

Muse

Niki Grangruth and James Kinser

by Ann Wiens

It all started in a gritty back alley in downtown Chicago. A woman with a camera, a man in drag. She adjusted her equipment, gauged the light, pointed her lens. He struck a pose and met the camera's gaze through heavy false eyelashes. Click.

The shoot marked the beginning of an artistic collaboration that has persisted. In their ongoing project *Muse*, Chicago-based photographer **Niki Grangruth** and multimedia artist **James Kinser** explore notions of gender identity through a series of photographs and the costumes, sets, and performative elements that lead up to the final images. Although nothing much came of the photographs they shot in the alley that day, working together the artists discovered an underlying foundation of shared interests. They gave themselves an assignment: pore through art history books and collect images that excited them. When they got back together, they were astonished—at least half of the images they had chosen were identical.

They quickly identified some common themes in the works they had chosen: most had an archetypal female subject (or “character,” as they describe them, underscoring the way they see the images as performative); most represented a traditional ideal of beauty; many had stirred controversy in their time; and most were firmly within the canon of classic European and American painting, readily identifiable by the general public.

Inspired by these beloved paintings, Kinser and Grangruth embarked on their *Muse* project in 2009. The series of large-format photographs have a painting-like presence as objects, reinforced by the paper choice and absence of glass over the framed images. But they are also records of the performances that Kinser—who plays the central character in each of the images—enacts for the camera; performances for which he creates elaborate, finely crafted costumes and accessories, and builds sets and props as one would for the stage. In September of 2015, the photographs and costumes were exhibited together for the first time at Columbia College

Chicago's C33 Gallery, just a block or so from that gritty back alley where the artists' initial collaboration took place.

Each image starts with an iconic art-historical painting that serves as a model (or muse) and acts as a platform for the artists to ask questions that challenge preconceived notions of gender identity, archetype, and classical standards of beauty. Through an examination and reinterpretation of the symbols, materials, and cultural references (both historical and social) that inform our individual and societal concepts of “masculine” and “feminine,” Kinser and Grangruth produce work that presents gender as fluid, elusive, and very much a construct of our own making.

Among the earliest works in the series is *Girl with a Pearl Earring (after Vermeer)*. Their inspiration, Johannes Vermeer's small portrait completed in 1665, recently wrapped up a three-continent world tour; it also inspired a best-selling novel and a Hollywood film (starring Scarlett Johansson). It is a very famous painting, which is important to Grangruth and Kinser. “The way people react to the work informs our process,” says Grangruth. “We're not interested in making shock art. We're interested in how to draw in a viewer through the aesthetics and then allow them to feel uncomfortable or ask questions.”

A viewer's own preconceptions about beauty and gender are likely to be high on that list of questions. Because *Girl with a Pearl Earring* is so recognizable, viewers' familiarity with it gives them instant access—here is something they know and likely find beautiful. But there's a twist: the turbaned, earring face peering out at them from the picture's rich, chiaroscuro depths has a beard. There is often a moment of cognitive dissonance, says Grangruth, as viewers are forced to assess their own comfort level with nonconforming gender: “Initially, I thought this was beautiful. Do I still think it's beautiful?”

The exhibition last fall marked the culmination of an eight-week residency at the gallery, during which the artists held open studio hours,

RIGHT: NIKI GRANGRUTH AND JAMES KINSER *Girl with a Pearl Earring (after Vermeer)* Laminated inkjet print, 24" x 20"; headpiece: silk shantung, silk chiffon, hand-dyed lace; costume: silk satin and taffeta, 2009.





NIKI GRANGRUTH AND JAMES KINSER *Ophelia (after Millais)* Laminated inkjet print, 24" x 40"; costume: embroidered polyester sheers, appliqué sequins and beads, brooch, all layers (except hems) were hand-sewn using a subtractive method, 2013.

visited classrooms, and conducted workshops on process, collaboration, and gender expression. They also offered an opportunity for students and others to participate in the performative aspect of the project firsthand by *"Becoming Pearl."* Visitors to the studio were able to don the elaborate, silk-satin and taffeta costume Kinser made for the piece and strike the familiar pose, "becoming" the *Girl with a Pearl Earring* before Grangruth's lens. "We were pleased—and a little bit surprised—at how uniformly both men and women engaged with it, and how seriously they took it," says Kinser. "Once they sat down and put the costume on, there was a visible difference in how they were presenting themselves."

