

*LEGENDS,
STATEMENTS
& STARS*





LIFE IS A BALL

Identity has always been at the center point of human existence. Ever since the formulation of language by the homo sapiens -and therefore the formation of societies- humankind has always dealt with a conundrum that hasn't yet found a solution: who are we and why are we here?

From the cave paintings in Europe -Spain and France specifically- to the human-centrist worldviews from the Renaissance, artistic expression has always proven to be the most faithful resource when it came to the questioning and answering of the beforementioned enigma. It is not uncommon then to think of sexuality as a big part of this equation.

As a gay, cis-gender man living in a modern world, I have also questioned myself on these topics, and identity has been there, pulsating and flinching in the back of my mind. To think of the past is also to think of the present, and eventually the future.

2007 was the year when I came of age with my sexuality, and it was then when I started to explore identity as a continuum and as a tool for further knowledge about the society that raised me and my place within it.

While reading about the early days of the LGBTQ+ community and its fight for freedom and equality I came across this documentary from 1991 called "Paris is Burning" (directed by Jeannie Livingston), a cornerstone of queer representation in mass culture, but further than that, a compelling narrative that portrayed bluntly and intimately a community in crisis, surrounded by poverty and danger but nonetheless, a community that enjoyed the gay things in life and which celebrated identity in a different and innovative manner.

The "ballroom scene" in its heyday was mainly dominated by the black queer community of New York in the 1980s when social oppression obliged everyone who challenged the status quo to hide. Black kids who were kicked out of their homes for being gay, transgender men and women who struggled to make a dime, misfits and misunderstood individuals were the stars of the "balls" (which now are called "kikis") and it became a phenomenon then brought to the spotlight by Madonna's 1990 "Vogue" anthem. Suddenly the whole world had its eyes on the same subjects it rejected. Thirty years after, this phenomenon is coming back to life thanks to the acceptance the LGBTQ+ has had over the years and all the representation it is having in pop culture (with TV shows such as "Pose" or "RuPaul's Drag Race").

Growing up in Panama, a country known for its skyscrapers and beautiful beaches, but not so much for its social and economic disparity, it was a much more complicated process to explore identity and questions about gender and sexuality.

When I moved to Montreal, I promised myself to explore all of these unknown aspects I never had in Panama as a gay man. Little did I know that two other Panamanians who were also in Montreal were at the forefront of this ebullient scene that hasn't been here for too long (the first "kiki ball" in Montreal was held in 2017), but that will stick around for years to come.

Brian and Gala, both born in Panama but who now call Montreal home, opened the doors to their world to me, they invited me to dance rehearsals and to parties, they introduced me to new people and let me explore all the things I couldn't, and that is what this project is about: new perspectives, explorations, and questionings.

Black and white seemed like a viable decision, at least for this occasion. A monochromatic and classical approach referenced Livingstone's documentary and also the work of photography giants such as Burt Glinn, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Garry Winogrand, Richard Avedon, and Philip-Lorca DiCorcia, to name a few.

As many things in life, black and white represents the two extremes: the yin and yang, light and shadow, truth or lie, good or evil, left or right, equality or injustice. And it was through this contrast that I found the perfect technique to register magic in dance, performance, and theatrics.

Street-photography was also a huge inspiration for this project. Its portrayal of the common, with humor and honesty, felt just right, something well explained by Katherine Bussard in her book *Unfamiliar Streets: The Photographs of Richard Avedon, Charles Moore, Martha Rosler, and Philip-Lorca DiCorcia*, "Street photography unites visual contrast, ironic juxtapositions, and lively vantage points."

It all concocted the perfect plateau for my project, a study of a community and the way it celebrates life and identity, but also how it counteracts rejection and oppression, even in 2019.

