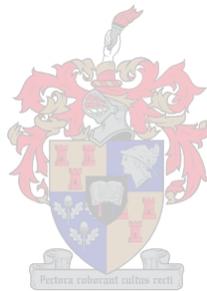


**Photographic representation of lesbian identity with special reference to the  
Southern African context.**

Jean Brundrit



Thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of M.A. in Fine  
Arts at the University of Stellenbosch.

**Supervisors**

Dr. M. Arnold. Fine Art Department, University of Stellenbosch.  
Ms J. Ractliffe. Fine Art Department, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.

March 2000

*Declaration*

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that the work contained in this thesis is my own original work and that I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it at any university for a degree.

## ABSTRACT

This thesis presents a discussion of a photographic representation of lesbian identity in Southern Africa. Two photographic series, *Does your lifestyle depress your mother?* and the *Dyke Career Series* (collectively referred to/exhibited as *Lavender Menace*) produced during the period 1997 to 1999 form the practical component of this MA submission. *Lavender Menace* is considered in relation to lesbian identity, lesbian social visibility, stereotypes and the relationship between photography and 'reality'. The various readings that the works can be said to have, are discussed and an explanation of the purpose in photographing the 'ordinariness' of the lesbians who were imaged, is included.

A historical overview of the concepts 'lesbian', and 'visibility' specifically in South Africa during the last 50 years, and how homophobia has affected lesbian life is presented in Chapter One.

In Chapter Two, the notion of stereotypes is examined, particularly those of the 'butch' lesbian and the 'lipstick' or 'chic' lesbian. Neither of these stereotypes is entirely accurate and the role of stereotypes in potentially disseminating mis-information and prejudice, and how this influences potential ways of identity construction, is discussed. It can be seen that this influence of stereotypes on lesbians and lesbian visual representation cannot be ignored as the dominant stereotypes in society are too pervasive.

The notion of readability is explored in Chapter Three. The constructed nature of photography, specifically with regard to *Lavender Menace*, is discussed in relation to truth, theatricality, the use of text and possible readings of the work. An explanation of my particular purpose in choosing to photograph in the way I did is included, concluding that although meaning is not fixed, the intention of the artist can be visually presented in a 'legible' manner (if desired) to assist possible interpretations.

This thesis/research has been utilised to inform my own artistic production, by exploring the questions and issues raised while producing *Lavender Menace*, namely lesbian visibility, the use of stereotypes and how images are interpreted. This thesis and *Lavender Menace* should contribute to the general research area by promoting social visibility of lesbians in South Africa.

## OPSOMMING

Hierdie tesis bied 'n bespreking van 'n fotografiese voorstelling van lesbiese identiteit in Suid-Afrika. Die praktiese komponent van die voorlegging vir die Meestersgraad bestaan uit twee reekse fotos, *Does your lifestyle depress your mother?* en *Dyke Career Series*, wat in die periode vanaf 1997 tot 1999 geproduseer is (en gesamentlik as *Lavender Menace* uitgestal/beskou word). *Lavender Menace* word in verhouding tot lesbiese identiteit, lesbiese sosiale sigbaarheid, stereotipes en die verhouding tussen fotografie en 'werklikheid' beskou. Die verskillende lesings/beduidenisse wat die werk sou kon hê, word bespreek en 'n verduideliking van die doelstelling met die fotografering van die 'gewoonheid' van die lesbiese wat verbeeld is, word ingesluit.

'n Historiese oorsig van die konsepte 'lesbies' en 'sigbaarheid', veral in Suid-Afrika gedurende die afgelope 50 jaar, en hoe homofobie die lesbiese lewenswyse geaffekteer het, word in Hoofstuk Een aangebied.

In Hoofstuk Twee word die idee van stereotipes ondersoek, veral die van die 'butch' en die 'lipstiffie-', of 'sjiek' lesbiese vrou. Geeneen van hierdie stereotipes is geheel-en-al korrek nie en die rol van stereotipes in die potensiële verspreiding van verkeerde inligting en vooroordeel en hoe dit die potensiële wyses vir die konstruksie van identiteit affekteer, word bespreek. Daar word getoon dat die invloed van stereotipering op die lesbiese vrou en die lesbiese visuele voorstelling nie geïgnoreer kan word nie, aangesien die oorheersende stereotipes in die samelewing te deurdringend is.

Die idee van leesbaarheid word in Hoofstuk Drie ondersoek. Die gekonstrueerde aard van fotografie, veral met betrekking tot *Lavender Menace*, word met betrekking tot die waarheid, die teatrale, die gebruik van teks en moontlike lesings/interpretasies van die werk bespreek. 'n Verduideliking van my besondere doelstelling met die keuse van hoe om te fotografeer word ingesluit, met die konklusie dat, alhoewel betekenis nie finaal vasgelê is nie, die bedoeling van die kunstenaar visueel op 'n 'leesbare' manier voorgestel kan word (indien dit verlang word) om moontlike interpretasies te ondersteun.

Die tesis/navorsing is aangewend om my eie artistieke produksie in te lig deur die vrae en kwessies wat gedurende die produksie van *Lavender Menace* na vore gekom het, namens lesbiese sigbaarheid, die gebruik van stereotipes en hoe beelde geïnterpreteer word, te ondersoek. Hierdie tesis, tesame met *Lavender Menace*, behoort 'n bydrae te lewer tot die navorsingveld in die algemeen deur die bevordering van die sosiale sigbaarheid van die lesbiese in Suid-Afrika.

## CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	(i)
INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER ONE: <b>Visibility</b>	7
CHAPTER TWO: <b>Stereotypes</b>	29
CHAPTER THREE: <b>Readability</b>	45
CONCLUSION	61
BIBLIOGRAPHY	64
ILLUSTRATIONS	70

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank:

Marion Arnold and Jo Ractliffe for their patience and valuable critical input into this thesis and *Lavender Menace*.

My family and friends for tolerating my absence.

Teresa Jones for being there.

Russell Jones of the Scanshop for digital printing expertise.

The financial assistance of the Centre for Science Development (HSRC South Africa) towards this research is hereby acknowledged. Opinions expressed and conclusions arrived at, are those of the author and are not necessarily to be attributed to the Centre for Science Development.

## INTRODUCTION

This thesis investigates aspects of lesbian identity, specifically the issues of visibility, stereotypes and readability in relation to photographic representation. All three of these areas are interconnected, creating a complex relationship between the points of investigation. My practical work forms an integral component of the discussion throughout the thesis in relation to these three core issues.

Neil Bartlett quoted in Smyth (1996b:109) writes ‘If you asked me to write a list of the first ten homosexual people with whom I had conversations, the first eight of them would be fictional characters...’. This statement underlines one of the main issues explored in Chapter One and in the practical component of the project, namely that of lesbian social visibility or the lack of it. A brief historical background of lesbians and gays in South Africa is provided in order to contextualise the issue of visibility and to explore where and when lesbians have been/are/can be visible. Questions about societal homophobia and the resulting difficulties of ‘coming out’ in a world where there are few or no role models are discussed.

Stereotypes of the socially ‘visible’ lesbian are investigated in Chapter Two. I consider how stereotypes function, how they are used to reinforce dominant ideas and consequently how this influences identity construction. The role of naming and the implications of naming are also explored.

