

IN CONVERSATION WITH: LEO ADEF

Chris Erik Thomas

Queer history can't exist solely through memory if it is to thrive. It needs to be documented. It needs historians fully immersed in the culture they are capturing, whose own struggles and triumphs mirror those of the community they're intertwined with. For Barcelona's LGBTQ community, one such historian is Leo Adef. Since moving to the Spanish city from Buenos Aires nearly a decade ago, they have become a fixture in the community. They have woven their way through dark, crowded clubs and sun-drenched afterparties with a camera almost always at their side, and they have diversified the nightlife scene through the queer collective MARICAS since co-founding it in 2018.

While the small mountain of videotapes and archive of photographs cataloguing their queer community are important, their talents behind the lens have also led to a body of work shown in film festivals and exhibitions around the world. What began as a means of processing the repressed sexuality and the forced masculinity they endured as a child in Argentina has become a vessel for their exploration into themes of identity, sex, and youth culture. They have documented unrequited love and burgeoning sexual identity, and crafted music videos that see hypermasculinity melt down into hedonistic orgies.

Last summer, as the pandemic eased enough to travel, they flew to Berlin to film members of the city's ballroom community for the brand Klarna, but decided to stay a week longer to produce their own personal documentary as well. In the film, called SAFE, the cast of queer, Black ballroom performers discuss community, beauty, oppression, and self-love as Adef's camera captures every moment. There are scenes of impromptu vogue battles on rooftops as the skyline glitters behind them, and moments of them huddled up in flats, free to be themselves away from the prying – and judgemental – eyes of the city. It's a raw, beautiful portrait of a community that is used to being on the outskirts, and it is the perfect encapsulation of what has made their work so vital.

In mid-March, as they packed away their flat for a move across town and put the finishing touches on their first book of photography, we sat down to talk about the evolution of their career, finding new ways to celebrate their community in the midst of a pandemic, and how they stay motivated to keep creating art.

When did you first start documenting things? How old were you?

LA: I remember using a camera since I was a child. I used to do videos with my family and friends. There was a breaking point when I moved from Buenos Aires to Barcelona; I discovered that I could choose what I want to portray. It also helped me a lot in trying to find my identity and to experiment with new things. I remember that before fucking a guy for the first time, it took me a lot of time to get out of the closet. I first started taking photos of guys, and then I let myself experiment with that, so photography is also a tool that I have to meet new people. For the book, I met people I wouldn't have had an intimate moment with in a different moment. With the excuse of the book, it's also a tool that I have to do things that, apart from the work, helps me in my personal life.



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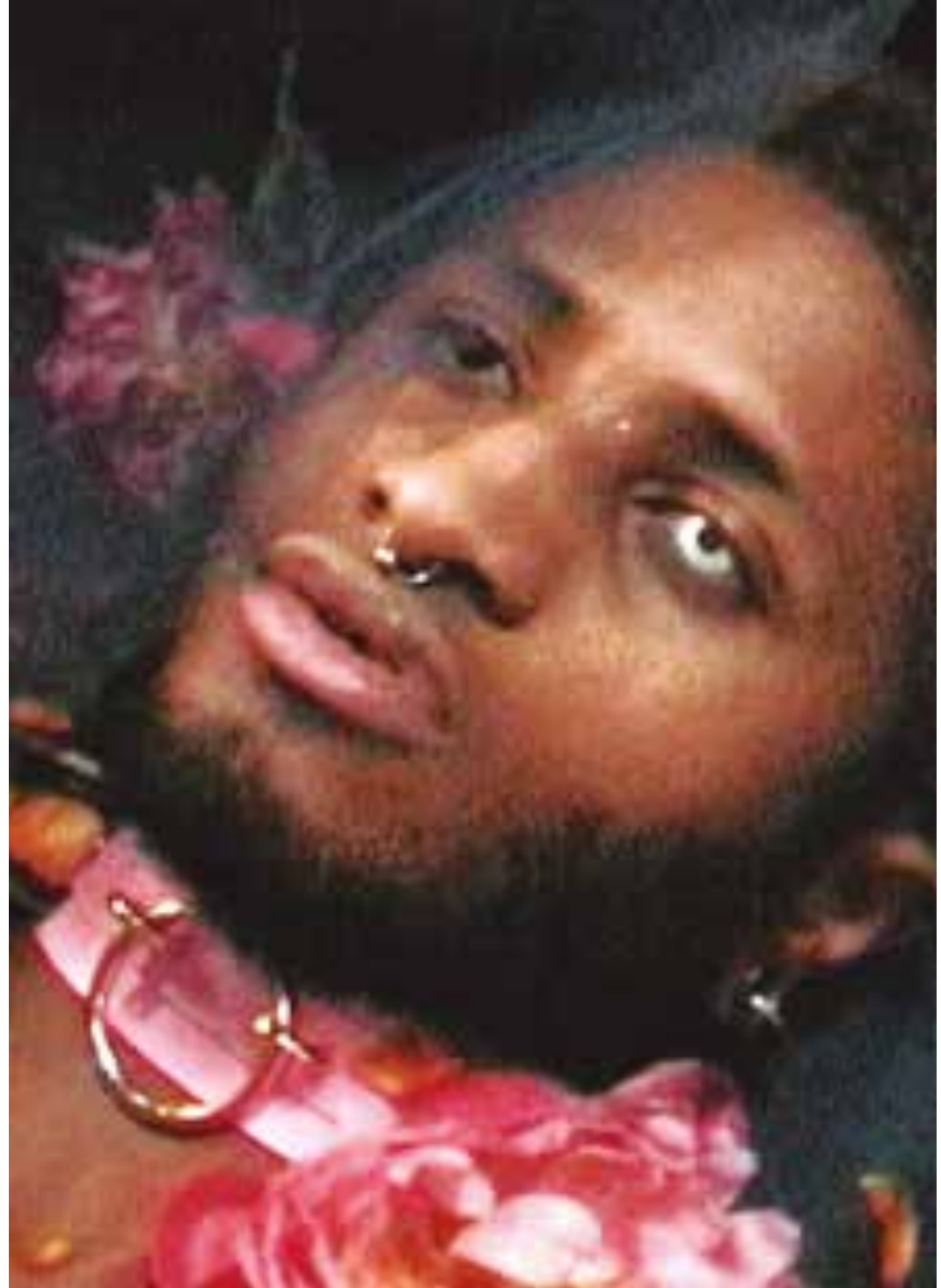
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Leo Adef, Illustration, 2021, Jü Storäi



