



PES FUTURES

Sonic Womb: Leaving Gender on the Dance Floor

June 7 - August 16 2025

Alyssa Alexander, Curator

Nowhere does gender stretch, dissolve, and slip like on the dance floors of queer clubs and ballrooms. "A sanctuary for queer liberation," as asserted by Sable Elyse Smith in their literary work *Ecstatic Resilience*, the club – in all its damp, thumping, exuberance – is a site of freedom for those who have the audacity to exist.

Borrowing from the auditory and speculative genius of Detroit techno pioneers, James Stinson and Gerald Donald, *Sonic Womb* seeks to mirror the subterranean refuge of both the mythological underwater kingdom of Drexciya and the underground clubs originating in 1970's New York City. Drexciya — also Stinson and Donald's eponymous music duo — is said to be populated by the children of pregnant enslaved women who either jumped to their deaths or were thrown overboard during the Middle Passage. In thinking of the ways queer nightlife emulates a protective vessel for diverse expression, Drexciya, a self-sustaining society of water-adapted Black people that exist in obscurity, is at arm's length. In *The Last Angel of History*, writer and musician Greg Tate posits, "Black experience and science fiction are one in the same. The conventions of the narrative of a subject within science fiction - it's usually someone who is at odds with the apparatus of power. And whose profound experience is one of cultural dislocation, alienation and estrangement." Detroit techno, the Drexciyan Empire, and Black queer nightlife all possess not only an intimate engagement with that alienation, but also the reimagining of Black cultural identity toward futurity - an embodiment of Afro-futurism.

The line between social reality and science fiction is an optical illusion. - *The Last Angel of History*

Through interview documentation, ink drawing, floor projection, sound installation and paper sculpture Billy's presentation, entitled *Our Fêtes*, draws on disco ball theory – the bending and refracting of time and memory – while examining how various members of the vogue and ballroom scenes interact with and express their gender identity. His sumi ink drawings stretch across the walls expressing emotive and reactive sweeping gestures of movement that electrify the space, encircling the testimonials of the show's current participants: Taylor Alexis Smith, Jacquelyn Batten, Riley Marc Jacobs, NYC Prince Evan Versace, Lamaj Demure-Versailles, and Legendary Yummy Lanvin. Centering ballroom culture and movement based practices, Billy imagines *Our Fêtes* as

a communal show, much like the medium of drawing, able to be opened up again and worked into for endless expansion. Much like a dance floor over the course of a night, the artist creates an environment that shifts and evolves, by adding new participants throughout its duration, welcoming new celebrations and interactions, and offering varied expressions of identity and lived experiences.

The expansiveness of ballroom's gender categories provide a varied subjectivity, as described by Marlon Bailey in *Butch Queens Up in Pumps*, that does not exist in the heteronormative sphere - "members of the ballroom community enact and experience sex, gender, and sexual identification as a performative process rather than an immutable biological fact." The category system while, not without its own limitations and restrictions, provides a foundation for an even more imaginative engagement with fantasy, performance, and costuming. Akin to that of movies or theatrical stage performances, walking in a ball synthesizes a number of narrative and movement based strategies as a means of telling the best story. This begs the question: as a means of escape, a protective veneer, or a reclamation, what do science fiction and afro-futurism mean to Black queer identity?

Drexcia surfaces here again, carrying within it themes of fugitivity and enmeshment with the ambient. At its inception, the club/ball, much like the mythological Drexcia, existed in a hazy obscurity born of the discarded. For Jupiter Magazine Stella Rae Binion asks, "in unbreathable circumstances, what are your gills?" For many queer Black and Latinx people, the answer lies in ballroom and queer nightlife. Where one can be nobody and everybody at the same time. Where the futurity of queer existence, the certainty of trans identity, is not up for debate, but rather a conjurable energy to be harnessed toward liberation.

For the second installment of *Sonic Womb*, Jesús Hilario-Reyes's presentation *on atmospherics* looks to the mangrove, a tropical tree species typically found in coastal environments where water meets land, as a conceptual and visual mechanism for exploring fugitivity, illegibility, and communal embodiment. An intricate network of roots that provide safe haven for various forms of life, the mangrove weaves throughout Hilario-Reyes' practice, taking form in sculptural works like *Holy Ghosted* that combine mangrove roots with found objects, and large welded-steel pieces like *A River Opens Up Into Many Windows*. Parallel to thoughts of "fluid togetherness," Hilario-Reyes takes up edging or edge worlds as a framework for understanding both the ecstatic potentiality of the club, and the adaptive nature of the mangrove – spaces where the bounds of the individual and the environment are indistinguishable. In his manipulation of salvaged objects, through the addition of welded rhizomatic

ornamentations and enmeshed mangrove roots, these works orchestrate blurring as more than just a protective measure but also a mode of redress. For the duration of his presentation, the exhibition space will also be partially engulfed in the dense fog synonymous with clubs and performance spaces as both a world-building tool and a means of further obfuscating individual identity.

At the root of Hilario-Reyes practice is a deep understanding and engagement with the underside of queer-nightlife as a DJ and organizer. His ongoing practice interrogates the notion of the club as wholly a space of liberatory practice. On the realities of nightlife, "Blurring and entanglement are protective measures for the impossibility of the everyday. The promise of nightlife as an idealized space is necessitated by the abrasiveness of our individual and collective reality. Still, those promises often come by way of a corporate nightlife entity." What remains, and what he cultivates in his practice, past the "manufactured, drug-induced fog," is that image of communal embodiment, and the real feeling of transcendence on the dancefloor. Hilario-Reyes' works metabolize the ideas behind Drexciya and gesture towards the transgressive capability of worlding at the margins.

Synchronous to their visual installations, both artists consider sound – not just music – as a necessary component of both the club and ballroom, taking shape in Billy's recordings of melodious ballroom commentators and Hilario-Reyes' use of found fog horns and subwoofers as sculptural components. An accompanying playlist from Billy and DJ mix from Morenxxx are also available for listening beyond the close of the exhibitions.