Chapter Three investigates photography’s relationship to ‘reality’, the notion of performance in image making and the use of text, and how these factors contribute to the production of meaning. The images considered form the practical or artifactual component of this thesis. The practical component consists of two photographic series, *Does your lifestyle depress your mother?* and the *Dyke Career Series* and calendar. This work has been collectively exhibited as *Lavender Menace*<sup>1</sup> and in the text when the two

---

<sup>1</sup> Lavender Menace is a reclaimed term for lesbians. This term was coined in the United States to refer to the lesbian presence at the Second Congress to Unite Women, May 1970. (Shantall *eMail & Guardian*

series are discussed together they are referred to as such.

Radclyffe Hall's infamous novel, *The Well of Loneliness* (1928), deserves mention, not for any possible literary merits, but because it provides a point of reference for some of the areas that are discussed in this thesis. It is still in circulation/print (fig. 1) and it might be said that it impacts on lesbian existence today, although perhaps not in a way that informs social etiquette, but rather establishes a history of existence. Its success rests partly on the high profile obscenity trial and subsequent nineteen year ban in Britain, after it was published in 1928. This notoriety guaranteed its social visibility and resulting impact. In Chapter Two I mention that *The Well of Loneliness* was invoked to establish sexual orientation during social interaction in a 1950s South Africa. (It was also among the first 'lesbian' books I and many of my peers read.)

As a result of its success, *The Well of Loneliness* was an ideal vehicle for espousing the ideas of the sexologists<sup>2</sup> including Richard von Krafft-Ebing and Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, whose work is quoted in the novel; and Havelock Ellis who wrote the foreword to the first edition. This firmly established the stereotypes of butch and femme, with butch being the 'real' lesbian (Stephen Gordon<sup>3</sup>) and the femme (Mary Llewellyn) really being a heterosexual woman who is possessed by the butch. Brassai writing about his 1930s photographs in 1976, perpetuates this viewpoint by writing only about the butches and simply ignoring the femmes although they appear in his pictures (fig. 2).

*The Well of Loneliness* also highlights a connection between financial independence and social visibility. Radclyffe Hall and many of the 1920/30s Parisian crowd, including Gertrude Stein and Alice B Toklas, Natalie Barney, Djuna Barnes, Janet Flanner, to name a few, could literally afford to be 'out'<sup>4</sup>.

---

November 2 1999).

<sup>2</sup> Modern lesbian identity begins with the early sexologists, who noted the existence of lesbians, wrote case studies and theorised about all aspects of lesbian existence. From the 1870s to the early 1900s there was a plethora of literature on lesbianism, originating mainly in Germany and Britain. This interest in sexuality and desire to define difference, should be contextualised by the rise and popularisation of psychoanalysis as a practice and science, among other new sciences such as anthropology and ethnology.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen Gordon and Mary Llewellyn are the central characters in *The Well of Loneliness*.

<sup>4</sup> Financial independence empowers women socially and in Southern Africa Kendall (1999:163) notes a

In commencing this research, I set out to find a working definition for the word central to my topic, the word 'lesbian'. The more I read the more I realised that lesbian identity was not as straightforward as I had first imagined.

The term 'lesbian' is derived from the Greek island of Lesbos, which was the home of Sappho, (active c. 600 BC), who wrote poetry and was allegedly homosexual. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* (1976:620) defines lesbian as '1. Of Lesbos. 2. Of homosexuality in women. 3. Homosexual woman'. The same dictionary defines 'homosexual' as a person being sexually attracted only by persons of one's own sex. *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (Brown 1993:1568) defines lesbian as a female homosexual.

On the basis of these definitions the determining characteristic of lesbian is based on sexual activities. This behaviour is not related to physical characteristics in the way that the characteristics of 'women' or 'blackness' potentially are, and since sex is generally a private affair<sup>5</sup> this body-orientated definition is deficient.

This raises a number of questions. Firstly what constitutes sex?<sup>6</sup> Secondly if a woman has sex with another woman for the first time is she automatically redefined as lesbian? Does this work in reverse, if a lesbian has sex with a man is she immediately assimilated into heterosexuality? Clearly this is not how things operate, and identity is more complex than this implies.

Definitions may be influenced by political motives, changing circumstances, ideology,

---

similar situation among the Swahili women of Mombassa, Kenya, where wealthy widows and economically empowered women, live together openly as lesbians.

<sup>5</sup> A distinction is generally made between public and private selves. We choose what to conceal and what we feel comfortable with revealing. The process of 'coming out' however, by its very name and nature, forces us to disclose something that is really quite intimate, that might in another time remain private.

<sup>6</sup> The dictionary defines sexual intercourse as an act of procreation with penile/vaginal insertion. If this definition is accepted it is logical to conclude that lesbians never have sex with one another (only men). The ridiculousness and ultimate pointlessness of this line of argument leads to its speedy abandonment, except to say that such a conservative definition of heterosexuality is not useful.

culture, social situations and reflect a particular historical time. The definitions quoted below reflect a range of understandings of the word 'lesbian'. For example this statement is from the Radicalesbians<sup>7</sup> in 1970, and foregrounds a political agenda:

'What is a lesbian? A lesbian is the rage of all women condensed to the point of explosion. She is the woman who, often beginning at an extremely early age, acts in accordance with her inner compulsion to be a more complete and freer human being than her society-- perhaps then, but certainly later-- cares to allow her... She may not be fully conscious of the political implications of what for her began as a personal necessity, but on some level she has not been able to accept the limitations and oppressions laid on her by the most basic role of her society-- the female role' (Reynolds 1993:xvii).

Martin & Lyon (1972:1) place the emphasis on personal motivation, claiming, 'A Lesbian is a woman whose primary erotic, psychological, emotional and social interest is in a member of her own sex, even though that interest may not be overtly expressed'.

Adrienne Rich adopts a more socially-orientated consciousness to guide the definition in her paper 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence' (1980),

'I mean the term lesbian continuum to include a range-- through each women's life and throughout history-- of woman-identified experience; not simply the fact that a woman has had consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman. If we expand it to embrace many more forms of primary intensity between and among women, including the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support...we begin to grasp breadths of female history and psychology which have lain out of reach as a consequence of limited, mostly clinical, definitions of "lesbianism"' (Reynolds 1993:xxvii).

Mary Daly (1978:26) reflects her separatist perspective in her definition,

'I prefer to reserve the term *Lesbian* to describe women who are women-identified, having rejected false loyalties to men on all levels. The terms *gay* or *female homosexual* more accurately describe women who, although they relate genitally to women, give their allegiance to men and male myths, ideologies, styles, practices, institutions, and professions'.

In *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love between Women from the Renaissance to the Present* (1981) Lillian Faderman wrote:

---

<sup>7</sup> The Radicalesbians were a political lesbian group active in the early 1970s in the United States (Gilbert

“‘Lesbian’ describes a relationship in which two women’s strongest emotions and affections are directed towards each other. Sexual contact may be part of the relationship to a greater or lesser degree, or it may be entirely absent. By preference the two women spend most of their time together and share most aspects of their lives with each other. ‘Romantic friendship’ described a similar relationship’ (Phelan 1989:74).

Shane Phelan (1989:62) says, ‘In most of America, the word lesbian is clearly understood, whatever stereotypes and valuations are attached to it. A lesbian, to most English-speakers, is a woman who engages with sex with women; a homosexual woman’.

This is by no means a complete list of definitions. It gives an idea of the variations in how lesbians have defined themselves (or have been defined in a sympathetic light) over the last thirty years. For my purposes I will define ‘lesbian’ as a woman who has sex with women and who also identifies herself as lesbian. It is important in the interests of authenticity that the individual concerned has a self determining voice.<sup>8</sup> In other words, ‘lesbian’ should be viewed as the primary identity and would include lesbians who occasionally have, or have had, sex with men. Identity is not static, it is an ongoing process of change and redefinition. So a woman might view herself as straight or bisexual or lesbian or in a state of flux at different times during her life. A distinction should be made between women who are defined as lesbian and women who engage in sexual activity with women but who view themselves as heterosexual, and thus do not claim lesbian identity.

