

Re: Gender(fuck)

by Tony Whitfield

Re: Gender(scape)
by Bradley Wester
The Kitchen (November 13)

At the bottom of what we have come to know as theatrical drag is often an element of misogyny. Women whose images are points of departure for drag have been given their significance, to one degree or another, with the sanction and at the service of the dominant (male) culture. Commercially packaged, those images can become the currency of oppressive ideology and drag is often a venue for its resale. Genderfucking, on the other hand, which holds as its bottom line a conscious critique of sexual stereotyping, is very likely to eschew replications of drag's clichés in favor of images that confound role systems. *Re: Gender(scape)*, the title of Bradley Wester's hour long performance work would lead one to expect more of the latter. Wester opts, however, for something which is clearly neither, but closely paralleled by the former.

Re: Gender(scape) rides on shimmer

and aura and style. While each is important to drag, the ability to identify with the character being portrayed is crucial to its success. For Wester such emotional connections are impeded by esthetic artifice. Wester opens the work dressed with New Wave simplicity in a black suit. After a long entrance, punctuated by blackouts, he dances/writhes in agony/ecstasy in an armless wooden chair. Next are slides of Wester soaring against a landscape or a void of sky (à la Robert Longo's men in cities) or collapsing on stone steps, dressed in a red taffeta evening gown and make-up that would make Capucine envious. His classically androgynous beauty in Earl Ripling's photographs echoes 1982 *Interview* and *Harper's Bazaar* circa 1959. Stumbling in spike heels, Wester returns to the stage dressed in the red gown, poses, suffers and shifts pose. He is the film noir version of a woman in the midst of a little existential suicide until he opens his mouth and emits a vocoded voice which gradually changes pitch. He tells the strange tale of a man on a sickle-shaped bank of land, Maw Maw's shotgun house, torture, square fits and

square jaws. It's all very chic, somewhat surreal, nostalgic, obsessive, as removed as a nouveau roman and slightly Freudian. There is even, in keeping with the vagaries of this vogue's consciousness, "a big black book with one word in gray helvetica: HITLER."

At the end of the first monologue Wester crosses the floor to another spotlight. His movements look like a breakdown cut from *Sunset Boulevard*. He then tells us, "When I dream, I change sex." In front of Wester—the woman—is a pane of glass, opaqued with paint to act as a screen for a film of Wester—the man in the opening scene. He goes on to describe a dream in which he is a woman with snake bite." The male (filmed) and the female (live) images of Wester confront each other with equal amounts of fear and attraction. The female, however gives way to the male and Wester strips off the gown. Square jawed and flexed, he assumes the pose of an aggressor and faces the audience.

Just below the surface polish of Wester's female role there has been that of woman as victim. His version is particularly disquieting because that

image appears to be an image of woman that, as Herbert Blau might put it, is speaking its own nature. Like Elvira in Fassbinder's *A Year of Thirteen Moons* the sexual crossover here is characterized by incomplete role assumptions and failed transgressions, but with the crucial difference of a complete disinterest in naturalistic character development which might remove Wester's creation to the realm of tragedy. In bits and pieces Wester has built an image that unfortunately crumbles into a very familiar male icon.

Both the strength and the disappointment of *Re: Gender(scape)* lie in the rarity of Wester's substantial command of his medium. The polish and gleam of the work is arresting and somehow extremely appropriate to an investigation of sex roles and their grand illusions. While escaping the customary boundaries of drag's humor and its emotional demands for identification, it fails, however, to supply the acute reflection it begs on the function of illusion and esthetic order, the bases of style, as an avenue beyond the dominant systems of sexual definitions.

