and mouth stretched into hysteria. Wearing a face beat for the gods and a gown stitched for a ballroom extravaganza, Miss Gay Lafayette, Miss Gay Louisiana, Miss Gay USA beamed us into a radiant union of Creoles, Cajuns & Sabines, of Blacks, whites & all the bayou shades in between. No church, no school, no home stood still or safe when we echoed the shake of her sashay. Dancing into revolution, we turned our bodies into sacred armor and our hearts into holy weapons. In the voodoo of the hour, we'd unknow all we'd ever known. Unknow hate, unknow hurt, unknow haunting and hiding. Overnight exiles off main street, we suddenly knew the magic that ran the club and the gris-gris that made love out of loss. A congregation of misfits, outcasts & wild strays, we found each other in the fantasy of a new home and a new family. We found a new place to belong, a new lie to believe.

Trust us, girl. The liberated & the saved. No memory is ever alive. No dream is ever free. No fantasy is ever reached. Reality is invented for jailers & fools, for those on the inside. Freedom is imagined by outlaws & fugitives, by those on the outside. Here, in the upside-down world of the disco, all of us, every single one, is under the moon and over the rainbow. Now, twirl, bayou girl, twirl.

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