In South Africa there are very few artists working with lesbian subject matter. However, in the United States, United Kingdom and Australia artists are prolific by comparison and have been given some publicity. Owing to the local scarcity of lesbian images - pictorial and photographic - I have concentrated primarily on my own production<sup>9</sup> for illustrative material.

---

1993:211). The quoted text is from a leaflet distributed at a conference in New York (Reynolds 1993:xvii).

<sup>8</sup> This prevents speculation on the part of the media/general public as to whether such and such was/is a lesbian.

<sup>9</sup> By concentrating on my own production I have utilised a particular working method, that of theorising

The photographs produced for this degree, together with the text, suggest some of the complexities of representation and interpretation within southern Africa which, as a place with a unique political history, has given the concept 'lesbian' particular meaning.

---

through practice. *Lavender Menace* is discussed in detail in Chapter Three.

## CHAPTER ONE: Visibility

One of the most striking features of lesbian history is the lack of public prominence, the lack of historical records, the lack of images and the written word. The ‘love that dare not speak its name’, Oscar Wilde’s term for homosexuality<sup>10</sup> (in 1895), applied primarily to gay men. For lesbians, homosexuality could have been termed ‘the love that has no voice’ as historical and social circumstances provided few opportunities to speak of one’s lesbian existence. Lesbians did exist and recent research into their lives is beginning to reveal the ways in which they created spaces for their existence in a homophobic world. There is still much work to be done before the social invisibility of lesbians is satisfactorily redressed<sup>11</sup>. ‘Visibility’ is an important aspect of lesbian lives and a central concern of *Lavender Menace*. Therefore it is appropriate to investigate this issue, especially in the relevant Southern African context, at some length.

For this discussion there are two relevant definitions of the word ‘visibility’. Visibility is defined in the *New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* as ‘The degree to which something impinges on public awareness or attracts general attention; prominence’ (Brown 1993:3588). Lesbian social visibility would include any event that facilitated the general public being, or becoming aware, of lesbianism. ‘Visibility’ is predominantly used in this research with the above definition in mind. However ‘visibility’ is also used to refer to the visual, ‘The condition, state, or fact of being visible; visible quality; ability to be seen’ (Brown 1993:3588). The two ‘visibilities’, the social and the visual, are on occasion inextricably linked. For instance, the existence of lesbians in Paris in the 1920s and 30s became global ‘knowledge’ through Brassai’s photographs<sup>12</sup>; today a gay and lesbian march through a city’s streets is visible both visually and socially.

The social visibility of lesbians is important as it signifies the actual existence of lesbians.

---

<sup>10</sup> Oscar Wilde referred to homosexuality in this way during his first trial in 1895 for ‘indecent acts’. *The Columbia Dictionary of Quotations* (1993) New York: Columbia University Press.

<sup>11</sup> For example the 1999, 10th Annual Lesbian and Gay Pride Parade held in Johannesburg still felt it necessary to include a ‘lesbian visibility march’ as part of the main parade. (From private correspondence with Sharon Cooper, co-chair of the 1999 Pride committee.)

<sup>12</sup> The relationship of photography to reality is discussed in Chapter Three.

Historically, publicity has been institutionally prejudiced - through the workings of the church, legal system, state, society and media - to the degree of being normatively homophobic. However, one could argue that any kind of publicity is positive where it speaks of the existence of lesbians. Just this registration, that lesbians exist, opens up possibilities for other women. Firstly publicity operates to affirm lesbian existence and combat a sense of isolation (the feeling that you are the only one) caused by a closed society. Secondly publicity can provide an explanation to someone who felt different from societal expectations of the women's role. Even if a lesbian could not, due to societal restraints or religious conviction, fulfil her sexual desire, at least she would have the possibility of self-awareness.

However, it would be naive to think that public perceptions are always positive. Homophobic prejudice can take many forms, including termination of employment, being cast out of one's community or rejection by one's immediate family. For instance, in a *Cape Times* (February 17, 1999) article entitled 'Mostly she wants her family to understand' Rayda Jacobs interviewed 'Zubeida' (not her real name), a thirty something lesbian who has been disowned by her family. 'I love my family. The hardest thing is growing up and being loved by them, and then having it disappear when they discover that you're different from them'.

The argument for the positive aspects of social visibility is presented by the Boston Women's Health Book Collective (1998:207).

'The more lesbian/bisexual/transgendered/transsexual women are able to be visible, the more chance people have to see us realistically rather than stereotypically, to notice our support of each other, and to feel our strength. Our increasing visibility in numbers enables us to work more effectively against job discrimination and other kinds of oppression that have made many lesbian/bisexual/transgendered/transsexual women stay hidden'.

This statement suggests that the initial step in debunking negative lesbian stereotypes and homophobia is for lesbians to be visibly out, otherwise heterosexuals may think that they don't know any lesbians and instead of informing their ideas from personal experience, they may base them on secondary 'authorities' such as religious groups or the media. We

will see how this occurs later in this chapter in the discussion of President Robert Mugabe's homophobic crusade in Zimbabwe and again, in chapter 3 with the objections from the Christians for the Truth in the Western Cape.

Lesbians and gays need to be able to organise politically to challenge oppressive perceptions and dominant ideologies. To do this successfully people have to be able to identify each other, to organise effectively, and be recognisable to society in general. If lesbians are not visible, we risk maintaining the perception that no lesbians exist and as such, people like Benny Alexander<sup>13</sup> (now known as Xhoisan X) meet with little resistance when they take the position that homosexuality is 'un-African'.

Being out is complicated: one may risk mental and physical abuse, rejection by community and family, discrimination at work and by society in general. In this context, support of lesbians by one another plays an important and vital role. Visible, 'out' role models are important, as they provide possibilities for lesbians who are coming to terms with their sexuality. Positive role models indirectly provide support by affirming our existence.

Being 'out' (out of the closet) is being socially visible to whomever one chooses. This could be out to one's friends, out at work, out to one's family or out to everyone. Normally one has to make some sort of verbal declaration to establish sexual orientation, for instance 'I am a lesbian' or 'I am having a relationship with a woman'. This is sometimes linked to being visually out; behaving and dressing in a stereotypic butch manner, wearing a T-shirt that, for instance, says 'Nobody knows I'm a lesbian', or being physically demonstrative with one's girlfriend in public.

In South Africa, visibility holds particular relevance as it was through group identification, and the resulting social and political organisation, that sexual orientation was included in the equality clause of *The Constitution* (1997:7). The inclusion of this clause was a major victory for the right to sexual orientation, yet societal attitudes still

---

<sup>13</sup> He said this in 1992 whilst he was secretary-general of the PAC.

need to undergo radical change before the spirit of *The Constitution* is reflected.

In order to explore the notion of visibility, the laws and social preserves that have contributed to lesbian social invisibility should be investigated.

From the earliest records of homosexuality in South Africa, the recorded history has been primarily about gay men<sup>14</sup>. There is very little information about lesbians, and where lesbians are referred to it is almost always as an afterthought. As such the history of oppression of gays and lesbians with little exception, acknowledges only gay men. This does not mean that lesbians have not existed, nor have they escaped homophobic discrimination. In fact, lesbians have been subject to the double oppression of being women and lesbians or triple oppression if they are also of colour<sup>15</sup>. More importantly, where there has been recorded material it has been written from a prejudiced perspective. 'Newspaper articles tended to be sensational and focus on deviancy. Similarly church records, psychiatric records, police reports and legal documents portray the lesbian/gay experience as one of sin, disease and criminality' (Morgan 1999:1).