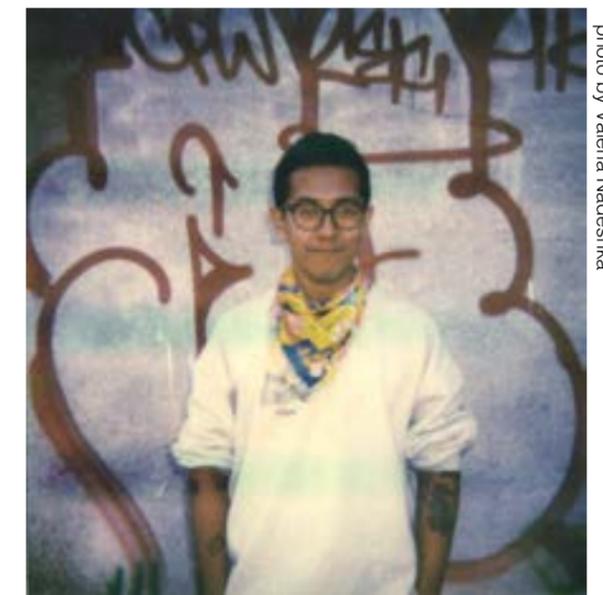


photo by Valeria Nadeshka

THE KIKI'S ABC

Deeply rooted in respect to its heritage, a big part of the ballroom/kiki scene's campy candor has to do with its vocal expressions and therefore jargon. "Fem Queen", "chop", and even a word as pedestrian as "walk" are some of the terms you will surely hear at a ball — some of these still holding their original meanings while others not, whether because of natural language evolution or as consequence of cultural appropriation.

In this quick — but fabulous — guide we will go over some of these words, concepts, categories and terms that will make you understand a little bit better what these queens are all about when onstage, on the TV or at brunch.

This is "The Kiki's ABC":

Butch Queen: is a category in ballroom that is for competitors to look and act 'heterosexual' enough to blend in.

Fem Queen: a category just for transgender women where, almost on the same line as the previous category, contestants are required to look as feminine as possible to camouflage in society as cisgender women.

Trans Men: referring to a transgender male — and only transgender — that can actually "pass" as a male.

Drags: a male who cross-dresses in women's attires and presents as female.

Female Figure: basically any trans and/or cisgender woman, and drag queens.

Vogue Performance: first of all, vogue is a style of dance that originated in Harlem in the '70s behind bars when queer black and Latino inmates would play

imitating the poses and photos seen in fashion magazine such as Vogue, the one who could 'serve the look' better would be the winner. Along with the shape the subculture gained, rules and requirements have been attached, therefore, a vogue performance is a performance that requires the elements of voguing: hands, catwalk, duckwalk, floor performance, spins, and dips.

Walk: having the courage to get on stage and face a table of judges and the crowd's stare and actually 'walk' a category.

Tens: the maximum qualification given in a category by the judges. If you get "10s across the board" you will go onto the next round of the competition.

Chop: the most horrible feeling in the world, just kidding, it just means being cut from a category, which, seen from a positive perspective means space for improvement but at the same time not going onto the next round.

Best Dressed: work that Grace-Coddington-genius and assemble the best — and most ostentatious — look and let everyone gagging.

Runway: you know that Beyoncé song where she goes "do the Naomi Campbell walk"? Well, exactly what Beyoncé said but onstage, in front of the judges. There are many sub-categories within "Runway" but that we will talk later.

Realness: how well you can blend into a group that's not yours, meaning the ability to blend in with heterosexuals in society as someone queer, trans or drag.

Ballroom: is a fascinating scene that through fashion, art, theatrics, dance, etc. speaks of race, gender and sexual orientation within society. Ballroom is also competition. Individuals (and collectives) perform different categories to achieve prizes and/or legacies.

Kiki: it's the junior version of the mainstream ballroom scene in terms of how low-key it functions, sometimes inciting just dancing and friendly competition. It is more focused on a community and the events are often organized and promoted by up-and-coming (as well as more established) members of the scene. It also denotes how new a scene can be.

Sex Siren: as many mouths as you can make water, the better. The name of the category says it all. Some people strip all of their clothes (yes, all) others go Demi Moore in Striptease or Magic Mike XXL.

Body: this category judges body structure. Wins the person who's more defined. But again, in this one, we are judging solely the body, not how sensual the individual is.

Bizarre: contestants are judged on their creativity to design a certain costume based on a specific category. Try to bring the most bizarre and out-of-this-world look to secure your tens — just make sure everything's glued well because a garment that's falling apart is a total faux-pas.

Face: think Ancient Greece and their classical beauty, nombre d'Or and all. Judges as asked to examine the structure of eyes, nose, teeth, lips and the overall structure of the façade. You are expected to not wear heavy make-up and still look flawless.

Runway (European): just like Pat Cleveland in the 70s, this sub-category within the "Runway" category demands flamboyant catwalk and may feature outfits and exaggeration often seen at a European fashion show. It's all about selling the femininity.

