



Grace, Della (Del Lagrace Volcano) (b. 1957)

by Tamsin Wilton

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Del La Grace Volcano.
YouTube Video Still:
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Della Grace, also known as Della Disgrace or Del Lagrace Volcano, is one of instigators of polymorphous perverse queer culture. Her work questions the performance of gender on several levels, especially the performance of masculinity by lesbians.

She was born Debra Dianne Wood in California in 1957. Born with the external features of a female, she lived the first 37 years of her life as a woman, but since then has been attempting to live as both male and female--as intersexed.

Grace was educated at the San Francisco Art Institute. She obtained a Master's degree from the University of Derby, England. One of the best-known lesbian photographers, she is famous as much for her exhibitionistic shifts in persona as for her sexually explicit work.

The S&M chic of her photographs, combined with her preference for young and attractive models, made her the darling of the heterosexual press and the scapegoat of pro-censorship feminists. However, the theme that dominates her work is not sex but gender.

Her photographs betray an anxiety about the performance of gender, in particular, the performance of masculinity by lesbians. Whether you find her work revolutionary or reactionary depends upon whether you read her use of semiotic codes from gay men's pornography as triumphant appropriation or envious mimicry.

Grace courts notoriety with some skill. Her own identity has metamorphosed from lesbian to hermaphrodite to transman to intersexed, and her work frequently addresses issues of chrysalisation or mutation. Here, "truth" becomes irrelevant. For example, her famous beard is variously claimed to be natural or the result of artificial hormones taken as part of a gender-transitioning process.

Similarly, she has never bothered to engage thoughtfully with criticisms that her work degrades women. Critics, especially feminists or lesbians, are met with insults or posturing. "Some French lesbians seem to be deeply resentful of anything that throws them off their precarious pseudo-feminist perch," she remarked, and added: "BOLLOCKS to that, I say! I'm a Gender Terrorist, a walking, talking bomb in The Boys' Club."

Grace's gender politics are deeply felt, but they are highly subjective and do not hold up well against the challenges of her more articulate and politically informed critics.

Grace's photographs, however, are important on several levels. By pillaging gay men's porn and simply not caring whether men get off on her work, she became one of the instigators of polymorphous perverse queer culture. In producing the most unapologetically blatant representations of sex between women, she effectively confronts the desexualization of lesbianism.

Also, by photographing demonstrations, scenes in bars and clubs, drag king contests, and other queer tribal events, she has produced important documentary images of an ever-changing community.

Finally, her portfolio of drag kings ensures that transgender culture is no longer so dominated by the stories of queens, fairies, and male-to-female transitions.

Grace has also experimented with strategies to interfere with the traditional pornographic dynamic between the voyeuristic gaze of the (usually male) audience and the objectified (usually female) body of the model. These experimentations culminate in a series of sexually explicit images of Grace and a lover fucking with dildos, rimming, and butt-fucking.

By exposing herself as she has exposed her models, Grace asserts community with the women who have posed for her and interrupts the voyeuristic gaze with her own controlling presence. Few women struggling with the male-dominated conventions of erotic art have confronted them with such courage and audacity.

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About the Author

Tamsin Wilton was Reader in Sociology at the University of the West of England, Bristol. She published widely on lesbian and gay issues since 1988, and visited many countries to lecture on lesbian studies and on the sociology of HIV/AIDS. Her books include *Lesbian Studies: Setting an Agenda*; *Immortal, Invisible: Lesbians and the Moving Image*; and *Sexualities in Health and Social Care*.