BUTCH
IS NOT A DIRTY WORD
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This publication is about reclaiming female masculinity and the identity ‘butch’. What started as a photography project grew into a place for queer voices to express their thoughts and experiences about butch identity. While the term means different things to different people, it is important to find a place where to be a butch isn’t a deficit; to know that there are others out there who accept and appreciate you. This project makes a small contribution to bringing a voice and imagination to those who identify as butch. May you find empowerment through visibility.
It started with invisibility. I felt it from before I can remember, probably as a child. My masculinity was always kind of a joke; a smirk from an extended relative or a murmured “she’ll grow out of it” in the background. Something that was inappropriate to be shared outside of our immediate family. I vividly remember the time my godmother gifted me soaps and candles for my birthday as a joke, laughing about it over the kitchen bench whilst knowing full well that I’d rather a soccer ball or a sports tee. I was squeezed into dresses and floral headbands so as not to be an embarrassment at family weddings (resistance I no longer receive today when I rock up in a suit!). My family dealt with it appropriately for the understanding of the time, I was a tomboy, encouraged to be myself in my own time, but on anyone else’s watch, I was to look and behave like a lady.

As a teenager this had weird implications for my presentation. In hindsight I ended up awkward, being feminine just didn’t come naturally, and it showed. There was an overlay of performed femininity, onto what I now know and feel as female masculinity. My love of skateboarding made me the only female in a lot of situations so despite the fact that I wasn’t the kind of girl that most boys looked at twice, occasionally one would come along and stick around. When I did get hit on, I struggled to take it seriously, and assumed they were in it to tell their mates. Being entirely uninterested in them, in sex and the whole thing, I would end up dating them only as a means of being deemed socially acceptable. Or as a means of proving to myself my self worth or level of attractiveness. It’s a trait that to this day I sometimes find myself revisiting, where I get confused - am I interested in them? Or am I interested because they are interested in me? Even though I can now make decisions based on my personal desire, it still gets clouded by the shadow of not feeling wanted, but needing to fit in, and trying to satisfy everyone else.

What interrupted this discourse was being desired for my own masculinity, not despite of it. Throughout this whole time I had been ashamed of a part of me I didn’t even know existed. And shame is hard to shake.

I didn’t know what I was looking for until I found it overseas. In travelling to the USA I stumbled into a land where the butch aesthetic was met with desire, not with repulsion. A place where I found my own masculinity and could name it, or rather, it found me. ‘It’ was a femme woman, and in the moment that she found me it wasn’t about community or visibility as it has now come to be, but it was purely about desire. She whispered some awesomely dirty things in my ear moments before pushing me up against a wall by my neck and shoving her tongue down my throat. Finally, after 24 years I felt seen. And felt. And felt up. And it was hella great.

This moment and the many that followed, finally allowed me to feel included in a world in which I had for so long been excluded from. I finally knew what straight people felt, finally felt the things I had been mimicking for years. Feelings and experiences I thought were reserved for someone else, someone else more attractive, someone else more feminine, someone else with a dick. It was a world I didn’t feel I could enter. Then suddenly I could feel it, and not only was it revelatory, it was super hot.

I assumed I could take this feeling back home and fit it into my life in Australia, but it didn’t work that way. Upon return to the motherland I once again felt the bitter sting of invisibility, which was now somehow worse. I’d tasted the alternative, but couldn’t make it part of my everyday life. Once again queer women looked through me, not at me. I was “too dykey” or “too queer looking”. After all, if those femme women wanted to “date a guy”, then they would. In Australia, at that time, my masculinity automatically made me feel unattractive and less than.
Each time I return from a stint in the USA, and I spend long enough living back in this world, the vividness of those moments of desire and visibility fade. The present reality seeps back in, until it is a distant holiday memory. And once again, I assume this invisibility as my absolute truth. The external world filters in and uproots my internal truth, leaving with it that ever so familiar feeling of not being enough.

Over the years, I’ve ended up bouncing back and forwards, from home to butch utopia and back. This feast/famine lifestyle has lead to some questionable life choices based on scarcity at home and abundance abroad. The end lesson for me was it’s unhealthy for my mental health to be in this constant state of flux.

Seeing other butches has helped to no end. Having other butches to look up to, to look out for me and see me has been critical. Hearing the term butch used with pride, not revulsion has helped build my own sense of self. It has taken away some of the shame I have felt, and have had projected onto me. This has lead to me to live some incredibly liberating experiences and finally to self love.

