

# VICE

## Vice Magazine

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### GILLES LARRAIN

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PHOTOS BY GILLES LARRAIN



*Ryan and Gilles (photo by Amy Kellner)*

I can't remember when I first saw the book *Idols* by Gilles Larrain. All I know is that ever since I got it, it's been a huge influence on me. *Idols* is one of the best photography books I've ever seen. It was published in 1973 and it's a collection of studio portraits of trannies, gender-benders, and just generally awesome-looking people in New York City. It's an incredible time capsule. There are Warhol people, like Taylor Mead and Holly Woodlawn, and members of the San Francisco-based psychedelic drag-queen performance troupe the Cockettes. There's a photo of the artist Al Hansen, aka Beck's grandfather, covered in silvery paint and dressed up like some kind of Roman soldier, and an unrecognizable teenage Harvey Fierstein, looking like a young pretty Jewish lady (well, almost). Most important, these people all had the best style. The greatest fashion always originates with drag queens. The outfit you're wearing today was probably invented by a drag queen ten years ago.

I recently visited Gilles in his huge studio on Grand Street in Soho. You can walk by it and see his photos of Jack Walls and Robert Mapplethorpe arranged in the window. Inside, it's a

cavernous converted warehouse stuffed with his artwork. Photos from his series on flamenco dancers, elaborate collages of nudes covered in fruits and tattoos, and many photos of musicians taken mostly in the 80s, ranging from Sting and Billy Joel to Nina Hagen and Miles Davis. Propped up in one corner is a large photo of Phoebe Cates and Jennifer Jason Leigh, circa *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*, snuggling nude under a blanket together.



**CARLA**

We sat down in his kitchen, surrounded by hanging copper pots, and I tried my best to decipher what the hell he was saying in his low, raspy voice with its thick French accent.

**Vice: The photos from *Idols* were first published in a French magazine called *Zoom* in 1972. Did you shoot them as an editorial for the magazine?**

**Gilles Larrain:** No, I never shoot anything for any purpose. I shot them because I found those people crazy enough and fascinating enough to be photographed. I saw some of them at Max's Kansas City and I thought, "I have to get those guys in the studio." I became friends with Taylor Mead and John Noble. One came, then they all came.

**When you photograph someone, do you shoot many photos or just a few?**

At the time I shot a lot, now I shoot very little. I shot thousands of photos for this series. The book is only a small part of what I have. I have maybe 5,000 of these Kodachromes.

**Oh, these were shot on Kodachrome? I love that film. It's so saturated. I wish they still made it.** Yes. So rich. So this is only the top of the tip of the iceberg. We're going to do something with the rest of them eventually.



**PRISCILLA**

**How did the *Idols* series come about? Did you set out to document a specific scene?** I don't work like that. Life happens while you make plans to do other things. I studied architecture. I was going to be a mathematician or a scientist. Nothing that I planned worked out. But what happens is more interesting. My plans are boring. So to answer your question, people heard about my studio and it was like a snowball coming down, getting bigger and bigger.

**Were these people you normally hung out with?** They hung out in my place, yes. But I don't hang out. I'm in my studio, I do my work, and people come to my studio. [points to some photos] This is Harvey Fierstein, you know, the playwright of *La Cage aux Folles* and *Torch Song Trilogy*. He began doing drag at my studio. He was about 19 here. And this one is Goldie Glitters, he was one of the Cockettes from San Francisco.

**The photo of Goldie Glitters is amazing. It almost looks like a painting.** None of this is manipulated. It's raw. What you see is what you get.

**Was this just what he happened to be wearing that day or did you style him?** It was a mixture of so many things. There was no formula; it was pure improvisation. We had lot of junk lying around and they came by in groups of 20 or 30, and they all shared things, having fun with makeup, playing with wigs and whatever. There was no direction. There was no intent to be specifically fashiony. It was purely *divertissement*, in the French sense—to have fun, create fun, and live fun. To enjoy the moment. Louis XV was great at that. Crazy parties in Versailles. Food, sex, everything. It was then that fashion began to move and be created. The culture of fashion comes from that time.



**GOLDIE GLITTERS**

**So everyone did their own makeup and styling?** Yes, but sometimes I intervened, sometimes I said, “No, I don’t like that, I’m not going to photograph that,” and they’d get upset about it and I’d say, “It’s been done before, do something fresh.” I always said, “Make fresh mistakes.” I’ve seen the old ones already, so what’s the point?

**True. Is there something specific you would look for in a model or in a pose?** No. When I saw it, I saw it. Otherwise it becomes a fashion shoot, it becomes stale. The fun thing about this was we never knew what the result would be. [*pointing at a photo*] What you see here is not a dress, it’s Chinese silk that is pinned in the back. If you turn her around she’s like a porcupine, you know? And this hat is made with cardboard and tape. We all made it together. Everybody. The studio became a beehive of playfulness and creativity.



**HARVEY FIERSTEIN**

**You weren’t interested in fashion?** I did some fashion shoots and commercial shoots and for that I know exactly what I’m doing. There’s a reason for it. A client wants something specific and you have to plan it. This was not planned. This grew organically.

**Did a lot of people ask you to shoot fashion after *Idols* came out?** Yes, but I don’t respond to offers very well. I’m reluctant to be engaged by outside energies. If my energy fits it, I jump into it. Otherwise it’s not my venue, it’s not what I need to do.

**What was it like on a typical night of shooting these portraits?** It was like a theater, like group sex—visually. I painted the backdrops—I love painting. My father was a painter and my mother was a pianist and a painter. I’ve always painted. I gave in to the whims of the

moment. It was purely *organique*. It flowed like a river and the river follows the easiest way around and it carried me exactly the same way. The metaphor of the river is perfect for this project. There were no designers, no art director, no makeup people, no stylists, none of those things that define a fashion shoot. It was completely improvised. They had their own ideas, of course. They knew how they wanted to look.