The artists credit that gravitas in part to the craft of the work, the obvious care that has gone into the making of the costumes and the quality of the materials from which they are constructed. The headpiece for *Girl with a Pearl Earring* is made with intricately pleated and stitched shantung silk, with a knot of silk chiffon that cascades down the back, ending in a border of

hand-dyed lace. While some of the earlier costumes were made with inexpensive, synthetic materials—silk, organza, taffeta, and chiffon—made a discernable difference in the final photographs. Kinser often embellished these upscale materials with hand-sewn sequins, vintage crystals, and ostrich and coque feathers, bringing an increasingly high caliber of tailoring to each tableau as he honed his skills. "Light reveals all," says Grangruth. "The way the fabrics interact with light, the costume—it's not just a picture, it's a performance."

Just as they use familiar source images and traditional elements of beauty to help viewers access the more challenging aspects of their work, the artists see craft as an entry point for their audiences. "I'm from rural small-town Minnesota," says Grangruth. "If there's an 80-year-old woman from rural small-town Minnesota who sews, she can appreciate the level of craft, and there's an entry point." Kinser credits a high-school home-economics class for providing him



NIKI GRANGRUTH AND JAMES KINSER *Whistler's Mother (after Whistler)* Laminated inkjet print, 32" x 40"; costume: silk shantung, appliquéd embroidered lace, corset boning; headpiece: silk organza, embroidered trim, 2015.

with basic sewing skills, which he has built through trial and error, study of period patterns and garments, and plenty of practice. He makes patterns based on interpretations of the inspiration images, then refines the garments in muslin before executing them in silks and satins.

Throughout, Grangruth provides feedback, exploring how a fabric will interact with light, or considering whether a straight, traditionally masculine seam or a more angled, feminine dart will better carry the multidimensional gender references that are important to a particular image. The costume for one of the most recent pieces, *Whistler's Mother (after Whistler)*, went through ten variations in muslin before Kinser settled on the final version. Made of crisp silk

shantung with appliquéd embroidered lace and corset boning, the ensemble includes a silk organza headpiece involving French seams and hand-embroidered trim. The image honors James McNeill Whistler's 1871 painting *Arrangement in Grey and Black No. 1* while simultaneously ramping up both the feminine (silk, lace, corset boning) and masculine (the "mother" has a beard) aspects of the figure.

The Annunciation (after Botticelli) reveals increasing levels of complexity and technical accomplishment on the part of both artists. The composite image features Kinser playing the part of both the Virgin Mary and the Angel Gabriel in a composition inspired by Sandro Botticelli's late-15th-century *Cestello Annunciation*. In the Mary



NIKI GRANGRUTH AND JAMES KINSER *Annunciation (after Botticelli)* Laminated inkjet print, 32" x 40"; Mary costume: silk shantung, appliquéd embroidered lace, roping, poly ultrasuede, embroidered trim; Angel Gabriel costume: silk shantung, appliquéd embroidered lace, roping; wings: wood, foam core, paper, paint; halos: gold thread, metal circle, buckram hat form, tulle, paint, 2015.



NIKI GRANGRUTH AND JAMES KINSER *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère (after Manet)* Laminated inkjet print, 26" x 40", 2015; costume: acetate, polyester satin, vintage brooch, 2007; headpiece: acetate, coque feathers, netting, vintage brooch, 2013.



NIKI GRANGRUTH AND JAMES KINSER *Birth of Venus (after Botticelli)* Laminated inkjet print, 32" x 40"; headpiece: silk/polyester chiffon and taffeta, 2009.

costume, multiple tiny pleats comprise the bodice, which flows into a full, flowing skirt unobstructed by seams. The halos are constructed with golden thread wound over metal lamp-shade frames in a pattern based on sacred geometry to represent the idea of the Trinity.

The earliest work in the series, *Birth of Venus (after Botticelli)*, presents a nuanced and fluid upending of the feminine body—Kinser/Venus—and the masculine gaze—Grangruth/Botticelli. For this image, Kinser built an enormous papier-mâché clamshell, which the artists hauled down to the Chicago lakefront just before dawn. As the sun rose over Lake Michigan, Grangruth began shooting—first capturing the sky and water, later getting the ideal light on Kinser as he posed in the huge shell. Here, Venus is at once feminine (who, after all, is more feminine than the Roman goddess of love?) and masculine—Kinser's angular body, bald head, and neatly

trimmed beard make no pretense otherwise. Absent are the forest, flowers, and other figures that appear in Botticelli's iconic 15th-century painting, yet the image remains instantly recognizable.

This work is not about making a particular statement about gender, say the artists, but rather about questioning it, and inviting viewers to do the same. It is an invitation made accessible by familiarity, beauty, exquisite craft, and a touch of humor—which all combine to create a complex and sincere challenge to the viewer: You thought this was beautiful—do you still?

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