Which brings me to the premise of ‘Butch is Not a Dirty Word’. The sole purpose of this publication is to ignite visibility and create community. Surely if I have felt this way then others before me and most importantly after me will feel it too. If in any way I can make their journeys even a fraction less painful or time consuming than it has been for me then my goal is complete. As much as I have created this for others, I have also created this for myself. The process of communicating with all of the beautiful humans involved, the process of honouring them in their authentic form, and giving them a space to be seen and heard has been just as healing for me as I imagine it will be for them, and all of the baby butches to come. I know being able to see myself reflected in the world would have made this journey easier for me, and I hope this finds it's way to anyone else out there who might need the same.

Esther Godoy

“HEARING THE TERM BUTCH USED WITH PRIDE, NOT REVULSION HAS HELPED BUILD MY OWN SENSE OF SELF.”
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Hail Butch Mary
Olivia Alminiana - Portland, OR

As a teenager I was sexually assaulted by the quarterback of my high school football team. He took advantage of his sexual capital, as a machismo-oozing male, forcing his way into my room, forcing his dick into my hands. He had it all, this omnipresent sense of entitlement because of his gender assigned at birth. A lifetime of people telling him, showing him, that it was his right to have women whenever and wherever he wanted. This was a pivotal time for me, as it is for most adolescents, discovering my own sexuality through the rubble of self-doubt and raging hormones. At the time, I never came to terms with what had actually happened, all I knew was that it felt wrong and that I had been taken advantage of. Fast forward to now, here I sit, a 27-year old proud queer femme who is desperately in love with a butch woman.

As I reflect on what butch-ness means to me, I can’t help but think of this quarterback, exercising his total and complete disgusting privilege and entitlement on me. To me, butches embody the exact opposite of that mind frame. To be a person, assigned female at birth, but to more strongly identify with male presenting affectations. BUTCH. To live your truth as a beautiful boy, that is a girl. To take on the bullshit that comes along with presenting male, while taking on the world as a female with less opportunity and forever skewed equity. To pour your love and respect on the queer goddesses of our community, knowing what it means to be a woman, but owning what it means to be a man. To me, these people are incredible fighters, and the sexiest of the bunch.

This tender bravado, this thoughtful intelligence, this predisposition to be critical about their space in the world because the world says that they should not be. This is what makes butch voices sound extra-sweet. A butch body is a different body, with different expectations on themselves and others. Butch-ness comes with self-education and thoughtful social and romantic engagements, with most butches respecting queerness and queer bodies and what it means to live outside the norm. Their lives are inherently subversive, they walk a constant fight, fighting for who they are and what they want to be. The result being, a human that can deeply empathise with hardship. And I love that.

This kind of person isn’t always the case, there are many butches who are just assholes, but they still walk a life of being a radical queer, whether they know it or not. Ball caps, motorcycles, button-ups, flannels, trucks. Intersectional feminism, nature, crystals, rituals, femme-worship. Gender binary also comes to mind when I think of butches. As a femme, I play into these roles quite a bit. I like cooking for my butch, doing the laundry, wearing dresses and lipstick on our dates. I feel so high in the world walking next to my butch-as-fuck girlfriend when I am dolled up, lipstick bright, highest femme, because here I am, making the choice to do so. The quarterback took my femininity from me, while butches, they honour it.

Ultimately this is the pull, the subversive nature of being with a masculine presenting person, someone who feels comfortable being themselves, even when society at large says, “nope”, makes me feel more safe to be me, whatever that may be. <3

“THE QUARTERBACK TOOK MY FEMININITY FROM ME, WHILE BUTCHES, THEY HONOUR IT.”
This is a new question. I often confuse people with my ‘gender presentation’, but twice now I’ve been asked what pronouns I prefer and it makes me uncomfortable. It shouldn’t, because they’re very well intentioned. It’s a way to acknowledge everyone’s experience and sense of self. And I’ve often felt my sense of self is lacking, so I should appreciate this effort.