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Do you feel quite shy outside of your work?

LA: I was shyer before, but my work has helped me. The shyness was more about not knowing who I am rather than something social. When I became more confident of who I am, what I do, and my ideas, that helped me a lot with my communication and relationships.

I grew up in a Jewish ghetto in Buenos Aires, so until I was 18 or 19-years-old, I hadn't met any different people or queer people. So before moving to Barcelona eight years ago, it wasn't me. It was me following the norms, being the kind of person that you have to be. From the moment I moved to Barcelona, it was an explosion of experimenting and discovering things.

You've been in Barcelona for eight years now. What changes have you seen in your work over this period?

LA: Four years ago, I met a queer community for the first time and became a part of it. As I was growing and meeting these people, it transferred to my work. I was doing an exercise during the pandemic where I made a PDF of my work for every year since I moved to Barcelona. I figured out that I was growing in the things that I showed and the people I portray. It's always evolving. I'm so happy to make this book that, as I told you, is like closing a stage of my life. I'm excited to start another stage and figure out what is going to come next.

You made a documentary last year called SAFE about the ballroom scene in Berlin. What was the process of putting that together during the pandemic like?

LA: That project started as a collaboration for Klarna. It was really cool because I had been stuck here in Barcelona, and now I could work in Berlin. I like the city, and it's difficult for me to find projects for brands that are not against my ideas or are about the people I want to portray, so this worked. I did this project for the brand, but then I stayed a week longer there portraying these characters so I could make a more personal and interesting piece, besides the one-minute piece for Klarna.

It's a really intimate documentary. What was the process of filming like? Especially during the pandemic?

LA: I was there four or five days shooting every day. It was also very interesting because I have my queer community here with the collective MARICAS, who I have been working on a documentary with for the last three years. It was cool to work on the same thing, but in a different context in a different place. The same things are happening everywhere, but with different voices or with different stories. In the end, the feeling is the same.

Was that the first project you had done since the pandemic started?

LA: I shot a small music video in the first part of the pandemic, but that was something really small in my house, trying to create something. At that moment, we were trying to make things at home, but SAFE was my first project with the possibility of creating something in different places with a team. So much of your work happens through meeting people. How did the pandemic change the way you create work?

LA: Part of my work and part of my life was meeting people, going out, and organizing MARICAS parties. So it changed a lot. Not in a bad way, but it changed. I still miss going out and discovering new people in crazy places, but I think it also helped me stop with that loop. It's also a loop. I want to do it again, but I like that it stopped, and I'm not just doing the same things.



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Definitely. For me, living in Berlin, the party cycle was very real. You spend your weekdays recovering and your weekends going out. How has your work shifted now that you can't create art through the nightlife scene?

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LA: It helped me because, for example, a lot of times that I went out, I would go with my camera and I was also creating or organizing things. Being alone here at home has helped me to process all the material. I have more than 100 tapes of footage. The pandemic helped me to process that and to watch it, and be more calm.