Runway (All American): in contrast to the previous one, American Runway wants to sell masculinity with a more stoic walk.

Battle: it's when a performer challenges another in and out of the ball.

Family: the organization within a house. Traditional organizations were led mostly by fathers or mother but modern structures go all the way as to having godmothers, uncles, cousins and so on.

Houses: the organization within the ballroom community, often led by a mother or father and provides resources, advice and, back in the day, shelter to its members.

Legends, Statements, and Stars (LSS): the first part

of a ball where the most prominent figures of a scene are called onstage to warm up and demonstrate how it's done.

Tea: the gossip. When your girlfriend goes home with a boy and you meet her the next day and ask her, "Girl, what's the tea?"

To Serve/Serving: bring-ing it 100%. Just you succeeding in life.

Clocked: thrown to dismay or called to attention. E.g.: "You need to clock Rebecca for that dress before we leave the house. Everyone's gonna laugh at her."



Two contestants battling during the "Body" category.

BRIAN MÉNDEZ



The poster boy of Montréal's "kiki ballroom scene" is not just a boy with a goal but also an inspiration to many other kids who look for a sense of belonging in an evolving dance community.

It is a cold November afternoon, the Sun has already set and Brian makes his way through the people with poise and delicacy, while engulfed in what could be seven layers of clothes.

Born and raised in Montréal, his Latin roots come from tropical Panama. He speaks French, English, and Spanish perfectly, but we are not here to talk about his language skills, we are here to talk about dance. "I always got inspired by dance, by movements, by gay icons. I remember clearly when I was little and saw the Spice Girls for the first time, it was a moment in life. I was like 'oh shit, I want to do that. I want to do that with a clique, with friends and be celebrities. But I was getting bullied a lot in school, so I always cared too much about my public persona and started to suppress my true self. It wasn't until my twenties when I started to officially dance."

While Brian's story is a bit different from the ones that founded the ballroom scene back in its heyday in the 1980s when kids were getting kicked out of their homes for being queer, transgender women and men had to rely on prostitution and drug dealing to make ends meet as a result of the lack of job opportunities and the discrimination towards black —queer— people were the everyday norm, we have to acknowledge rejection as the principal motor behind the escapism that dancing became for the majority of queers in the kiki ballroom community —Brian included. "I am a huge gamer and I used to play that game called Dance Central on the Xbox. It's a game



where they show you some choreography that you have to then repeat perfectly to get all the points and win. I was obsessed and that was it for me. At first, it was hip-hop, dancehall —urban stuff you know— but I always knew there was something more to it so I enrolled in L'École de Danse Contemporain. I was doing contemporary all day and then at night, I would go to this session that we had here back in the day at Espace Sans Luxe. We had a two-hour weekly practice every week for two hours, so we would smoke a joint, drink a coffee and spend two hours training hard, very hard."

But school was not enough for Brian, there had to be more to it. Luckily for him, the world was keeping up with the social undercurrent of queer theory and the media's portrayal of voguing exploded when US reality show America's Best Dance Crew cast its first voguing crew, "there was Leiomy [Maldonado], Dashaun [Williams], Devon "Pony" Webster, Prince Miyake Mugler... a lot of dancers who are icons now. I watched their first performance and I was like, 'what the fuck is that gay dance?' It was very intimidating—I was even hating it at first, but now that I see it from a different perspective it was more envy than hate. I wanted to do what they were doing so badly but there was no voguing here in Montréal, I steadily started training myself, slowly watched a lot of



Some of Brian's children getting ready for the show. The sense of community is seen everywhere.

clips. I learned the basic elements, I learned how to dip before it was even a thing. Suddenly, this girl, NC Prodigy, came to Montréal to give a class. It became a drug. Then, Gerard [Reyes] —who goes to Berlin all the time—started teaching and giving classes every week, he became my mentor in this world. Him and Wayne [McLaughlin]."

When the time was right, the first kiki ball disrupted into the scene in 2017. Brian, along with Gerard and Wayne, were there at the frontline.

With time, Brian now is a mother of the House of Disney. His role shifted from just a dancer to a leader of the pack. With eight kids under his wing, his responsibilities are different and more complex nowadays: "My job is that my kids are really educated and get to really know about the scene, the rules, and the history. What people don't realize is that when you walk a category in a ball you are not representing yourself but the House you belong to, that's why I'm always trying to make them the more confident that they can be."