I hear women talk of the power of their high heels, the power of that favourite dress. And how when they’re getting all dressed up, they feel sexy. Powerful. Invincible. I feel that way in a finely cut pair of pants, a crisp shirt and boots. And I can’t work out what it is about a fresh, sharp haircut that makes me feel like a million bucks, but it does. And then I leave the house. Despite being used to it, it doesn’t take much. A double take from smirking teenagers. A confused look from a middle aged woman. Perplexed, then disgusted. And then my swagger shrinks, and the shame sets in. I suddenly feel the shame of the world seeing me as a young boy, then more shame when they realise I’m butch. My clothes can be my armour, but also my undoing. I never know how I’m going to be read, but I recognise the revulsion a mile away. And from strangers I can sometimes bear it. The twist of the knife is when it comes from women who like it, as long as no one else can see me with them. I think most of the time they don’t even know. They can’t articulate the shame they feel for desiring someone who looks like me. And how that desire marks them as deviant too.

At these times I feel an intense amount of shame - shame that being asked about my preferred pronoun should counteract. But for some reason it doesn’t. Asking in a queer space about pronouns doesn’t stop me being removed from women’s toilets, doesn’t stop the weird looks and crawling humiliation. The only thing that really stops that feeling has to be myself. Has to be writing it down. Has to be finding others like me, and being able to ask to speak it all out loud. Has to be knowing there’s nothing to be ashamed of.
In 2013, I moved to San Francisco, queer mecca. I went to explore the city and myself. I was comfortable seeing myself as a more ‘feminine’ lesbian. The term ‘queer femme’ was on my radar, but I hadn’t exactly aligned with it yet.

On my first day living in San Francisco, I ripped my acrylics off. With my teeth. I felt I needed to be visible and this would unveil me. My nails. My bright fucking nails. Sharp, smooth, unpredictable and visible. Long, pointy and bold. I fucking love my nails. So... where’s the sense in that? Rip off your visible nails to become more visible?

I mention my nails because they seem to have always been an issue, for others to accept about me. When they were on, long, pointy and fake as hell, I received comments like:

“Oh I didn’t think you were gay cos’ of your nails.”
“How do you go with those? You know...”
“How do you get anything done with those on?”
“Doesn’t it hurt when you... you know?”
“Are those real?”

Yes. No. Not really. No I love them. Yes, I can do anything in them. Yes I fuck with them. Yes they are fake. No they don’t hurt. No you cannot touch them. You know what? What you can do is, fuck off.

Between living in San Francisco in 2013, moving back to Melbourne and up until the present time, I’ve experienced a few things and I’ve changed quite a bit.

I cannot and do not wish to speak for all queer femmes, but I will speak for myself. San Francisco made me feel like I had been found, like I had been heard, I was being listened to and recognised. Butches would strut past me on the street, old and young, all beautiful, all real and all proud. San Francisco made me feel like my nails: bright, sassy, unpredictable, loud and confident.

In Australia, I am invisible. I come out, every, single, day. I come out at work, over and over again; it’s as if my co-workers just refuse to ‘believe’ me. I come out to the doctor. I come out to the pharmacist. I come out to my friends who have known me for years. Daily, weekly, monthly.

No, I don’t have a boyfriend. No I am not married. I have no intention of getting married. Yes, I’m really gay. No, I do not use the contraceptive pill.

These comments are simplistic, they simplify me, my being. They make me feel small and isolated, strange and ‘quirky’. But I’ve learnt how to combat this. These comments don’t scare me. They don’t threaten me. It may come as a surprise, or no surprise at all, but the people who I have struggled with the most are the people in my community, our community.

A rich tapestry of ideas on love, pride, beauty and identity have been laid before us by writers and activists such as Leslie Feinberg, Joan Nestle, Ivan E. Coyote, Kate Bornstein and Sylvia Rivera (just to name a few). We all belong to the same family. So why is it that I have experienced the most
phobia from my own community?

It is when I've marched myself into a safe community space, a queer high femme with heels and big hair. The way you stare, the way you whisper and the way you avoid contact makes me feel invisible.

It is when I've gone to a queer night with my friends and have been asked, “Honey, you do know this is a gay club right?”.

It’s when my short-shorts, heels, make-up, hair and nails have boldly expressed my inability to conform to ‘non-conformity’.

It is stories from other queer femmes who have been refused entry to gay clubs because they are assumed to be straight.

It is when your insecurity is searching for camaraderie and you ask my butch, “How do you go with those nails?”.

I have felt silenced, dulled, illegitimized.