In the introduction to their book *Defiant Desire* (1994), Gevisser and Cameron talk of the public perception of 'gay experience' in South Africa and the implications this has for representation of women, and gays and lesbians of colour. 'What has passed for "the gay experience" has often been that of white, middle-class urban men. The political and social cost of this perception, both in how we are represented and in how we are seen, has been enormous' (Gevisser & Cameron 1994:3). Some of the political and social 'costs' of this perception are discussed later in this chapter - divisive perceptions that hampered the organised struggle, and Winnie Mandela's 'homosex is un-African' defence in her 1991 Stompie Seipei court case (discussed below).

---

<sup>14</sup> In 1996 artist Clive van den Berg produced an artwork for *Faultlines* at The Castle of Good Hope, Cape Town that dealt with an incident uncovered in the State Archives by Zackie Achmat. In 1735 two men were chained together, rowed towards Robben Island and thrown overboard to drown. They were executed for 'an unspecified sexual offense' presumably because they were gay. (Personal correspondence with Clive van den Berg/Andrew Worsdale 'Gay apostles on the box' in the *Mail & Guardian* November 19-25, 1999).

<sup>15</sup> It should be noted that for most of the period under discussion (1950s to 1994) the system of apartheid influenced every aspect of South African's lives.

Although lesbianism was not criminalised in South Africa<sup>16</sup>, societal discrimination and censure have been effective in keeping lesbianism invisible to the general public. For instance in the quotation below ‘Lucille’(not her real name) talks about conservative attitudes towards sex, specifically in the 1950s. However, up until now, the societal expectation that a woman is ‘naturally’ heterosexual and will marry (a man) is still widely held:

‘You have to remember, these were the 1950s. A girl was expected to sit with her knees tightly crossed until her wedding night. These were the days when a girl might be fired if she was so much as having an extra-marital affair. So you can imagine how beyond the pale a gay life was. Our lives were ruled by fear’ (Gevisser 1994:25).

As a result of attitudes towards lesbianism and the scarcity of public gathering places, white lesbians in the fifties and sixties lived extremely closeted lives. In urban centres a social sub-culture developed around private parties, that were held by networks of lesbians who found each other through word of mouth. Sports teams, e.g. cricket and hockey, also functioned as social gathering places for legitimate, ‘above board’ same sex interaction (Gevisser 1993:19-22).

Apart from societal and familial rejection, another reason for a closeted existence was pressure to remain employed, as most lesbians were not economically independent. This also made it nearly impossible to be out as a public figure in the same way that many gay men could be. ‘Heather’, a teacher recalls that:

‘...we were all poor and hard working. You have to remember that in those days women as a matter of course earned much less than men. And also we were by definition independent. We didn’t have men to look after us. So we had to earn a living. And for middle-class women in the 50s that was unusual. There were very few professions open to us, and we could not afford to lose our jobs - there was no hubby to go running back to. This dictated how we ran our lives’ (Gevisser 1993:22).

There is a dearth of literature on lesbian experience in South Africa. The Gay and

---

<sup>16</sup> Lesbianism has only been criminalised in South Africa where an individual is under 19 years. This legislation was passed into law in 1988 and is discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

Lesbian Archive (GALA), established in 1997 at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg recognises this absence. 'One of the most exciting and challenging components of the archives is an oral history project, which aims to collect the life histories of lesbians and gay men from diverse communities' (GALA information brochure). Furthermore 'the archive aimed to expand the official historical record to provide an inclusive, emic and holistic record in which the voices of gays and lesbians would be heard' (Morgan 1999: 1). This ongoing project initially concentrated on collecting oral histories from gays and lesbians who were socially active during the fifties and early sixties. This provided vital background information for Mark Gevisser while writing his script for the docu-drama film, *The Man Who Drove With Mandela*<sup>17</sup> about the life of a gay man, Cecil Williams, who was involved in the liberation movement and was being chauffeured by Mandela at the time of his (Mandela's) arrest in 1962. In an article about the film Gevisser quotes from a conversation he had with Albie Sachs, 'If you want to understand why the older generation of ANC comrades are so receptive to the notion of gay equality in the constitutional debate, you need to go back and look at the role that Williams played' (*Mail & Guardian* October 23-29, 1998).

One of GALA's researchers/interviewers, Ruth Morgan, involved with this oral history project, comments on the secrecy still maintained by lesbians of over sixty, and the resulting frustration in trying to set up interviews. For the ten interviews that were eventually conducted there were approximately fifty refusals. Of these ten interviewees, seven have placed a fifty year embargo on public access and only one was a woman of colour<sup>18</sup>. 'The underlying unspoken code was to maintain the secrecy in order to protect the group. Thus stories could not be told openly, names could not be named, photographs could not be donated to the Archive without blacking out the faces of everyone else' (Morgan 1999:2). It seems that notwithstanding intense loyalty to friends and hidden social networks, plus a resistance to outsiders, the primary reason for secrecy was that these women were not out to their families - neither their parents nor their children.

---

<sup>17</sup> 'The Man Who Drove With Mandela' Written by Mark Gevisser, directed by Greta Schiller, 1998.

<sup>18</sup> Black lesbians may have been reluctant to speak to a white interviewer who, by virtue of her colour, is

In her paper, 'The fine art of evasion: older lesbians protecting their identities' Morgan discusses the interviews with two lesbians, one white (Shey) and, one 'coloured' (Brenda)<sup>19</sup>.

'Interestingly, the thematic analysis of the texts of Shey and Brenda indicate that these two women from different worlds, had parallel experiences which informed their identity construction. They both rejected the stereotyped gender roles for little girls in the 40s and 50s, were keen gymnasts at school, rejected the feminine dress code, identified as "other" and felt that they did not belong to the heterosexual world which dictated that they should marry. They managed to create secret spaces for themselves in which they had relationships with other girls and later women, found other lesbians, adopted the butch role in relationships, and eventually became politicised in terms of gender identity and came out. Ultimately there were more similarities than differences in their experiences' (Morgan 1999:12).

Having said there is little published documentation of lesbians in South Africa, one should note that there is even less about the lives of lesbians of colour. However there are two accounts of Gertie, aka Johnny Williams, from the *Golden City Post* (1955) and *Drum* (1956). These recount the trials, literally, and personal testimony of a Cape Town 'coloured' women who preferred to live as a man (Gevisser & Cameron 1994:128-133). In these articles there is no indication that Williams identified herself as a lesbian or knew and socialised with other lesbians.

Under the circumstances, that is, the legal and societal policing of gays and lesbians, there was no national gay and lesbian organisation, nor apparently was there a desire to create one. However this changed rather abruptly after a much publicised police raid of a predominantly male gay party in a northern Johannesburg suburb in 1966. In response to the ensuing public outrage, the Nationalist government, in 1968, proposed an amendment of the Immorality Act, that would

'...make male and female homosexuality an offence punishable by compulsory imprisonment of up to three years. This would have had the effect not only of bringing lesbians into the scope of the law, but of making homosexuality itself statutorily illegal, whereas previously, only public male homosexual acts had been regulated by statute' (Gevisser 1993:31).

---

very much an outsider. 'Brenda' was interviewed by a gay, 'coloured' man from her community.

