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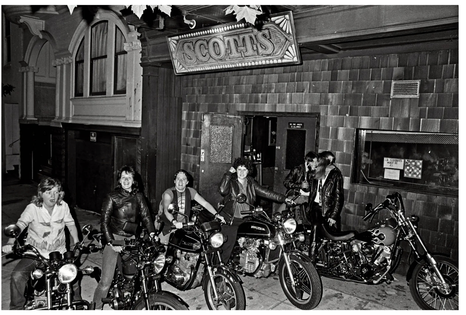
Del LaGrace Volcano: ‘I’m making work about the beauty and power of being different’

The queer US photographer Del LaGrace Volcano’s first solo show in Britain captures the countercultural energy of San Francisco’s 1980s motorcycle dyke community



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Gay male leather culture entered the photographic record early: Robert Mapplethorpe completed the *X Portfolio* in 1978, and a decade later it was touring American museums, leading to a trial for obscenity in Cincinnati in 1990. Its lesbian counterpart has almost no such record, which is the first thing worth saying about the photographs Del LaGrace Volcano made between 1980 and 1982 at Scott’s, the working-class motorcycle dyke bar in San Francisco.

Women drink, argue, undress and have sex there with the ease of people who have concluded that the camera belongs to them. It did. Volcano was a scholarship student at the San Francisco Art Institute, living as a woman called Della Grace; in one 1982 photograph of six riders outside on their bikes, they are third from the left.

Sensual/Mutual, now on show at Auto Italia in east London, sets out to correct that absence. It is the first gallery solo exhibition Volcano has had in Britain, and almost nothing in it has been seen. The work comes from three places they lived: Scott’s; the Goodman Building, an artists’ hotel then deep into a long, failed rent strike against the city of San Francisco; and ARF (Asylum for Rowdy Females and Dogs), a land commune in the mountains above Santa Fe in New Mexico.

Volcano’s reputation rests on what came afterwards. Born in California in 1957, they moved to London in 1982 and stayed, surfacing in 1991 with *Love Bites*, a photographic book about sex-positive lesbian subcultural spaces that was briefly impounded by US customs. Their name arrived in 1995 after marrying Johnny Volcano; Della Grace became Del LaGrace Volcano, genderqueer and non-binary. The same year, having let the facial hair they had spent years plucking grow, the artist made *Self Portrait with Blue Beard*, which remains the image most people here know.

The San Francisco pictures are a world away from that studio work: 35mm throughout, shot fast, in bad light, close in. “Grittier, grainier,” Volcano tells me. “But it’s real.” What separates the series from drop-in reportage is that Volcano knew everyone. “I’m not taking pictures,” Volcano says. “We are making pictures together.”

The dates matter: 1980 was not a neutral moment to raise a camera at lesbians in leather. Within two years, the sex wars would break open at Barnard College in New York City – between “sex-radical” feminists and those who were anti-pornography and BDSM – and, to many among the women’s movement, these people were evidence for the prosecution.

A second argument runs through the ARF pictures. The commune was often a site of trans exclusion, and the warrant was close at hand; Janice Raymond’s *The Transsexual Empire*, published in 1979 and much read in radical feminist circles, cast trans women as men colonising women’s spaces. Volcano was inside that world. “I was Della Grace, or Della Disgrace,” they say. “Accepted as female. Accepted as lesbian.” Several of the butch women here have since become gender-critical, taking the opposite side in the argument today. “The kind of dykes who got kicked out of the women’s bathroom, who are now punching down,” Volcano argues, “especially towards trans women. That’s extremely hurtful.”

The silence of British institutions is hard to account for. Catherine Opie was photographing the Los Angeles leather dyke scene at the same moment and now hangs in the Guggenheim; Ingrid Pollard, long overlooked, was Turner-nominated at 69. Volcano has broken attendance records abroad, but until this year, no British gallery had called.

Volcano has a theory about the neglect, and of who gets canonised and why. One encounter sharpened it. In 1992, finishing a master’s at Derby University, Volcano sat a critique with a visiting photographer Nan Goldin, six years on from Goldin’s groundbreaking book *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*. “She eviscerated me,” Volcano says, without much grudge. What stayed was the comparison: Goldin’s route into the art world foregrounded her own damage, the battered self-portrait, the injured party. “People in my work are heroes,” Volcano says. “We are looking back at you. We refuse to be pathologised. That makes the art world uncomfortable. They cannot consume us.”

The influence travelled, anyway: Casalis and Zanele Muholi – the latter twice exhibited at Tate Modern – have each said Volcano’s work paved the way for their own art. People still write to say the photographs changed their lives: “It makes me cry every time.”

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At 69, the artist seems less concerned with what the museums decide than with the fact that the pictures are still finding the people who need them. “I’m here, I’m queer,” Volcano says, “and I’m still making work about the strength and the beauty and the power of being different.”

Sensual/Mutual is at Auto Italia, London E2, until 25 October

Photographs by Del LaGrace Volcano

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