And from all people, you? Our community? My community? My family? How is it that you do not know our history? How is it that butches and femmes are a dying breed? How is it that butches are feeling unloved, unlovable? I believe, I feel, I know, that butches are crystals under the earth, waiting to be found. I adore you. I worship you. And you worship me. Thank goddess we have each other. But we need the rest of our community too.

Being queer, to me, is a gift. It is a pride party, every, single, day. Can we celebrate each other?


I have attached myself to the term queer femme for power, strength and confidence. And this is exactly what I’ve gained. I have read all that I can by queer femmes who have come before me. I have spoken to butches, femmes, family, friends, randoms and Tinder dates. Every time I feel judged and isolated by my peers, I realize that there is a stronger feeling within me that pushes me to fight back. I know I have the support from the people who mean something to me. When I feel invisible, I remember that I am queer, I am femme and I come from a long line of rule-breakers, fighters and great lovers. This is what fuels my heart. This is what makes me fierce.

Yes, I am complex. Yes, I am queer. Yes, I am femme.

And I’m proud as fuck.

So. When I returned to San Francisco this year, on the first day I arrived, I took myself to the nail salon. I sat down, in my heels and mini and asked for the brightest, longest fucking nails she could give me.

“IT MAY COME AS A SURPRISE, OR NO SURPRISE AT ALL, BUT THE PEOPLE WHO I HAVE STRUGGLED WITH THE MOST ARE THE PEOPLE IN MY COMMUNITY, OUR COMMUNITY.”
“What’s the point in dating a girl who looks like a guy? I don’t get it. You may as well just f*ck a dude...”

I once too internally struggled with answering this question. I suppose now after encountering it from 99% of my immediate social world, I like to think that I have it pretty damn down pat. Yes. I am attracted to masculinity. Just not so much to the self-entitled and misogynistic mindsets held by such a vast percentage of a certain societally privileged gender. But, hey, I know, #notallmen. Am I right?

In all seriousness though, like many, it took me a while to sit comfortably in my sexuality, or to figure it out at all for that matter. To navigate what I wanted, and who I desired.

My earliest sexual experiences were with men. Whilst I recognised that I was never really into “it”, it never occurred to me that I may have been queer. Queerness was not a possibility that I ever even entertained, and, well, within my socio-cultural context homosexuality was not a way of being that I was presented with or exposed to.

Heteronormative discourse wins again!

So, I lent myself to believing that I was someone who just wasn’t-that-into-sex. And, I was kinda ok with that. I mean, it’s not as if I yet knew what I was missing out on, besides, the validation and sense of accomplishment that I experienced after making a guy blow his load seemed like enough. What a good little girlfriend I was. I could put dinner on, and then suck a dick whilst it simmered. How’s that for time management!

Then, after four years of sexual mediocrity and the shame that followed each sexual encounter, I found myself on the dance floor of The Beat, mildly entertaining the notion that maybe, possibly, I was someone who just wasn’t-that-into-dudes. As I looked around though, still very much in the mindset that there was only one way to be and exist as a woman, I struggled to see myself navigating this space, too. My great plan of challenging my heterosexuality seemed to be washing down that infamous drain; in a sea of long hair, heels and glossed lips.

Disheartened and convinced that I would end up (staying) in a relationship with my purple Rabbit for the remainder of my life, I schlepped to the bar. I ordered a wet pussy shot (it was 2010, ok?), and flippantly attempted to make a joke about the one between my legs (I know, I know). If my intoxicated memory serves me correctly this was not met with enthusiasm by the bartender, contrarily, probs with an eye roll or two. Yeah good on ya, I’ve never heard THAT one before. There was a laugh from behind me, though and the words, I shit you not, “I can help you out with that”. I whipped around and felt like I had copped a roundhouse kick to the throat. I had laid eyes upon my first butch.

You know when people speak about climbing mountains in Tibet and how half way up they became enlightened and had an epiphany? Yeah, that happened to me whilst standing at the Cockatoo Bar in the middle of The Beat Megaclub.