Due to the harshness of the proposed amendment, a Parliamentary Select Committee was formed to evaluate submitted evidence and draft a final legislative proposal. In a swift response to prevent this from becoming law, white<sup>20</sup> gays and lesbians were galvanised into organised action. The Homosexual Law Reform Fund was created to facilitate research and a submission to the select committee. This had the effect, for the period prior to the Law Reform's submission, of actively involving lesbians, and unifying the gay and lesbian communities with a common goal. Shey, one of the people interviewed in the oral history project talks about this period:

'It was absolutely crazy and what we did was explained... we were under threat from the government and we were going to stand as one body and we were going to tell them to get lost. And it was the most incredible sense of comradeship, you just can't believe it... it was a tremendous bonding. It didn't matter who you were or where you came from, everyone stood together and when they realised who was involved! We had rugby captains and we had famous... all sorts of people, bank managers and they all said 'right we'll go down and we'll tell them' (Morgan 1999:11).

The Law Reform Fund succeeded in preventing the original proposal from being passed into law. However the Immorality Act was modified to include the following: the age of consent was raised from 16 to 19 for male homosexual acts, dildos<sup>21</sup> were outlawed and it became illegal to be a 'male person who commits with another male person at a party'<sup>22</sup> any act which is calculated to stimulate sexual passion or to give sexual gratification' Section 20A of the Sexual Offences Act (Gevisser 1994:35).

Although this was viewed as a legal victory, the interaction between various gay and lesbian groups ceased<sup>23</sup>. It also separated lesbian and gay life further from contact with the general public and promoted a hidden existence.

---

<sup>19</sup> Not their real names.

<sup>20</sup> Apart from the fact that apartheid had racially segregated South Africans 'the authorities themselves had defined homosexuality as a white problem, ignoring even the possibility of black homosexuality' (Gevisser 1994:34).

<sup>21</sup> It seems that during undercover police investigations into homosexuality it was discovered that butch lesbians use rubber 'dilders'. According to Glen Retief there seemed to be an unnatural interest in the size of dildos used '... and the manufacture or distribution of any article intended to be used to perform an unnatural sexual act was to be prohibited' (Retief 1993:103).

<sup>22</sup> A 'party' was defined as 'any occasion where more than two persons are present' (Gevisser 1994:35).

<sup>23</sup> Gevisser notes the 'instantaneous evaporation' of the Law Reform movement soon after the publication of the Select Committee's recommendations (Gevisser 1994:36).

In the 70s and early 80s a bar/club scene emerged in the urban centres, with lesbians frequenting clubs, gay bars and lesbian bars such as the 'T-Bar' in Johannesburg or 'Tots' in Cape Town. Due to apartheid and the liquor licensing laws these bars were racially segregated. Apart from this public existence, a number of private supper clubs<sup>24</sup> that organised social gatherings, sprang up in both Cape Town and Johannesburg. These catered to specific sub-groups within the gay and lesbian population creating a supportive social network.

Such supportive social structures are invaluable, especially in smaller towns where public gathering places are minimal or non-existent. In Pietermaritzburg, for instance, a group of lesbians, 'Out on Sunday'<sup>25</sup>, meet once a month for an informal supper and entertainment. Part of the success of this organisation, and ones like it, is in its structure. It does not require a large capital outlay, like a bar or club, and members meet at one another's homes and all contribute to the meal.

Up until the formation of Lesbians and Gays Against Oppression (LAGO) in 1986, none of the organisations that existed had political agendas. Possibly the most important development prior to the formation of LAGO was the formation of the first national organisation, the Gay Association of South Africa (GASA) in 1982. Once again this functioned primarily as a social and support organisation catering to mostly white<sup>26</sup>, gay men and was apolitical. It should be remembered that in the mid-eighties a state of emergency was declared. This brought about not only increased oppression from the state but also increased political mobilisation to end Nationalist rule. GASA placed itself outside this struggle. One of the reasons for not opposing the government was an attempt

---

<sup>24</sup> There is at least one supper club being run in Cape Town in 1999. It has a regular membership of approximately 70 lesbians and occasionally new guests are invited. It meets once a month for a dinner-dance.

<sup>25</sup> 'Out on Sunday' began in 1996 and has been meeting for about three years and although it does not have lesbians of colour in its regular membership, it does include lesbians of all ages. Entertainment generally takes the form of a talk by one of its members or a video with 'lesbian' interest.

<sup>26</sup> GASA did in fact have some black members. However after tension with the white members, they split to form, the Saturday Group, under the leadership of the late Simon Nkoli. The Saturday Group provided a social and counseling service in the townships.

to remain unbanned, and therefore free to continue with the valuable support and social services it offered. However in the repressive climate it was impossible to be apolitical and retain credibility as representative of gays and lesbians in South Africa. GASA as a national organisation was dissolved in 1986, but some local chapters continued in their social and support capacities.

It has repeatedly been noted that lesbians were scarce within gay and lesbian organisations and largely absent from the struggle for gay and lesbian equality. A number of reasons for this, such as discriminatory attitudes towards woman, have been suggested. Other contributing reasons are political disinterest<sup>27</sup>, a preference for bar culture, marginalisation of lesbian issues within organisations, the existence of politicised women's organisations, for example the Black Sash and the United Women's Congress, and the difficult task of unifying lesbians across socio-political differences.

Lesbianism, apart from particular non-procreative sex acts, was not criminalised in South Africa until 1988<sup>28</sup>. The legislation introduced under PW Botha, criminalised sex between women where one is under 19 years of age. This came about as a direct result of a Report on the Youth of South Africa by the Committee for Social Affairs<sup>29</sup> of the tricameral President's Council, 1987. 'Homosexuality was classed as an "acquired behavioural pattern" and "a serious social deviation" which was damned as "irreconcilable with normal marriage"; it was one of the range of "evils" to which "promising young people" fell prey' (Cameron 1993:93). Even if lesbians had been politically organised it is unlikely that they would have been able to influence legislation in this area. Where this situation with the recommended legislative changes differed from the Law Reform movement is that it involved 'the youth'. The myth of gay men (read all homosexuals) as child abusers is a media favourite for sensationalist stories.

---

<sup>27</sup> As lesbians were not as visible or discriminated against as gay men, they may not have felt the same need to be politically active.

<sup>28</sup> It is interesting to note that Britain also brought in repressive legislation, in the form of the notorious Section 28 of Local Government Acts during 1988. This law effectively prevented funding and 'promotion' of homosexuality by any government structure. The circumstances surrounding the introduction of Section 28 are however very different to the South African situation.

<sup>29</sup> President's Council *Report of the Committee for Social Affairs on the Youth of South Africa* Government Printer, Cape Town. 22 May 1987.

In 1996 *The Constitution* (fig. 3) was officially adopted by the new South African government. *The Constitution* includes the Bill of Rights and equality clause that states:

‘The state may not unfairly discriminate directly or indirectly against anyone on one or more grounds, including race, gender, sex, pregnancy, marital status, ethnic or social origin, colour, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion, conscience, belief, culture, language and birth’.<sup>30</sup>

It is important to note, that in keeping with international precedents, the wording of the equality clause specifically uses ‘sexual orientation’ as opposed to ‘sexual preference’ which ‘...implies that people simply choose to be heterosexual, lesbian/gay or bisexual’ (Fine 1992:5). Also a ‘preference’ can be modified and altered, whereas an ‘orientation’ implies relative stability.

