

ERICA MCKEEHEN

**BODY BREEZE EARTH:
2023 MFA PHOTOGRAPHY THESIS EXHIBITION**



DEPS ARTIST PROFILE SERIES

May 9 – May 20, 2023

BODY BREEZE EARTH: 2023 MFA PHOTOGRAPHY THESIS EXHIBITION

Body Breeze Earth presents the graduate thesis exhibitions of Jessica Hays and Erica McKeehen in Columbia College Chicago's Photography Department.

Jessica Hays presents pieces from two bodies of work, *The Sun Sets Midafternoon*, which combines image, text, and video to explore climate grief and solastalgia through the lens of wildfire, and *Horizon Line*, a monumentally scaled handmade artist book rooted in experiences of reverence and appreciation for the land while recognizing it as both open and divided concurrently.

Erica McKeehen (who performs as Greta-X) combines imagery from her long-term portraiture projects *Secret Mermaid* and *REVEAL*, which profile McKeehen's close friends and fellow burlesque performers and sex workers, *Secret Mermaid* and *Kitty Tornado* (respectively), alongside her own self-portraits in *Days of Rust*, to present nuanced views of femme sexuality, autonomy, and experience.

Body Breeze Earth: 2023 Photography MFA Thesis Exhibition is presented in conjunction with the Department of Exhibitions, Performance, and Student Spaces (DEPS) and the Photography Department. These projects were partially funded by The Albert P. Weisman Award, a private trust of Columbia College Chicago. The printing of the photographs in this exhibition was made possible with the generous support of Hahnemühle.

ERICA MCKEEHEN

Although photography's highly descriptive nature can foster deeper understanding and compassion for others, it can also perpetuate reductive portrayals that further harm, rather than help, entire communities.

Motivated to share sex workers' perspectives and lived experiences, I create self-portraits and collaboratively photograph my peers who navigate a range of roles within the sex industry, combining images with written narratives inspired by our conversations. I also document the resurgence of live burlesque in Chicago to offer a contemporary, insider view into the nocturnal life of a charged artform that continues to challenge the status quo 150 years after it was first introduced in America.

My entry into sex work began when I started performing burlesque in 2017. Many burlesquers, like me, work in other roles within the broader sex industry. Debuting in 1868, burlesque shows were the first stage productions to feature stripping as part of live performance, and as such, burlesque is the original form of adult entertainment, pre-dating the now-abundant amount of sex depicted in magazines, film, and the Internet. My consideration of burlesque as sex work acknowledges its vital role in the history and evolution of sex on stage—and speaks to the reality that burlesque performers oftentimes also take on additional vocations. Yet, sex workers navigate what is known as the “whorearchy,” which reinforces that certain types of work are more socially acceptable (i.e., burlesque) than others (i.e., stripping or escorting). Regardless of their specific trades, sex workers of all kinds can face communal discrimination and abuse when their vocations are known.

My work expands representation of sex workers and strengthens visibility for those, especially femmes, who are often villainized for expressing sexual autonomy instead of recognized as active agents making their own choices regarding pleasure and occupation. In embracing a multitude of image-making styles including intimate portraiture and documentary, my work presents larger, more complex portrayals of individuals in sex work that encourage deeper understanding and open conversation about their lives.

Erica McKeehen (b. 1987) is an American artist who was raised on Coca-Cola and rock n' roll in Bucyrus, Ohio. She relocated to Chicago in 2010 and hasn't looked back since. McKeehen is a local burlesque performer and producer alongside her visual practice. She received her BS from Ohio University, her MA in Arts Management from Columbia College Chicago, and she is currently an MFA candidate at Columbia College Chicago. She also works as a Curatorial Assistant at the Museum of Contemporary Photography and as a Graduate Student Instructor in the Photography Department.