My shoes sticking to the beer, and I’m sure vomit encrusted floor, I caught my breath. I picked my jaw up off that grimy floor and began engaging in some contrived, idle chitchat with...well, let’s call her butch # 1. Most likely in an attempt to shut me the fuck up, butch # 1 kissed me. I felt something that I had never felt before; butterflies and light-headedness. Although, the latter may well have been from the

“"I NOW UNDERSTAND THAT BEING ATTRACTED TO MASCULINITY AND BEING ATTRACTED TO MEN ARE TWO THINGS THAT CAN BE COMPLETELY EXCLUSIVE FROM EACH OTHER."
afore-mentioned wet pussy shot.
It felt like I was being kissed for the first time. Awakening. I remember thinking that if my shoes were not so stuck to the floor, I totes would have kicked a leg up. Ya know, ‘like in the movies’. Fast-forward five years and countless orgasms; I now openly and proudly identify as a butch-loving, queer femme.
I now understand that being attracted to masculinity and being attracted to men are two things that can be completely exclusive from each other.
I have uncovered my sexuality and like so many things in this world, she is fluid and constantly shifting. Evolving. Most importantly, I have discovered that I am a person who is indeed very much into-fucking-and-being-fucked…I was just looking, and licking, in the wrong pants.
If you had met me when I was young you would have said I was boy crazy. It was the softer boys –the ones who wore pressed shirts and combed their hair down gently across their foreheads –who made my knees buckle. I’d watch the apples of their cheeks push their glasses up the bridge of their nose as they’d smile, or admire their agility as they weaved the soccer ball around their opponents. These were not the boys who started fights or had dirt on their knees. I fell in love with their sweetness, with their lean, square shoulders and soft eyes. But this was before the girls around me shed the skin that had been forced upon them.

In my teenage years I caught my gaze drifting. Tomboys seemed to emerge around me in an almost holy revelation. By the beginning of high school, my lesbian identity had solidified. Still, coming out challenged the way I saw myself. I struggled with gender roles, even within the queer community. My own gender reflection went through the motions as I tried to find peace in being truly femme, truly myself, but invisible. Inside, I was still a shy adolescent girl, hoping to catch the eye of the boy I liked as we passed each other in the hallway at school. It was still the short cropped hair and boyish grins that made my heart pound; I was wholly enamoured with masculinity. But it was difficult to not feel as though I had to justify my attraction to it while affirming my sexuality and my gender expression. I grappled with myself, with the world around me, to be taken seriously.

As I grew older I fully embraced my love of butch women. I had been welcomed into the beautiful rituals of their world. I straightened tie clips and rolled shirt sleeves, watched as binders were pulled taut across chests. I’d run my fingers through the hair at the nape of their neck while they were driving, and feel the curve of their waist through a favourite baggy t-shirt. I’d blush, endlessly turned on by collections of sports bras and boxer briefs. It was in this worship that I discovered I was worthy of the same. For the first time I felt that wearing dresses and heels didn’t make me weak, that spending time on my hair and makeup didn’t make me vain. I was lauded for my femininity, encouraged by my counterparts.

There is something very powerful about the duality of masculine women. Delicate, yet strong. Beautiful and handsome. Empathetic but unfaltering. They are endlessly diverse, boldly defiant, shamelessly honest. It requires bravery to be their true selves, challenging what they are told they should be for the world around them and daring to live in a way that claims their lives as their own. I have so much admiration for these gorgeous women who steady me through my life, hold me while I sleep, and love me without constraint. In many ways they’ve shaped my world, but have also given me the strength to live in it.
Dear Butch,

This is complicated.

Today when I walked out into the street, several cis-men whistled, muttered and leered at me in ways that made me feel unsafe and threatened. This happens every day. Some days I pause in my doorway and wonder if it really is worth being in the world, because my version of brazen femme is so visible, and I will not tone it down and be less of myself, because in that 'compromise' I lose myself, and at least the other way I get to be me inside the fear.

Some weeks ago, I was sitting in my car at the lights, and an older butch woman started to cross the road in front of me. I was singing to the tune on the radio, mouthing lyrics, and she caught my eye and saw me, and saw Me queer, desiring, femme, Me. That jolt of recognition between us made me blush instantaneously, and she smiled to herself and kept walking across the road, this time with a little swagger. It made my day. I hope it made hers.

But we live in a world in which masculinity is privileged. Except when it’s queer. Or even when it’s queer. Or perhaps that’s the only way to be inside queerness when people see your body as female, or perhaps Butch isn’t connected to gender, or perhaps femininity is the only thing that’s visible or perhaps none of those things are true statements.

The first memory of recognising my sexuality was on a bus on my way home from school. I looked up at a pair of work-worn hands - strong, deft - and I blushed from the inside out. Academic, trapped inside books, I had no idea what I was feeling or what to do with it. Your hands still do that to me.