Various circumstances, events and strategic lobbying contributed to the inclusion of the equality clause in the Bill of Rights. This should be seen against the background of major political change, the unbanning of the ANC in 1990 and their election to government four years later. In part the sympathy within the ANC towards gay and lesbian rights can be attributed to the ANC’s general policy that entrenched human rights and rejected discrimination. During the constitutional process Edwin Cameron explained why gays and lesbians should be afforded special protection.

‘Gays and lesbians are specially vulnerable to irrational and unjustifiable discrimination, exclusion and stigma. They are a necessarily deviant minority (like left-handers) whose votes cannot force through political change. They are exposed to powerful historical and cultural forces of distaste and rejection. Unlike gender and colour, their defining characteristic is not obvious, immediately or at all. And sexuality itself, despite much recent progress, remains for many a taboo area, replete with repression and suppression. The case for special constitutional protection for gays’ and lesbians’ rights to non-discrimination is therefore strong’ (Cameron 1993:94).

During 1986, Lesbians and Gays Against Oppression (LAGO) was formed in Cape Town. Although it was a small organisation it was the first to firmly position ‘...the lesbian and gay struggle within the context of the total liberation struggle’ (Gevisser

---

<sup>30</sup> Equality Clause (9.3) of *The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996*. Act 108 of 1996. (1997)

1993:58). LAGO later evolved into OLGA (Organisation of Lesbian and Gay Activists) which applied for and was accepted as an affiliate to the UDF in 1989. This was successful because of the professional way it was handled and the excellent credibility of its members such as Sheila Lapinsky and Ivan Toms as comrades in the struggle.

Other organisations such as the Gay and Lesbian Organisation of the Witwatersrand (GLOW)<sup>31</sup> formed in 1990 and the Association of Bisexuals, Gays and Lesbians (ABIGALE)<sup>32</sup>, formed in 1992, joined forces with seventy-two other organisations under an umbrella body, the National Coalition for Gay and Lesbian Equality (NCGLE) in 1994. This laid the ground for organised, strategic lobbying of the ANC and later other political parties as well.

It is important to note that not all members of the ANC support gay rights. In fact, the broader liberation struggle reflected homophobic attitudes and both Ivan Toms and Simon Nkoli experienced homophobia in the End Conscription Campaign (ECC) and the Congress of South African Students (COSAS) respectively.

The detention and subsequent trial of Simon Nkoli<sup>33</sup> deserves comment. Nkoli came out to his co-accused, who included influential liberation struggle members like Patrick (Terror) Lekota and Popo Molefe, during his incarceration. This helped to introduce gay liberation into the agenda of the ANC, where it was especially supported by ANC officials who, during time spent in exile, had been exposed to 'liberal' ideas. For instance Albie Sachs and Kader Asmal are both important advocates for gay rights and have been publicly supportive: Sachs addressed the marchers at the first gay and lesbian march in

---

The South African Government.

<sup>31</sup> Within Glow there is a Lesbian Forum that serves a social, counseling and activist function for lesbians in a predominantly male organisation.

<sup>32</sup> ABIGALE's members were mostly black and it was strongly linked to the ANC Youth League at the time of its formation. It was one of many lesbian organisations active during the 90s, and was still in existence in 1995.

<sup>33</sup> Simon Tseko Nkoli (1957-1998) was one of the Delmas Treason Trialists in 1986. He was active in COSAS, the UDF and later became a member of the ANC. As discussed he was also active in the gay movement prior to his arrest and after his release founded GLOW. Apart from his gay activism he was a key figure in the fight against AIDS. He worked in the Township AIDS Project and Positive African Men's Project. He died of complications related to HIV/AIDS.

Cape Town in 1993 and Asmal opened the 'Out in Africa' film festival in 1996. Support from within the government is important as it sets an example of non-discrimination and tolerance.

South Africa, specifically Cape Town in the 1990s had particular relevance to my own artistic production as it is within this context that I live and work creatively. The public scene for many lesbians in Cape Town<sup>34</sup> seems largely to revolve around monthly women's nights, and various one-off parties that are normally well supported. Monthly events include women only nights at established gay bars, for example a 'ladies night' at Café Manhattan and a 'women's night' at 'The Gin Mill'. In addition there are monthly dances - 'Brenda's Bash', a women-only dance, and 'Owen's Gat Party' where lesbians and gay men socialise together. These events, amongst others, cater to a wide cross-section of lesbians in Cape Town.

During the 90s in Cape Town there has been a variety of events that have acted as loci around which lesbian interaction - social, supportive and political - can occur. One such venture was the Women's Centre which opened in Observatory in 1990. Apart from a bar and dance area, it also housed a library and created, for a while, a place to exchange ideas. However, like the bars mentioned below, it only existed for a short period of time. The lack of economic sustainability can possibly be attributed partly to the lack of economic power<sup>35</sup> of its patrons when compared with gay men, or to fickleness on the part of the patrons who support new venues for an initial period only. The alternative is for women to socialise within the already successfully established male gay bars. Some of the Women's Bars which have existed over the years are 'Harringtons' (1989) and 'Doras' at the Kimberly Hotel (1993).

Various organisations also stage events, for example, a celebration when the constitution was formally adopted in 1996, or the First Cape Town Queer Sex and Kultuur Fest

---

<sup>34</sup> 'Gay interest' events are listed in *Cape Review* 'the official Cape guide to entertainment' and one-off parties are advertised by flyers and word of mouth.

<sup>35</sup> Of course there are wealthy lesbians but it seems that in Cape Town, they are not particularly interested in bar culture. This could be because a lot of lesbian social life takes place in private, with a supportive

(1999) organised by the Triangle Project, both held at the Mowbray Town Hall. Both were mixed lesbian and gay events as were Cape Town's two Pride marches and the parties mentioned below.

An important annual event in Cape Town is The Mother City Queer Project (MCQP) that hosts an 'annual mega-deluxe costume-party extravaganza' (MCQP promotional booklet) for a night. Starting in 1994 the projects include, The Locker Room (fig. 4), The Secret Garden, The Twinkly Sea, The Shopping Trolley, The Safari Camp and Heavenly Bodies. MCQP take an inclusive definition of the word 'queer'. They explain, 'Queerness is a state of mind, not a label. We've reclaimed the word "queer" and for us, all unusual, out-of-the-ordinary things are queer. Differences are queer. Enjoying difference is queer'.<sup>36</sup> They also note, 'Although many Queer people are homosexual, not all homosexuals are Queer. Nor are all heterosexuals un-Queer'.<sup>37</sup> Due to the scale and nature of the event any social interaction it facilitates is more likely to be around preparing the venue, or costumes for the night<sup>38</sup> than the actual party itself.

In 1993 and 1994 gay and lesbian marches took place through the streets of Cape Town (figs. 5 - 8). These were important as they were both public and highly visible events. The first march was influenced by liberation politics, and was a protest to have sexual orientation included in the Bill of Rights. The second march had a different emphasis, it celebrated the interim draft of the Bill of Rights (although the final Bill of Rights, including sexual orientation, was only adopted in 1996). Participants carried part of a huge rainbow flag, originating from New York Pride, that made us feel included in a global community and struggle. Both marches were peaceful.

Since 1994 'Out in Africa' has run an annual South African Gay and Lesbian Film Festival. The festival traditionally has an after-party on opening night and offers a 'queer

---

network of friends.

<sup>36</sup> The Mother City Queer Project (1996). *The Twinkly Sea Project*, (promotional booklet), Cape Town.

<sup>37</sup> The Mother City Queer Project (1995). *The Locker Room Project, revisited / The Secret Garden Project, revealed*, (promotional booklet), Cape Town.

