

In the year or so before I began producing these pieces, I had reached a point in my work where I knew what I didn't want to do but hadn't yet found what I wanted to do. My work was changing but I still didn't feel it was where it needed to be.

One night in 1990 or 1991, after weeks of pestering, a friend took me to The Peel in Collingwood. In the 90s it hadn't closed its doors to women or heterosexuals who were gay friendly. Unlike heterosexual dance clubs and bars, it was also a venue where age was no barrier and I felt immediately at home. Sometime after 11pm or a little later, the crowd started to grow and the bar was suddenly studded with drag queens, who drew the crowds from the Commercial Road gay venues after they closed. I saw Dulcie and I knew pretty well immediately I wanted to work with him and that I had found the direction I was looking for. Dulcie was not quite convinced that a strange woman embroiderer who approached him in a bar late at night was going to produce anything serious but he humoured me and agreed to let me take some photos for a portrait. He was a great model and a great mentor and support to me throughout the whole project. Someone I was lucky to have met and someone I considered a friend.

As soon as I saw them, I loved everything about drag queens. Correctly or not, I saw them as men who were also women. I loved the make-up, the costumes, the creativity, the glamour, the fearlessness, the obligatory straw in a can of VB and the humour in general. By the time I completed the work for the 1994 show with Darren Knight Gallery in Smith Street, Fitzroy, several other visual artists were also doing portraits of Drag Queens. It was the year Priscilla came out, and it seemed the world couldn't embrace drag culture quickly enough.

From that first meeting in the early 90s, the next 5 or 6 years my life revolved around producing these pieces. Going to venues, hanging out, partying, going to community events and meeting people, taking photos for the portraits, sewing and eventually painting. It was my work and it was also my relaxation, if not the release I needed from the pressure of work. Everyone supported what I was doing and the people I asked to model for me were invariably generous with their time and patient with my requests. It was one of the pleasures and privileges of my life to be welcomed into this community.

Following the first show, for a number of reasons, I began screen printing the portraits and using a combination of paint and sewing as secondary elements. The work of sewing entire pieces became too exhausting and at the time I was unhappy with what I saw as the limitations of sewing on its own. In 1997, these pieces were shown at Darren's in Sydney.

25 years later, I never expected to be revisiting these works and this period of my life. My health has prevented me from continuing to work and also prevents me from being present to see the work in the gallery. It has been wonderful to look at everything again with fresh eyes.

Paul Hyland January 2023.