

SECCA

GLISTEN

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 theatre.

- Susan Sontag, 'Notes on "Camp"', 1964(1)

The best way to celebrate a camp milestone – or a milestone of camp – is to explain it to death. As Susan Sontag's iconic essay 'Notes on "Camp"' celebrates its sixtieth anniversary in 2024, it is tempting to play call and response with Sontag's treatise on what makes camp, camp. A critical language of camp had barely been articulated before Sontag's essay in 1964, so its covert, coded and cult-like status as sensibility and style afforded fanciful latitude in extolling its glistening artifice in 58 "notes". Since its publication, the floodgates of camp have unleashed so much liquid eyeliner that its lexicon is instantly knowable and known, far surpassing the esoteric and obscure into a mainstream arena where the grounds of camp have well and truly been de-camped. A key case in point – Camp: Notes on Fashion at The Met, New York in 2019.

In the first of Sontag's notes, she initiates the reader into an "aesthetic phenomenon"⁽²⁾ of camp that is first and foremost about artifice and stylisation. By the tenth note, as cited above, Sontag is putting the quotation marks of irony around Camp-with-a-Capital-C to signal its appetite for decoration, flourish, and exaggeration – a knowing form of visual gossip which animates contemporary queer aesthetics and discourse.

The highly stylised tableaux of Gerwyn Davies are precisely that: a camp manifestation of visual gossip that beneath its layers of textile concealment hides a figure winking for the camera, unseen. A kind of queer self-portraiture where the human subject morphs into sculptural assemblage as still life. Creating a tension between what is revealed and concealed is the *raison d'être* of Davies' work. Davies fashions spectacle through elaborate sculptural costumes donned in sets that are either there or not there, much like the artist himself. Whether shot in constructed studio environments or post-produced digitally with the figure dropped into a plastic-synthetic *mise-en-scène*, his performative dress-ups permit a partial disappearing act. The loss of facial recognition gives way to detection via tattooed arms and legs inviting surface attention. "They're a costume of their own, he says of the markings. "A kind of costume beneath a costume."⁽³⁾

For more than a decade, Davies' has been creating a serial parade of photographic images that sit within an Australian context of queer art and visual culture. Obvious reference points include

artistic icons of yesteryear like Leigh Bowery right through to artists of the present such as Liam Benson and Justin Shoulder. What makes Davies kin to these few isolated examples is how he draws from fashion, popular culture, advertising, and club culture. Where he differs is how his practice has seamlessly blended references to the local and global through the sites depicted, steeped as they are in the alienation of the built environment with all its vernacular recognisability and visual excess. Davies' body of work is like a typology of locations – real and imagined – that references and constructs hyperstylised tourist destinations and more generic landscapes, streets, and beaches you might find in a web image stock library. Whatever the location, Davies is drawing attention to the ubiquitous role photography plays in relation to place. What makes this site more of a selfie magnet than any other? is what his work asks. Location location location, is its reply.

By inserting the queer body into these locales, Davies offers a camp take on a discourse of queer visibility stemming from the politics of queer oppression and liberation. In the West at least, visibility has come a long way in shaping the politics of representation and the advancement of LGBTQ+ rights. But even if we purport to be more 'seen' than ever before, some implicitly have greater access and ease to visibility's glittering stage than others. It comes down to the same age-old biases that derive from a world of whiteness built on compulsory cis-gendered hetero-patriarchy. So, no matter how visible and how far removed we are from the closet, visibility can bring regulation and risk, coercion and control. "Visibility is a trap," to paraphrase Foucault.(4) Maintaining queer resistance is the key.

As such, Davies acknowledges these tensions regarding visibility and how they enliven his thinking and making: "I'm not foreclosing but proposing this idea of queer invisibility as this very elaborate, very powerful place to be. I'm not shutting down the importance of queer visibility, but I think the work is kind of proposing different ways of representing, in which the subject is empowered by being kind of invisible, at the same time being hypervisible. Again, this kind of queer tension between states, neither entirely this nor the other."(5)

The visual gossip of Davies' practice can therefore be defined as the irresolvable ambiguity and incongruity created between states of being. Meaning is transmitted and circulated promiscuously in these images. It is never fixed and precise, morphing effortlessly from one glorious costume change to the next.

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Endnotes

1. Susan Sontag, 'Notes on "Camp"' [1964], *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966.
2. Sontag, *ibid.*
3. Gerwyn Davies in conversation with the author on Zoom, 30 January 2024
4. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* [1975], New York, Vintage, 1995.
5. Davies, *ibid.*