<sup>38</sup> Party-goers have to appear in teams of two or more people so organisational meetings before the event are common.

space' for people to meet and chat between screenings. Nodi Murphy and Jack Lewis, the organisers, commented on the impact of the film festival in the 1998 programme. 'This film festival reaches many thousands of lesbian and gay people and creates a queer vision and visibility that establishes lesbian and gay cinema as an important component of South African culture'.

Unlike Cape Town, Johannesburg has managed to sustain an annual march since 1990. GLOW, under the leadership of Nkoli, was instrumental in organising the first Lesbian and Gay Pride March in South Africa. During the first march, some participants marched with bags over their heads, obviously to prevent recognition and Simon Nkoli chanted 'Not the state, we ourselves decide our fate!'<sup>39</sup> GLOW was instrumental in organising the first three marches and still, ten years on, supports the Pride Parades, as do a wide range of other organisations.

Although now unconstitutional, homophobia is still widespread in Southern African societies, to the degree of being normative. However there have been some legislative moves to bring the law in line with the constitution. Discussed below are some examples of homophobia and also some of the positive changes that have come about.

An example of homophobia in South Africa in recent years can be found in Winnie Mandela's defence council's tactics in the 1991 Mandela United Football Club and Stompie Seipei trial. As a senior member of the ANC, at that time, it seemed inappropriate for her to use this line of defence (equating homosexuality with child molestation). Inappropriate too was the deafening silence from the ANC on this matter. The trial and subsequent sentencing was a legal and political nightmare<sup>40</sup> but what was left behind was an attitude best summed up by a placard held by one of her supporters outside the court that read, 'homosex is not in black culture'.

Court judgements in South Africa have been inconsistent in following a system of legal

---

<sup>39</sup> From private correspondence with Sharon Cooper, co-chair of the 1999 Pride Committee, about the history of Pride in Johannesburg.

precedents when it comes to homosexuality. After the unbanning of the ANC in 1990 a sense of a new, liberal era is reflected in some judgements. 'In a 1990 case, a judge remarked that "society accepts that there are individuals who have homosexual tendencies and who form intimate relationships with those of their own sex," and that courts had to take this into account in enforcing the existing criminal provisions' (Cameron 1993:91). Yet in 1997 'A Cape Town Regional Court Magistrate told a heterosexual man that although he understood his rage at being propositioned by a gay man this did not justify killing him'. However he goes on to say 'Under the circumstances, you had a reason for your actions'. The murderer was sentenced to two years imprisonment with a further three years suspended (*Cape Argus*, June 24, 1997).

A widely publicised example of Southern African homophobia is the comments made by Zimbabwean President, Robert Mugabe, at the opening of the 1995 Zimbabwe International Book Fair held in Harare, that reveal the extent of his homophobic sentiment. The events leading up to Mugabe's opening speech were as follows. The Zimbabwean government pressurised the organisers to exclude GALZ (Gays and Lesbians of Zimbabwe) from participation in the fair. This was duly done and GALZ's registration was cancelled. As the theme of the fair was 'human rights, justice and freedom of expression', this brought the credibility of the organisers, and the event, into serious question. Various participants withdrew in protest.

In his opening speech, on the 2nd of August 1995, Mugabe made his position and that of his government very clear. Quoted here from an article by Botha (1995:14) Mugabe said;

'It is extremely outrageous and repugnant that such immoral and repulsive organisations like those of homosexuals should have any advocates in our midst; ... We don't believe [gays and lesbians] have any rights at all;... If we accept homosexuality as a right, as is being argued by the association of sodomists [sic] and sexual perverts, what moral fibre shall our society ever have to deny organised drug addicts or even those given to bestiality the rights they might claim...including the freedom of the press to publicise literature on them?'

In November 1999 Mugabe again expressed his homophobia. This was connected to

---

<sup>40</sup> For a detailed account see Holmes 1993:284-294.

Peter Thachell attempting a 'citizens arrest' of Mugabe while the Zimbabwean President was in London on a private visit in November. In retaliation Mugabe verbally attacked British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, at the Commonwealth Heads of State Summit held in Durban. 'If Tony Blair wants to turn Britain into a United Gay Kingdom, that is a matter for him but he should not go around lecturing other countries...People in Zimbabwe are shocked by attitudes towards homosexuals in Britain. In Britain I hear you can do anything. Men can marry men, women can marry women' (*Sunday Argus* November 13/14 1999).

Mugabe's sentiments have been echoed within the borders of Zimbabwe, Namibia<sup>41</sup> and South Africa by such diverse interest groups as the International Islamic Movement and an article by the founders of the South African Association For Men in the South African edition of *Hustler* (October 1994). In an extremely prejudiced article John Loftus and Kierin O'Malley, discuss the 'naturalness' of homosexuality and the obvious conclusion that this will ultimately destroy humankind. The same conclusion is reached by Abdullah Osman, the Chairman of the International Islamic Movement, Johannesburg in his letter to the *Mail & Guardian* (September 8-14 1995). 'If we allow this perversion to continue and proliferate the way it is, then more and more people will become homosexuals, because association breeds similarity. Before long this country will be worthy of the same fate that Sodom and Gomorrah suffered'. Osman starts his letter by congratulating Mugabe for 'his forthright and unapologetic condemnation of homosexuals, gays and lesbians and what have you. It is true that homosexuality is anathema to African culture'. Osman's sentiments are echoed by another letter to the *Mail & Guardian* (October 3-9, 1997) from Nkosinathi Sibanda, a WITS law student, who in response to the 1997 gay and lesbian pride parade wrote the following. 'What we witnessed last Saturday is the beginning of greater things to come: increased drug habits, the decadence of another African norm and institutionalised sexual exploitation. Long live Mugabe!'

---

<sup>41</sup> Since 1996 President Sam Nujoma and other cabinet ministers have been making homophobic statements and threatening to introduce anti-lesbian and gay legislation in Namibia.

In both the Winnie Mandela trial and Mugabe's tirades<sup>42</sup>, homosexuality has been maligned as an imported western, white disease that has defiled and colonised a pure, essentialised African culture. The irony is that homophobia - not homosexuality - is the western import<sup>43</sup>, arriving in Africa with Christianity. However this attempt to demonise a group of people clearly comes with a calculated agenda aimed at gaining wider political support for Mugabe and others who need to unite against those who are different.

In contrast to this saga of negative comments and hostility there have been some notable victories in South Africa. For example an application by the NCGLE and the South African Human Rights Commission resulted in the various laws that criminalised same sex conduct being struck down in May 1998. These included sodomy and unnatural offences and Section 20A of the Sexual Offences Act. Although technically these laws only apply to gay men, the implication of the judgement, namely that discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation is unconstitutional, protects and benefits lesbians as well as gay men. This finally brings the law in this area into accordance with the equality clause in the Bill of Rights, four years after the interim constitution was adopted.

In his finding, delivered in the Johannesburg High Court, Judge Heher held that:

'Constitutionally we have reached a stage of maturity in which recognition of the dignity and innate worth of every member of society is not a matter of reluctant concession but is one of easy acceptance. ... This is not to suggest that there has ever been reason to behave otherwise save for the usual impediments to all kinds of human progress such as religious intolerance, ignorance, superstition, bigotry, fear of what is different from or alien to everyday existence and the millstone of history. The Constitution enjoins equal treatment before the law of persons entitled to its protection. That excludes individual or class discrimination. To penalise a homosexual person for the expression of his or her sexuality can only be defended from a standpoint which depends on the baneful influences to which

---

<sup>42</sup> Another example of Mugabe's homophobia is his stance on AIDS and its origins. On the 25th of January 1994, Mugabe had the following to say. 'AIDS is caused by white homosexuals. Here we find [homosexuality] extremely horrifying. We cannot countenance a situation where people are allowed to be homosexual in the military;... Homosexuality is for whites only and anathema to African culture'. Mugabe is also quoted as saying "that homosexuals had the 'status of beasts,' and were 'worse than pigs'. Zimbabwe would not tolerate their 'sub-animal behaviour'" (*The Saturday Star*, 12 August 1995).

