

HYPERALLERGIC

ARTICLES

The Transgender Women Activists of Color in Andrea Bowers's Iconic Photos



Carey Dunne March 10, 2016



Andrea Bowers in collaboration with Ada Tirmai, "Trans Liberation: Building a Movement (CoGe - McDonald)" (2016), archival pigment print, 95 x 57 1/2 in (all images courtesy the artist and Andrew Kreps Gallery)

In 2012, CeCe McDonald, an African American transgender woman from Minneapolis, accepted a plea bargain for 41 months in a men's prison on manslaughter charges after she defended herself from a racist and transphobic attack outside a bar. Many felt McDonald had been punished for surviving a hate crime, and her imprisonment sparked a wave of "Free Cece!" protests. By the time she was released, she'd become a folk hero in the trans rights movement.

McDonald is one of the activists featured in *Whose Feminism Is It Anyway?*, a solo show of work by Los Angeles-based artist Andrea Bowers, now on view at Andrew Kreps Gallery. Bowers uses a variety of mediums — photography, photorealistic graphite drawings, video installation, and sculpture — to document trans women activists of color committed to direct action and civil disobedience. The work protests the ongoing anti-trans violence epidemic: 70% of hate motivated murders are committed against trans women, and 80% of those are trans women of color.



Andrea Bowers in collaboration with Ada Tinnell, "Trans Liberation: Beauty in the Street (Johanna Saavedra)" (2016), archival pigment print, 95 x 57 13/16 in (click to enlarge)

The exhibit centers around a series of large-scale, full-length portraits of three trans women activists: CeCe McDonald, now the subject of a forthcoming documentary on anti-trans violence; Johanna Saavedra, Northwest Co-chair of the Trans Latina Coalition; and Jennicet Gutierrez, co-founder of Familia: Trans Queer Liberation Movement. In these photographs, members of the nation's most victimized minority group are feminine and battle-ready in angel wings and garlands, wielding hammers, guns, and bricks. Composition-wise, the portraits are reinterpretations of images from Bowers's vast archive of historical activist material, which is piled up in the middle of the gallery for

visitors to rifle through.

Some overtly political art suffers from prioritizing its message above its visual impact and, as a result, risks feeling preachy or gimmicky, socially conscious but aesthetically flaccid. In Bowers's work, on the other hand, the underlying political message seems to only be strengthened by her technical virtuosity. Still, details of the surrounding politics are somewhat obscured by style — the one crucial thing the show lacks is contextual information on who, exactly, these activists are and the roles they play in the trans liberation movement. It's possible to leave without a clear sense of their stories, especially if you miss the back room video installation in which McDonald and Gutierrez discuss their activist work.



Andrea Bowers, "Roundtable Discussion" (2016), single-channel HD video projection, ribbon projection
screen dimensions variable

Jennicet Gutierrez, an undocumented trans immigrant activist, poses for a symbolically loaded portrait holding a gun and wearing a black hood. Gutierrez made a name for herself last year after she interrupted President Obama during a speech at the White House about LGBTQ rights. “President Obama,” she yelled, “release all LGBTQ immigrants from detention and stop all deportations.” (She was forcibly removed from the banquet shortly thereafter.)



Andrea Bowers in collaboration with Ada Tinnell, “Trans Liberation: Ni Una Mas, Not One More (Jennicet Gutierrez)” (2016), archival pigment print, 95 x 57 13/16 in



Andrea Bowers in collaboration with Ada Tinnell, "Portrait with Gun and Hood (Jennicet Gutierrez)" (2016), archival pigment print, 48 x 32 in

In "Building a Movement," Cece McDonald stands wearing braids and black-feathered angel wings, a sledgehammer tucked in her sash. This avenging Angel of Liberty, inspired by an [illustration by Walter Crane](#), is backdropped by a giant crane over Sunset Boulevard, "a nod to movement building and a city in transition," Bowers [writes](#).

Johanna Saavedra, born in Guadalajara, Mexico, co-chairs the Trans Latina Coalition. In Bowers's photograph, she wears strappy red heels and throws a brick down a palm-tree lined street. The image is modeled after "Beauty in the Street," a 1968 French Situationist poster. It's also a clear reference to the Stonewall Riots, during which black trans activist Marsha P. Johnso allegedly threw the first brick. The show's title — *Who's Feminism Is It Anyway?* — alludes to how many accepted accounts of Stonewall Riots and the LGBTQ movement they sparked downplay or exclude the role trans activists played. Bowers's photographs restore some of their visibility, but it also asks the viewer to do some homework. Even when stripped of their political and social context, Bowers's portraits are visually arresting in their color, composition, and symbolism, but they pack a real punch when paired with their subjects' backstories.



Andrea Bowers in collaboration with Ada Tinnell, "Throwing Bricks (Johanna Saavedra)" (2016), archival pigment print, 77 1/2 x 57 in