Website: <http://www.ericamckeehen.com>

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Bordel (from Secret Mermaid), 2022, archival print, 8" x 12"



Cover Me (from *REVEAL*), 2022, archival print, 19" x 13"



Hair Dye (Self-Portrait), 2021, archival print, 19" x 13"



Here Lately (Self-Portrait), 2021, archival print, 19" x 13"



Gone Tomorrow (Self-Portrait), 2021, archival print, 19" x 13"



Kitty and Greta (from REVEAL), 2022, archival print, 19" x 13"



Size 5 and ½ (from *Secret Mermaid*), 2022, archival print, 12" x 8"



The Morning Sun, It Want to Know Where You Go (from REVEAL), 2022, archival print, 13" x 19"



These Dreams (from *Secret Mermaid*), 2022, archival print, 19" x 13"

INTERVIEW WITH ERICA MCKEEHEN

Conducted by Sierra Delamarter

Sierra Delamarter: Your work largely deals with sex work and the burlesque scene here in Chicago. What drew you to this scene, and what inspired you to create an art practice surrounding it?

Erica McKeehen: My involvement in burlesque and ultimately sex work at large began when I started collaborating with my now best friend, Katina (Kitty Tornado). She was in a relationship with my coworker David at Starbucks (I was a store manager for five years before grad school... and David is now her husband!), and she was taking burlesque classes and performing locally. When Katina and I met and became friends, I began making portraits of her as a performer per her request for costumed images. I also started going to her burlesque shows, which were transformative and provocative and immediately persuaded me to start taking classes of my own. I didn't have a performance, dance, or theatre background, but after taking thirteen classes, I performed regularly as part of a showgirl ensemble with Katina and others until COVID forced venues to close for over a year.

At the time I was in grad school for Arts Management (I graduated from the MA program at Columbia College Chicago in 2021) and I endeavored to research, curate, and make work about local burlesque while in my performance hiatus because I still wanted to contribute to the local scene in my own way. I was motivated to expose local burlesque to the Columbia community because I found so much power and rich content inherent in it—mostly in all the multi-talented femmes of diverse presentations and backgrounds that made up the scene. Many burlesque performers also navigate a range of roles within the broader sex industry as skills cultivated in sexual performance are transferrable to other lucrative trades, thus my work deals broadly

with sex work, and I consider burlesque a branch of that tree (especially as burlesque shows were the original strip clubs and were sought-out sources of adult entertainment).

In arts management, I researched and curated a photo-based exhibition profiling some prolific local performers. I took everything one step further when I decided to immediately pursue an MFA in Photography at Columbia at the conclusion of my Arts Management degree. My undergraduate degree was in commercial photography, and while I've never felt a kinship to making advertising imagery, I have always been drawn to portraiture, and undergrad provided me with that foundation. After a long break from undergrad (12 years in food service management) coupled with the exposure to Columbia's Photo MFA program via the photo electives I took while in the Arts Management program and my position as Curatorial Assistant at the Museum of Contemporary Photography—I applied and was accepted into the program in the fall of 2021. I knew that I wanted to make visual work leveraging my personal experience in sex work, and I knew that I was passionate about making portraits of my community to expand representation of femmes who are often villainized for expressing sexual autonomy.

My journey cultivating an entire practice (visual, curatorial, and performance) around sex work has been relatively brief in the span of a lifetime—roughly six years—but it runs deep and is constantly changing. For example, in the past four months that Katina and I have been curating and producing our own monthly burlesque show, I've noticed my visual work has become more complex in response. And while I would say that my work explores topics like burlesque and sex work, ultimately it is about femme experience, community, and friendship.

INTERVIEW CONTINUED

SD: Your show has a large self-portrait element to it, as it deals with your experiences in sex work and burlesque as Greta-X. Could you speak about how your experiences have shaped your body of work and inspired your photography?

EM: In these images, I am exploring my interests in the performative nature of burlesque as sex work as well as the powerfully transformative powers of sex work and sexual performance for those who have experienced bodily traumas and struggles with their sense of autonomy. I show myself as a shifting, changing single woman (in preparation, dying my hair; or at ease, made-up for an evening client) within the solitude of my modest city apartment.

My intention is to create work that facilitates deeper understanding, and critical conversations about sex workers by leveraging photography's descriptive nature to illuminate others, as well as expanding representation of sex workers that ultimately shapes societal perceptions. Drawing from my own experience, I create self-portraits in color and black and white and combine them with photographed relics of my living space to present a nuanced view of femme experience. My experiences in sex work, and with my body, are reflected upon within my private interiority, which highlights the complicated and VERY internal impact sex work has on self-image and self-conception.