When I got older, I recognised my desire was connected to masculinity. But I didn’t know how to find it outside of the cis-men I wasn’t always sure how to love. Toxic versions of masculinity bombarded my body with need and want and what I felt and thought was hard to hold onto inside of that. The word ‘Bro’ still makes my blood run cold.

When I meet you, Butch, I do a quiet tango every time, looking for traces of the kinds of masculinities that deluge my body when I leave my house. Looking for a calm place to rest in amongst that pounding desire and entitlement that is so disconnected from my own wants.

Sometimes I feel like the place that I hold for you - loving, showing you the desire in my eyes - is the most important thing that I do with my love and my life. Sometimes, I wish I knew that you could hold that same space for me without a toxic masculinity leaking into the seams and damaging me with its sharp edges.

But I’m in love with you, again, and again, and it is starting to seem like I have no choice in the matter. But more importantly, I don’t want to change anything. My world is better and brighter and more full of colour when your eyes meet mine and you see me, and I see you.

“I recognised my desire was connected to masculinity. But I didn’t know how to find it outside of the cis-men I wasn’t always sure how to love.”
Recently, there are more and more spaces for femme-identified people to be together. Those places feel like a soft place to land amongst a world that is hard and brittle. These spaces are important, they find queerness in glitter and plum lipstick, and none of those things are the prerogative of femme people, but they are so sweet and so welcome.

I don’t define myself against you, Butch, because ‘Butch’ and ‘Femme’ might be connected in many ways, but the way that I found myself in the word Femme came to me in the final step through finally seeing supportive femme community a thing I had never known, that I still struggle to find. Being queer and femme and desiring and myself in the same breath was a barely-known privilege in my head then. And I never dreamed I’d find company.

So it’s complicated, Butch. Because there you are in privilege and un-privilege, always taken seriously, not seriously enough, and I know those things, but they are different for each of us. But this is a love story. Because I want to take your hand, and smile into your eyes, and kiss you in front of the haters like there is no one in the world but us two, and change the world in the process. And I need you to hold me like you would be held, and those spaces we hold can combine into pushing into the world to take space from the deluge.

The ways in which you are seen are important, Butch. The ways you are photographed. The ways in which your representations are in the world. All of them. But so are mine.

love,
a Femme.

Bianca Oliveira
24 months ago, my Facebook feed vomited up one of the most important posts it ever has to date. The post described a photography project, which had been created in a far away land. The photography project was BUTCH, and the photographer was Meg Allen. When I stumbled across this nugget of gold, I immediately knew that this project was going to affect me. For the first time in my life I had seen Masculinity in women celebrated, not denigrated. These women wore their masculinity with pride, not shame. The project was captivating.

Some time later I found myself chasing a girl up in Oakland CA, and whilst the brief romance didn’t work out, my time in the motherland sure as hell did. I met the wonderfully talented, passionate and generous Meg Allen. I was lucky enough to be photographed for the project, and although I didn’t know it then, “Butch is Not a Dirty Word” was born! Whilst in the final stages of this project, I thought what better way to wrap it up than where it all began. Without further adieu, I give you, an interview, with the creative brain behind BUTCH.

How and why did you get into photography?
Ah yes, I was in construction! It wasn’t what I had planned on doing after college but no one in my world was really encouraging about going into the arts. I had studied to be a writer, I used to love to write, but I realized that I didn’t love it enough to take such a financially unstable path. So I got myself into construction and learned how to be a carpenter. I loved it. I got to work with my hands, my body got stronger, and it was super fulfilling to see what was either created, or torn down, at the end of the day. There was not a lot of onsite bs, you either knew what you were doing or you didn’t. It was hard to be a female in such a male dominated trade, but eventually I earned the respect of my peers. I worked for a landscape firm after that, in a more secure management position. I made great money, had great benefits, yadda yadda, and stayed with it even though I hated my boss and the way the company ran. The main pull was wanting to practice my portraiture if I wanted to make some money. And, I wanted to use my butch friends to practice on, and explore how I might form and conceptualize my first body of work.

