HYPERALLERGIC

ART

The Outrageous Art of Transgender Punk Rock Star Jayne County

An exhibition at Participant Inc. gathers the sometimes fantastical, sometimes caustic visual art of the punk icon.

Barbara Pollack | February 21, 2018

Jayne County, "Mer Creatures" (2017), acrylic and marker on canvas (all images courtesy Participant Inc.)

It is almost impossible to encapsulate the brilliant career of rock star Jayne County. As punk rock's first openly transgender performer, she was an inspiration for everyone from Andy Warhol to David Bowie, but never quite got credit for her widespread influence. Donning lipstick decades before "gender fluid" became a trend, County participated in the Stonewall uprising, DJ'ed at Max's Kansas City, performed as lead singer in Wayne County and the Backstreet Boys, among other bands, and set the world on fire at SqueezeBox!, the seven-year-long party at Tribeca bar Don Hill's, which was an incubator for New York's 1990s drag scene. Her journey is best summed up in her own words in the 1995 autobiography, *Man Enough To Be Woman*, though County may be best understood watching her live performances (readily available on YouTube).

Jayne County, "Untitled" (2017), acrylic and marker on canvas

Throughout it all, County has made art using any means available to vent emotions and express herself in ways more intimate than her music. Now, Participant Inc. is presenting over 80 of her works, spanning 1982 to 2017. The exhibition is an exciting revelation, a discovery of a major body of work that is difficult to categorize. With an abundance of dots and circles, these modest-sized paintings, drawings, and collages might be compared to works by Yayoi Kusama, but their quirky sensibility is closer to Henry Darger or others mislabeled as "outsider artists." Penises abound, but the overall impression is not gratuitously shocking. Instead, County's works are heartfelt and poignant, even when she is taking aim at enemies or deflating celebrity egos.

The exhibition is titled *Paranoia Paradise*, after the song that County sang in her role as Lounge Lizard in Derek Jarman's 1978 film, *Jubilee*. The title is also an apt description of many of the pictures on view. For example, a painting from 1982 shows the artist giving a blowjob in a public park — an unguarded, honest self-portrait of sorts. In others, she openly rages against hypocritical behavior. For instance, the pair of drawings "Lou and Rachel Present" (2002) and "Lou and Rachel Past" (2007) punctures Lou Reed's reputation as a rebel and renegade with a pointed critique of his domineering treatment of a transgender woman. "Phony Faggots" (2010) depicts a trio of rock stars: David Bowie, Mark Bolan of glam band T. Rex, and Reed (portrayed with an exceptionally small penis). Better yet, "Trump, Chicken Man, and Adolf Warhol, Pop Dicktater" (2017) depicts our current president as a big, fat, penis-less clown in a black top hat.

As raucous as this work is, County is at her best when she delves into her personal vocabulary, which steers away from known celebrities and popular figures. In recent years, she has painted female figures covered in shrouds reminiscent of ghosts wearing sheets or women in burkas. In paintings like "Active in Wise Ladies" (2017) or "Lay Down" (2017), these women appear against abstract fields, only discernible by their almond-shaped eyes and red lips. In other works, County

Installation view of *Jayne County: Paranoia Paradise* at Participant Inc. (photo by Mark Waldhauser, courtesy Participant Inc.)

Jayne County, "Untitled" (2017), acrylic and glitter on canvas

obsessively draws dots in bright colors, rimmed in black or white circles, rendering these cloaked characters in a manner akin to psychedelic pointillism. Add to the mix a bit of Egyptology and an homage to mermaids, and you the truly outlandish visions of an artist who is self-taught but rebels against attempts to categorize her as an outsider.

All of the paintings on view — made with acrylic paint, watercolor, gel markers, and nail polish — are modest in size but have an outsized impact. A highlight is "Rockin Around the Penis Tree #1 (NO XMAS)" (2005), a work on paper depicting Elvis and a woman in a miniskirt dancing on either side of a massive tree trunk bearing penises and vaginas. Rendered in acid shades of pink, turquoise, and purple, the drawing has been partially eaten by one of County's many pet cats, making it look all the more like an artifact from another universe.

Installation view of *Jayne County: Paranoia Paradise* at Participant Inc. (photo by Mark Waldhauser, courtesy Participant Inc.)

In the back room of the gallery, there is a display of photographs, ephemera, and album covers spanning the breadth of County's career as a punk performer. Many of the photographs were taken by the exhibition's curator, Michael Fox, who has known County since the 1990s and often documented her performances, despite his day job as a sergeant in the New York City Police Department. Fox has done a formidable job combing through three decades of County's art to assemble this show, and produced a pair of zines featuring interviews with the artist. They are key accompaniments to the show and well worth a read for those who want to know more.

County, now 71, lives in rural Georgia near her hometown and is temporarily not performing due to back problems. She made a virtual appearance at the exhibition opening via Skype and belted out a song a cappella, demonstrating that she has lost none of her ability or her vivaciousness. Now in semi-retirement, she is devoting most of her time to art-making, which is promising given the inventiveness and originality evidenced in the works on view here. They make me want to see more, and I was happy to hear that more is on the way.

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Jayne County: Paranoia Paradise *continues at Participant Inc. (253 East Houston Street, Lower East Side, Manhattan) through March 11.*