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WHITEOUT



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Beautiful Freaks

by James Anderson



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**Unleashed in the
east and then sent
up west.**

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The fusion of Ralf Obergfell's photographs of fabulous London nightlife looks along with artist/set designer Tony Hornecker's purpose-built installations which house them has – during the past twelve months – shown that club and gallery can intermingle, with the type of mind-boggling success perhaps last seen in early-80s NYC clubs such as Area.

German-born, London-based Obergfell – the founding member of Photodebut, who co-runs Gutterslut and has regularly splashed his photographs across the pages of prestigious titles including Creative Review, International Herald Tribune and i-D – has been a familiar face in the East End's most talked-about clubs, bars and parties since moving to Dalston in the late 90s. Capturing on camera the Capital's new wave of after-hours club kids, trannies and disco demented became part and parcel of his regular partying. Consequently, he built up a vast array of images that documented and celebrated the polysexual figureheads of the emerging Mind Noughties electro scene and beyond. Events and venues including Trailer Trash, Gutterslut and Gay Bingo; the Bricklayer's Arms, Joiners Arms and, of course, George & Dragon would all play host to endless giddy-and-garish show-offs keen for additional validation via Obergfell's appreciative lens. Importantly, though, Obergfell was not a mere voyeur; these subjects are his friends, fellow revelers, and lovers...

Meanwhile, Hornecker – when not working for commercial clients including Kylie Minogue, PUMA, Sony, Nokia and Bat For Lashes – began to sporadically transform the somewhat dilapidated former garage, in which he lives and works in Dalston, into a micro-gallery that would house his own remarkable multi-media installations. These have included exhibitions titled 'The Amazing Story of Little and His Incredible Adventures with Mankind,' and its successor, '2 centuries, 13 years, 12 days and a night at Ciao Baby'. The 2009 launch of his occasional speakeasy-restaurant, The Pale Blue Door, would likewise make good use of this space, becoming a cult destination frequented by those immune to the corporate charms of Pizza Express and the like, but hungry for live tranny entertainment, rickety furniture-a-plenty and fine cuisine cooked by Hornecker himself, duly dished up on mis-matched crockery.

In late September of last year, Dalston Superstore played host to Beautiful Freaks, an exhibition resulting from a carefully considered – yet nonetheless fantastically ludicrous – collaboration between Obergfell and Hornecker. The Private View avoided obligatory canapés and polite chit-chat, however, instead offering up a maze of temporary spaces fashioned by Hornecker from steel, wood and god knows what else, to house many of the core big-wigs who starred in Obergfell's accompanying, stunning photographs.



A live techno soundscape, created by PER QX, further enhanced the proceedings. Exotically-named creatures including Jonny Woo, Ryan Styles, A Man To Pet, Pia Arber and Miss Transforma unleashed their own performance rituals and scenarios inside their individual spaces – admired by the attendees through curiosity-arousing peep-holes, small openings, two way mirrors and cracks in walls. Needless to say, both the 'opening night' itself and the exhibition were thundering successes, with record levels of attendance being garnered to this relatively new venue.

Following on from this, some months later, Beautiful Freaks was reprised, remixed and re-staged as part of the Royal College of Art's Gender and Performance group show. Various

of the original performers from the Dalston debut took part, with Scottee, Nando Messias, Kevin Howbrook, John Sizzle and fashion muse Jeanette also joining the line-up this time around, amid tweaked variations of Hornecker's original structures. While the RCA is no stranger to pushing creative boundaries, even the most seasoned denizens of Kensington Gore were, at times, clearly flabbergasted by this invasion from London's Wild, er, East.

This bewilderment was, no doubt, compounded by the sudden outbreak of a fire alarm, that sent a gaggle of artfully-attired trannies and club kids out onto the rarefied streets of the Royal Borough, not to mention the overly-enthusiastic response from one female, who simply could not restrain herself from devouring the famed penis belonging to often-naked performance artist, Kevin Howbrook.

Comedy moments aside, few could deny the power of Obergfell's photographs. These were mounted upon sturdy, industrial metal, of the sort that gradually reacts to oxygen and elegantly rusts, thus framing the images' inevitable transition from a fashionable zeitgeist to that of nostalgic artifacts, while simultaneously nodding to the non-glitzy environments of today's most underground nightclubs.

Boldly and beautifully, these very modern portraits shimmered; testaments to those whose lives – reinvented, transformed, made better, brighter, louder, wilder and lived-out to the max – are a fantastic confusion of reality-meets-performance, with the disco and the art gallery as a stage.