Has it changed as it has progressed?
Absolutely. It took me about 20 portraits to realize that what I liked most in showing the lives of each individual was how they lived. It was showing their environments, whether it was just a place they liked or their homes. Initially, I experimented with just photographing on a white background,
but I got rid of that really quickly. I found that photographing people in a much more dynamic background told a bigger story and was more interesting to me visually. I also was only interested in cataloguing the butch woman who identified as female and who hadn’t opted for top surgery. At first. But the more I explored my community, the more I realized that the butch identity wasn’t identical in many of my butch friends. So I opened myself to other definitions and for it to be more complex, perhaps, that I was allowing it to be. Especially with top surgery. So many butch women have had a long standing complicated relationship with their breasts that I couldn’t ignore some people’s decision to chop them off, but hold onto their butch identity. I realized it wasn’t for me to say who qualifies as butch. That’s when I really started to get some steam to catalogue every type of butch identified cis-female person I could find. And it became a really beautiful diverse identity that I could relate to even more than the black and white version that I had started with.

**What were some of the hurdles you had to overcome in order to get it off the ground?**

Haha, mostly convincing my friends to sit for me. Some were really excited, but some I had to really really persuade. But overall, my friends thought it was an interesting idea to bring butch imagery to the forefront of queer imagery. To celebrate the butch identity in a way that hadn’t been visible for a while. Also learning how to do portraiture, learning how to guide and direct my subjects. I had no idea what I was doing, so each session was really creatively intense for me. I was always asking the questions “who is this person?” “where is their best light?” “what is their best side?” “what is their most intriguing expression?” During our session I would try to answer those questions, always 100% aware that it was my opinion. So that was hard to trust. What makes my vision so good as to make these decisions? I had no answers. I still don’t. I just shoot what I like.

**What are some of the positive experiences you’ve had that have motivated you to continue?**

I think it is the experience of watching how my friends and community have related to these photographs. The first show I had was at the Lexington Club in San Francisco, which is the dyke bar that’s been there for the last 20 years. The space was PACKED with so many people. I mean it’s a small space, but I didn’t expect SO many people to be there. Every show I have am amazed by the fact that there is this huge audience that loves this project.

All my models come, they are awesome and super supportive and bring their family and friends. I love that my community feels seen. I love the emails I get from all over the place that thank me for just bringing the butch image to the limelight, that it makes them feel seen and celebrated as a person. It made me realize that this wasn’t just a “practice” body of work. It made me realize what a bubble I live in here in the bay area, there are butches everywhere so I just got used to it. I’d forgotten what a special place it continues to be as sort of a gay mecca for those who live in less inclusive places in the world.

There is a certain level of vulnerability that comes with presenting a body of work that explores complex subjects so publicly (particularly gender presentation and identification!). There is always the risk of criticism. How do you deal with negative feedback? Or with people’s whose views don’t necessarily align with your own?

That’s actually been easier to deal with. That’s the benefit of having been in this community for so long. I’ve learned that people who have negative things to say about butch women and female masculinity are usually people who are incredibly insecure with their own gender identity. Either that, or they are just incredibly ignorant that not everyone is like them or fits...
the mainstream socialized gender specifications. And it’s fine for everyone to have an opinion. I’m extremely grateful that I live in the time I live in. 50 years ago I’m sure I would have been thrown in the psych ward for just being a homo. But, the fact that this isn’t true for me in California doesn’t mean that it isn’t true for someone living in a more conservative political climate. This truth motivates me even more to get this work out into the world so those people don’t feel so alone in their communities. So that people realise that the world is very different in different places and that it continues to evolve.
Choosing Butch

Anonymous

If I was 10 years younger, I’d undoubtedly call myself genderqueer. Maybe I’d mess with pronouns a bit and probably change my name.

If I was 25 years younger, I might feel I’m in the wrong body. I’d want to wear my brothers’ clothes and tell everyone I was my mothers’ son, that she doesn’t have a daughter.

But I came up in a different time, where I was mistaken for a boy and felt the shame of it. Where I knew I wasn’t meant for dresses, but didn’t know what I was meant for. Except exclusion, awkwardness and a dread of formal occasions with pink dresses and peter pan collars.

Eventually though feminism, through some old school butches and femmes and an Arts degree, I settled on butch. I still feel the shame of that title, and I only use it round queers. Even then, some laugh uncomfortably when they hear it, as if to say “haven’t we moved past that?“.

Perhaps this generation has moved past it, in a world where trans issues are discussed publicly, where gender is queered rampantly and where everyone can self name and identify. But I, as them, am a product of my time and experience. And that leads me back to Butch.
BUTCH IS NOT A DIRTY WORD