



Ian Lewandowski's *The Ice Palace is Gone*

Ian Lewandowski is an American photographer completing his Masters of Fine Arts at the State University of New York at Purchase (lovingly known as Suny Purchase). The twenty-eight years young photographer spends his free time listening to Joni Mitchell and his working time shooting queer folk and teaching undergraduate students.



I thought I'd ask the obvious question first, where does your series, *The Ice Palace is Gone*, which consists primarily of portraits of queer people, derive its title from? Is there any connection to the New York club *The Ice Palace*?

The title does refer to the nightclub on Fire Island in NY. With the title, I was interested in the phrase "ice palace", i.e. a grand, temporary structure, in particular its application to a queer space such as the club. Those characteristics are aptly suited to how I see queer culture transmitted over time. Even after stripping away the impossibly heavy baggage of capitalist structures engaging with queer signification

and symbolism, there remains a need to negotiate safety. I am thinking about how fragile this safety is -- the illusion of some universal social contract. It helps me to visualize such illusions of safety for queer people (and their subsequent ruptures) as grandiose yet makeshift structures that must constantly be mourned and rebuilt simultaneously. This cycle must be generative.



Your professional career has so far largely focused on queer portraiture, what do you find intriguing or challenging about the subject matter?

I think I go into every photo shoot extremely nervous -- like stage fright. It's absolutely the most exciting and familiar subject matter for me, but recently I've found that the best, most generative parts are actually quite boring. I really find a lot of my creative energy in the moments before the shoot actually takes place. Maybe they will be trying on different looks while I'm setting up, we might be talking or silent depending on the dynamic, but we are sharing that space with each other. I used to be afraid of that silence, but now sort of view it as just another way to be in the room with someone. It's really being there with the person/people and my camera that is most exciting, that weird type of presence. I'm still figuring out what's so exciting about it for me.



You've posted publicly on your Instagram about the difficulties of showing your work on such platforms, due to their continued censorship of nude bodies, why does that affect the impact of your work more than it would a photographer of heterosexual nudes?

I'm still sort of negotiating how to handle something like Instagram, a platform that's taken the route of Craigslist Personals and Tumblr. I genuinely rely on IG for several reasons: I meet many of my sitters there, see what kind of pictures they are posting of themselves, and generally it's a very accurate and

intuitive gauge for the atmosphere I want to create in my own photos. I like that, in its function, Instagram is a picture world or continuum. I remember when photographers hated Instagram. For me it's always felt like this vast bank or pool of images, like an archive. A total lack of censorship might be idealistic thinking, but introducing algorithms that deliver specific content to users and other algorithms that are designed to scope out nipples and genitals feels very sad and spooky. Reading through their guidelines, they make specific mention of "female nipples", a phrase that doesn't mean anything to many. At the same time, expecting such a corporation to self-analyze their misogyny and disregard for their trans and non-binary users, regardless of their status as sex worker or other non-"family friendly" identifier, might be a pipe dream. It's funny, yet sad, when corporations think they have value systems to uphold.



Why are genitals a key part in portraying gay and trans bodies/people? (feel free to connect this question to the above, I'm treating it like a follow-up based on our earlier conversation)

I think a lot of discourse around these issues go the route of assimilationism, or maybe imbuing that route with some kind of morality. Visibility is a complicated idea because it can be a liberation as well as a trap (check out *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility* edited in part by my friend Tourmaline if you haven't yet!). So that route of assimilation is, in one way, littered with a sense of appeasing and protecting straight people from seeing something like genitals on a body they're not used to seeing them on, but in another way that route can provide a safe space from violence. All this is to say that I believe queer people make extremely difficult negotiations daily, and that has to factor into how they are portrayed. Ideally a discussion of genitals wouldn't have to be a key part of someone's identity, but it comes with some of that negotiation. A major topic of my master's thesis has been caretaking and visibility at the intersections of cancer and queerness. I was reading Audre Lorde's *Cancer Journals* recently, and she speaks at length about the expectations around breast prosthetics for those affected by mastectomies due to breast cancer. I highly recommend reading the whole text, but I want to share this quote in particular as I feel it wholly relates to such policies for queer people including Lorde, a self-identified Black Lesbian Feminist (her capitalization):

I refuse to have my scars hidden or trivialized behind lambswool or silicone gel. I refuse to be reduced in my own eyes or in the eyes of others from warrior to mere victim, simply because it might render me a fraction more acceptable or less dangerous to the still complacent, those who believe if you cover up a problem it ceases to exist. I refuse to hide my body simply because it might make a woman-phobic world more comfortable.



Your work feels narrative at points, whereas elsewhere it seems to mimic traditional portraiture, these queer (often nude) bodies seem posed reminiscently of Victorian family portraits, can you talk a

little bit about the import of both your narrative photos, and the more posed ones? What does the narrative provide that the clearly-posed does not and vis versa?

Recently I've been very interested in fiction in regards to my pictures. I don't totally separate the more posed stuff from the more narrative stuff. To me they have to exist together because as an undercurrent I want this all to be about photography, the sense of our ability to penetrate multiple worlds when we look at pictures. In that way. I guess when I conceive of it, there's some narrative there, but I don't like to be limited by a narrow definition of what narrative can be. Maybe that's why I like fiction. I've never been interested in what a portrait can "say about someone". It's always been much more exciting to vie for high drama and glam or playing things up.



Is there a tension between the desire to portray queer people honestly and the desire towards fiction?

Great question. I think the interest or tendency toward fiction comes from a few places. For one I don't really feel a connection to honesty when making pictures. I think the prospect of making an "honest" picture would drive me crazy. It's not that I want to be dishonest, I've just found that working under the goal of total authenticity has never worked for me. Frankly I don't think it's possible. I advocate more for a type of homage or witnessing or noticing of someone's presence or contribution, making a sort of "character" together with the person photographed. A significant part of the process of making the pictures for me is picking up on signifiers on the body, not just signifiers of a western-centric, mostly American brand of campy queer culture (although that is certainly a very important part of my work), but even just significations of photographed bodies broadly. I think this is where my sensibility for posing or posturing of the body is informed: over time pictures carry traces of past pictures, maybe in very subtle ways like the tilt of a head or position of a hand. Seeing those patterns emerge feels like a story is being told in a coded language, which is exactly how I feel queer signifiers are transmitted, among other information. So I have no interest in hiding that the photograph is, in that way, a total production and fabrication, a rip-off, a "posturing", a perversion. I feel the route of fiction or establishing characters is much more effective for talking about something like identity.