When asked if he thinks being a queer young person is one of the main reasons he first got attracted to the scene, Brian enthusiastically affirms that to him, his marriage with dance and vogue is a thing of destiny. "I believe that in life when you give love and support, some type of energy is given to you back. So probably because of the fact that I really, really wanted to do and have that [voguing and create a community for itself] then life made it work. I did all my best and now I'm a mother, I have danced with people I admired for so long [during Fierté Montréal, Ciara invited him and his crew to dance with her onstage] and I am now a reference for other dancers and queers. Everything was supposed to be like this."

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Brian teaches urban and voguing techniques every Tuesday at Emotion (1483 Mont-Royal) at 7PM, and at Urban Element (7577 St Hubert) every Wednesday at 8PM.





GALA SIRIANO



Gala's journey started a long time ago in Panama. Before moving to Montréal she was a popular fixture in the Panama drag scene. She participated in beauty pageants and performance contests in gay bars and became the talk of the town because of her natural beauty and sweet personality.

In 2003 Gala packed her bags and moved 4000Km up north away from with the purpose of a better future, one where she couldn't face the discrimination and rejection normally experienced at the time in Panama [homosexuality was illegal until 2008].

She started working actively and saved enough money to be the woman she was always meant to be, and with it also came a new family and community that supported her throughout her transition. "My family in Panama was always very supportive. I have to thank a lot for that. Transgender women have always been the most vulnerable letter in the LGBTQ+ acronym and it has taken us a lot of time to realize that. Nowadays, we can have a decent life with job opportunities and space for progress, especially here in Montréal where sexual diversity is such an important thing."

Her insertion into the "kiki ballroom scene" was not on her books—it was more of a fortuitous happening. "A

friend invited me to this party that everyone was talking about. When I got there it was crazy: drag queens and queer people all over the place dancing and performing. It's a weird thing because in my everyday life I am quite pensive and introspective—I am not an attention magnet to say so—but when I saw that stage, the lights; when I heard the pumping of the bass and the MC calling the categories it was like a transformation for me. I became Gala at that very moment. It felt completely natural to walk onstage, with zero preparation and expectations. Nobody knew me at the time so it was a huge surprise that I went home winning the category [Beauty, one of Gala's fortes]."

Like anything in life, not everything is about winning. She went back a second time, this time she had the



Fashion category in her eye but she got chopped, "The judges disqualified me and it was the most horrible thing I've ever experience. You have this adrenaline rush that comes with performing but you then face failure, it crushes your heart. But it was a big lesson for me: I wasn't aware of all the rules that exist within ballroom culture, when you're walking Fashion, for example, you have to have certain items included in your look: a bag, a gown, jewelry, etc."

Relentlessly, Gala kept going to the balls where she is now expected and respected. "If there is one thing kiki ballroom scene has taught me is to never rely just on



my beauty. And that confidence is not a given when you have a pretty face. Confidence is something you gotta hone, like a plant, you have to water it in order to grow flowers." And it's this sense of identity the biggest prize Gala has ever won over the years of being part of this community—also, love.

Met in a practice, Rene and Gala have been together for more than a year. They share a house, a life and a dog called Georgie. They are part of the same House [of Siriano] and share the kind of the same journey—Rene is also a transgender man.

But what does it mean to be a part of a family in modern day times? "We get together every week to practice, we catch up and hang out. And like, whenever I need help with the look I'm preparing I can always message Wayne [McLaughlin] or some of the other members of the House to consult with them what they think. There's always space for improvement."

I cannot help to ask about the intersectionality of the scene here in Montréal, where the majority of the participants and well as the crowd are white. "The voguing scene has a big history with cultural appropriation. When Madonna released her 1991 hit the scene was all over the place because like it or not,



she appropriated it. But it's a complex thing when more than the half of the city is white. And I'm happy to share with them my culture, my community and somehow my struggle, but there are so many black queer people in Montréal who are still being discriminated. It's just not fair. What we need here in Montréal is to keep growing this feeling of community so every single person feels welcomed and able to be at their higher potential. Whether black, Latino, First Nation or whatever culture you are from, you are always going to find love and support in the 'kiki scene'. Yes, it is a competition—a ruthless one sometimes—but what I've learned with my time walking categories and helping others is that if you see it from a positive perspective, competition is the best excuse to better yourself and to keep perfecting your skills. We live in a time when being queer is no longer a crotch, so we need to use this opportunity to make the world a better place for everyone."

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