That's also how the book started because the photos are frames from my video camera that I shot while documenting these things. It helped me to process and create something from that, and also to finish a stage. It's a stage of using that camera and doing that work. It's the first time that I'm doing an object; when I'm doing videos or editorials, it's a link or a magazine or something that. The pandemic helped me make an object from all of the stuff I've been shooting without purpose. When I was filming, I didn't know what it would be; I did it just because I wanted to. Over the last year, it took this form of a book, and I'm happy with it.

The book is made up of pieces from many different projects, but I'm curious if there are any overarching themes you noticed from all the material?

LA: I mean, it's my life. It's not that I have a concept or that I'm trying to look for something to illustrate that concept. It's the people I know when I go out, when I have sex, or when I'm meeting new friends. It's capturing all those moments. It's like vomit, you know? I was thinking about the narrative of the book or the order, but at the end, I thought that the best way to do it was that you open it, and it's 200 pages of a lot of things you can project themes onto.

I can identify some themes that are there because there are things that I'm interested in or things that I'm working on, not just in my work but in my life. It was about being inspired by seeing other people working on their identities, on their freedom, on their ways of expression. That's what I've been doing all my life.

How has the pandemic impacted the queer community in Barcelona?

LA: It's been complicated because, as you said, the

night is something very important to all of us. If you look back at history, it's always been like that. These identities couldn't be lived or expressed during the day; they needed to express themselves when everything was dark, when nobody was watching. Now, I think that we have more freedom, so it's different. We are also trying to figure out how to create daytime spaces. When I look at my circle, at the beginning of the pandemic, it was a little bit dispiriting because we lost that freedom from one day to another. Now we are trying to find new ways of expressing ourselves or having meeting points and moments that we used to have before. It's not easy. Here in Spain, we cannot leave at night. At 10 pm, we have to be inside, and outside it's full of police. It's quite heavy.

We are still figuring out how we can recover that feeling. It's true that there are a lot of people

who I used to see a lot, and now I haven't seen them for a year. The energy is also lower. It's difficult to fight against that low energy and to create things because we're not motivated. In my case, in particular, I'm happy working on this project for the book. It's creating something personal that I can sell; I can work on something directly for the people that like what I do. It's not something for a brand or a magazine. When I have to earn money, there is always a client or someone giving their opinion. Now I'm trying to find a way of doing an event or a presentation to meet people and try to find a way of connecting in a different way, so I'm excited right now.





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You brought up an interesting point about needing to find clients when you need to make money. It's difficult because you want to highlight friends in these communities, but then it also can feel like these brands want to use the "cool factor" of queer people to sell their product. Do you feel a struggle between these two things?

LA: Yes, it's always like that. It's trying to find a balance. I mean, we are living inside capitalism. I have to play a little bit of that game — if not, I have to become a hippie or something. I'm trying to find that balance of not doing things that are totally against my ideas. For example, what I've done with this documentary, SAFE. I made that piece for the brand, but in my agreement, I was able to do my director's cut and tell the story the way I want. The brand doesn't have any voice in that edition.

How do you stay motivated to create new art?

LA: I think I'm always motivated. I have to make an effort to still work on things now that everything is slower, and it takes more time, or it's more difficult, but I don't treat it like a job or work. When I went to parties with my camera, it wasn't an effort to do that. When I didn't take it with me, I saw things there that I wanted to capture or that I wanted to remember. It's part of the way that I communicate and relate with other people.

Right now, I have to work to have money. If I could, I would only do this, but the thing is that I also have to do commercial stuff or work with brands or clients. What's changed in the last year is that I'm doing projects now that I wouldn't have done before when everything was more activated. I have to collaborate with brands that I wouldn't have collaborated with in another moment. Or I have to do smaller things with less budget with characters or celebrities I don't like or with artists I don't identify with. I have to be a little bit more patient. Right now, I'm doing the things that I find because I need the job to survive.



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Is there any theme or message that you want people to take away from your work?

LA: I thought a lot about that. I'm not putting myself in the position of giving a message because I'm doing this as something personal I want to share. But I know that I also have a responsibility to show my process, show what I'm thinking, and change it if I need to. In the beginning, my work was more gay and not as diverse, because that was what I was living and what I was discovering, but there was a moment that made some noise in my head that it wasn't what I was or what I want. I started meeting people, and I worked on adding diversity and things that my work needed because I was also learning that in my personal life. That's the responsibility that I'm always concerned about with my work. In the end, there's not a message that I want to spread. I think more about

what I would love to have seen before that I haven't seen. I think a lot about when I was a teenager in my room with the door closed, trying to find things on the internet to understand who I am. What would have been really cool for me to discover or to watch online?

How does the concept of genesis relate to you and your work?

LA: When I think about "genesis," what I like is that it's not just the beginning of something. What I find interesting is the process of creation. My work is related to who I am. I always go back a lot to my teenage years and the moment when I was discovering these feelings. I think that process of creation will last all my life. It's happening all the time. I'm now starting a new stage, so there will be a new genesis.



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