**Oh sure, drag queens? Forget about it. But it sounds like you're kind of anti-fashion?**

In a way. I am anti many things. But I do have one quality: I attract people. Maybe because I'm not really a known quantity. I am off balance very often, and I have an energy that could be endearing or scary or whatever. I attract people in some way. I mean, why are you here today?



**CHARLES**

**Exactly. Do you prefer photographing nudes or people wearing clothes?** Definitely nudes. You come to my studio and I will get your clothes off, you can be sure of that. I have tons of nudes. But this series is about transvestites; it's about masquerading.

**Do you prefer shooting in a studio?** The studio provides for me a very precise world that I know by now. I know my lighting, and I experiment with it, but I have come to terms with simplicity. Also, I do my own printing. I'm a dinosaur, you know. I have digital cameras but I don't pay attention to that too much. I use them for referential things, but my love is not there.

**How long did this project last?** Over a year. Every so often we would make slide projections of the previous photo sessions to show everyone. It's too bad I didn't have a video camera to document it. It was so funny. You have no idea the comments that they made about each other. It was a riot.

**Are there any photos in the book that are more memorable than others, like maybe something crazy happened that has a good story?** All these photos, there were crazy moments around them. In this photo of Beauregarde, when he lifted his skirt and his bulge

unit was presented there, people were cracking up. I said, “Don’t listen to them, you are my victim now. Look innocent.”



**BEAUREGARD**

**I noticed that you dedicate the book to Jean and Dominique de Menil.** Yes, that’s an amazing story, I can tell you the story.

**They’re Dash Snow’s great-grandfather and great-grandmother.** Yes. Well, in '72, Jean was very sick. He was in Sloan-Kettering with cancer. A friend of mine, Simone, used to work with him. She said to me, “I know someone who wants to see your work. Why don’t you prepare a couple of carousels of your slides, go to this room in the hospital, and bring a projector and a screen.” So I went to the hospital, I went upstairs, I saw the man in bed. He was tired, white, in pain. A man considering many thoughts in his head, thinking about his life. I thought, “What am I doing here?” I was young and I wanted to show my work but I felt insecure there, so I went through the slides—boom, boom, boom—very fast. He stopped me and said, “What are you doing? Give me the control.” And he went back and he looked at every photo. 280 slides he went through.



**GAIL**

**So why did you dedicate the book to him?** Well, if you're patient I'll tell you.

**[laughs] OK, OK.** So I was at his bedside for an hour and a half. As I was leaving, I saw him reach into his drawer. He pulled out his checkbook and wrote me a check for \$15,000. I had never had that much money in my life. That would be like \$100,000 now. He said, "This is not only a gift, I want to have your work in my collection." That man launched my career. Amazing man. Can you imagine? On his deathbed. To do that, to watch, to listen, to care about somebody else when you're on the threshold of death... Fantastic.

**Wow. So are these photos in the Menil Collection in Texas?** Unfortunately no, because Jean died the next year, in '73. Dominique was very Protestant and she didn't like transvestites. This subject matter was not her cup of tea.

**What kind of reactions did you get when the book came out?** I got very different reactions. I think it was in the *Village Voice* where a critic said that these photos were the epitome of fashion and they would put *Vogue* to shame. But at the time, don't forget, you could not go out on the street like that. Some people, some clients of mine, said, "How dare you photograph these people? How dare you photograph these deviant, ugly people?" One photo critic for the *New York Times* didn't like it because the lighting was not gentle; it wasn't soft. I did not glamorize people and he thought that meant that I was against them somehow. He wrote, "From these photos I gather that Gilles Larrain himself is not a transvestite."

**I don't get that sense from these photos at all.** Different people, different senses. Some people were mad that they weren't in the book, some didn't like the way they were portrayed. But the intelligent people loved it and now it's become some kind of icon.

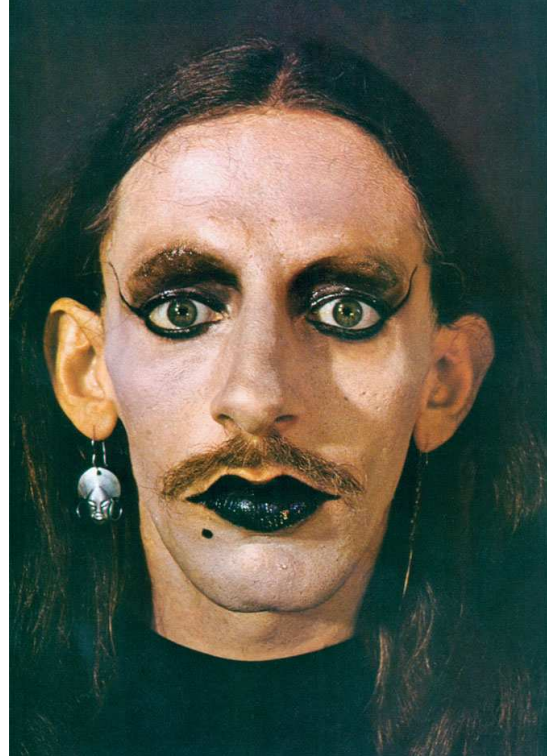


**BEAUREGARD**

**It's one of my favorite photography books ever. I started shooting studio portraits recently and I always look at *Idols* to get inspired.** Oh, that's fantastic. I'm so pleased. You see, when there is passion, when there is energy, when there is vision, and when there is luck, you achieve things. Do what you love and love what you do. [*laughs*] I'm speaking like a preacher here!



**MARGUERITE**



**JOHN RAVEN**



**TAYLOR MEAD**



**SEBASTIAN**