Further, I am drawn to exploring my roles in sex work and sexual performance with a camera because they, like image-making, foster unique risk-taking opportunities and create space for all identities and bodies to be fully seen. Within the rich community of sex work, I discover and work to reveal the vital narratives I endlessly encounter—including my own, as I entangle them in time.

SD: While in Spain, you explored the local burlesque scene in Madrid. How was it similar or different compared to Chicago? Did it change or inspire any new ideas in your art practice?

EM: Last summer, I was able to travel to Spain with funds from the Stuart Abelson Graduate Research Fellowship at Columbia and reconnect with Katina and her husband David, who were living in the coastal town of Alumencar. After my visit, they decided to move back to Chicago, and Katina and I have worked fervently alongside each other ever since, collaborating for my visual practice and as co-creators and co-producers of our local burlesque show in Ukrainian Village called Lust for Life.

While traveling solo in Madrid, I connected with several local performers who invited me to photograph their small productions. One particular show held in the back of a dive bar made me ask myself, "Why am I not doing this?" The DIY spirit of the scene in Madrid is similar to the one in Chicago. The performers are diverse and so the show offerings are too. Mostly, after leaving Madrid, I was determined to brainstorm with Katina about a show of our own (assuming she was eventually moving back to Chicago). We developed the show theme and name while we were still traveling together abroad. Spain brought us together—and it sort of made everything happen.

SD: REVEAL is a show that "resists voyeurism and spectacle." Why are the conversations around bodily autonomy, sexuality, and creative comradery so important when it comes to sex work and burlesque?

EM: Growing up in a conservative, rural community without easy access to arts institutions, from an early age I developed a fond fascination with glamorous icons in film

INTERVIEW CONTINUED

and music. When I trace the origins of these obsessions, I recall my private infatuations with how famous women like Monroe and Madonna proudly authored their own bodies and flaunted their overt sexualities on screen and in print. While family members looked on discouragingly, shaming them for “dressing and acting like whores,” I questioned the taboo surrounding their images and aspired to the fearlessness and self-assurance they displayed in their crafts.

Although photography’s descriptive nature can illuminate others, it can also perpetuate reductive portrayals that further harm, rather than help entire communities. Throughout visual culture, sex workers have historically been portrayed as a group of unnamed, naked, and shamed people—disguised, masked, or abstracted from view—or, as oppressed, damaged individuals living in the fringes of society, in need of being saved. Photographs of sex workers function as conversations that shape societal attitudes and behaviors toward sex workers. Likewise, policies impacting their safety and livelihood are decided by individuals who have likely seen a litany of depictions. Yet, sex workers navigate what is known as the “whorearchy,” which reinforces the idea that certain types of work are more socially acceptable (i.e., burlesque) than others (i.e., stripping or escorting).

Regardless of their specific trades, sex workers of all kinds can face communal discrimination and abuse when their vocations are known, and images of them can perpetuate oppressive attitudes and behaviors. In my work I portray (with care) sex workers expansively to counter transgressive, reductive portrayals; and I celebrate aspects of their lives and livelihoods in ways that resonate within the sex work community.



THE DEPS ARTIST PROFILE SERIES

The DEPS Artist Profile Series presented by Columbia College Chicago's Department of Exhibitions, Performance and Student Spaces (DEPS), is a virtual publication on select artists involved with the DEPS Galleries and the Columbia College Chicago community. Our goal with this series is to connect artist and viewer on a deeper level, and to highlight the amazing works and thoughts of our featured artists through interviews, artist biographies, and catalogs of work. Art has always been a way to connect with others, no matter where one may physically be. We hope by presenting the creativity and insights of the people involved in the DEPS Artist Profile Series that viewers may have one more way to stay in touch with and support the arts community. The DEPS Artist Profile Series is managed by DEPS Exhibitions Assistant Rachel Manlubatan and Sierra Delamarter. Graphic design is also managed by DEPS Exhibitions Assistant Rachel Manlubatan. This program is partially supported by a grant from the Illinois Arts Council Agency.

Learn more at: colum.edu/deps

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