<sup>43</sup> Kendall in her paper *Women in Lesotho and the (Western) Construction of Homophobia* (1999:157) discusses the 'widespread, apparently normative erotic relationships' among the women in Lesotho. She concludes 'that love between women is as native to southern Africa as the soil itself, but that homophobia, like Mugabe's Christianity, is a western import'.

I have alluded' (*Equality* 1998:12-14).

This case turned into an unnecessary lengthy process delayed by the then Minister of Justice, Mr Dullah Omar's temporary opposition to the court application to repeal these laws. He later withdrew his objection, without clarifying the reason for his opposition (fig 10). This did not inspire confidence in the consistency of the ANC's commitment to non-discrimination.

Other important constitutional test cases centre specifically around family issues like children and custody, and partners' rights. Two important hearings were a 1998 ruling that allowed the female partner of a police officer to be registered onto her medical aid scheme<sup>44</sup> and the 1999 ruling<sup>45</sup> that allows lesbian and gay foreign partners to be treated in the same manner as heterosexual married partners, with respect to immigration status, under the Aliens Control Act. Both cases involved lengthy legal procedures and set ground-breaking precedents; both judgements were appealed and, in the Aliens Control case, the applicants were harassed by the Department of Home Affairs. NCGLE was instrumental in supporting the applicants, bringing these cases before the courts and achieving the successful outcomes.

Social and visual visibility have been a primary interest in my artistic production. This was born out of frustration and dismay with the lack of locally produced lesbian images. An earlier work to *Lavender Menace*, and in many respects a precursor, is *A Lesbian Couple in South Africa, 1995* (fig. 10). This work was made in response to a public invitation to take part in a photographic portrait project, hosted by the *Mail & Guardian* and the South African National Gallery (SANG), culminating in an exhibition - *People's Portraits*. The entry form assured participants that 'Entrants have complete freedom to

---

<sup>44</sup> Inspector Jolande Langemaat took POLMED, the police medical Aid scheme, to court for unfair discrimination for refusing to register her partner, Beverly-Anne Myburgh, as a partner thereby effectively denying her medical aid benefits. On January 28th, 1998, in the Pretoria High Court Justice Roux ruled in favour of Langemaat (*Equality* 1998:8-11).

<sup>45</sup> Judge Dennis Davis ruled that the Aliens Control Act unfairly discriminated against same sex partnerships and was therefore unconstitutional. He gave the Department of Home Affairs one year to bring this Act in line with the Constitution. This has been delayed due to Home Affairs' appeal against the judgement. The judgement was delivered in the Cape High Court on the 12 February 1999 (*Equality*

express the spirit of humanity in anyway they see fit...'. At the time it was not yet clear whether 'sexual orientation' would be included in the final draft of *The Constitution*. As such, with regard to sexual orientation, the notion of 'the spirit of humanity' was a bit tenuous.

I chose to image a couple whose identity is literally effaced. As Jane Taylor comments in a review of *People's Portraits* (*Mail & Guardian* September 29-October 5, 1995) 'Most overtly, Brundrit is telling us that the subject of the portrait, the lesbian couple, is excluded from the language of visual images, because the 'couple', as we know how to see it, is generally a heterosexual one'. It is this lack of acknowledgement of lesbians both socially and visually that is referenced in *A Lesbian Couple in South Africa, 1995*.

Silence supposedly speaks volumes but only if one is aware that a silence exists. Grover (1993: 184), in a discussion of Tee Corinne's photographs (figs. 19 & 20), also mentions the lack of lesbian visibility and how conceptual and formal aspects are integrated in her work. 'These heavily manipulated images function not only as protection for individual models' identity, but also as a correlative for the status of the public lesbian: present yet invisible, out yet hidden, provocative yet in need of protection'.

The cut out couple in *A Lesbian Couple in South Africa, 1995* leave a physical trace, in the form of shadows around the vacated space, that alerts the viewer to the act of erasure. An advantage of imaging lesbians portrayed as having no distinguishing physical characteristics, is that the image could represent all lesbians. 'The task of representing the *Portrait of a Lesbian Couple in South Africa* is an act of the imagination, and we as viewers are manipulated into filling the space ourselves, producing portraits that rely upon our own experiences, fears, stereotypes, longings' (*Mail & Guardian* September 29-October 5, 1995). This is not the case with *Lavender Menace*. These images are of a very specific group of lesbians, namely white (mostly), economically empowered and 30/40 something. *Lavender Menace* speaks only of this specific group's lesbian experience and is not representative of all lesbian experience. Lesbians are a very diverse group, cutting

across religions, politics, socio-economics, physical characteristics and abilities.

*Lavender Menace* is thematically linked to *A Portrait of a Lesbian Couple in South Africa, 1995* with respect to its content; the concern with lesbian visibility. *Lavender Menace* consists of two series of photographs *Does your lifestyle depress your mother?* and *A Dyke Career Series* plus calendar. The first series consists of twelve, black & white images (figs. 21-32) that depict lesbian couples engaged in mundane domestic activities. The series follows a 'day in the life' type narrative where the couples wake up, bath, shop, clean house, watch tv, eat, go out, clean teeth and go to sleep. These images are small in scale, approximately postcard size<sup>46</sup>, which necessitates a close and intimate reading. *A Dyke Career Series* (figs. 34-45) consists of twelve portraits of lesbians. In these images the subject is photographed with various props that point to the work she is engaged in, with the images titled to disclose her career, for example, restaurateur, chef, goldsmiths, artist and so forth. This series is physically realised in two different forms, firstly as large (1,2 x 1,5 metre) prints and as an A3 sized *Dyke Career Calendar for the year 2000*. A calendar seemed an appropriate way to extend the concept of visibility. The calendar reaches a wider audience than regular gallery goers, as it is displayed outside of gallery space, and is functional for a year.

*Lavender Menace* raises the issue of, and contributes to, promoting lesbian visibility, both socially and visually. As the photographs image lesbians they encourage lesbian social visibility in a number of ways. The gallery exhibitions and the accompanying media coverage encourages debate and brings issues of lesbianism into the public's consciousness.

In this chapter I have discussed the scarcity of lesbian recorded events in South Africa. Under extreme circumstances lesbians did rally together, for example, in the Law Reform movement and the liberation struggle. However, pervasive homophobic attitudes have kept lesbianism out of the public eye. Where public records do exist they often express homophobic sentiments. It is ironic that those sentiments acknowledge the existence of

---

<sup>46</sup> *Does your lifestyle depress your mother?* size is 14,5 x 10 cm and reproduced close to scale in this thesis.

lesbians, and consequently lesbianism gains public exposure and to a certain extent, longevity through these records.

The relationship of homophobia to lesbian visibility is complex. For instance if Mugabe had not objected so vehemently to the presence of GALZ at the 1995 book fair, Zimbabwe and the world may never have realised that there was a thriving, organised gay and lesbian community in Harare. It is difficult to assess the impact that this exposure - increased state sanctioned homophobia, public awareness and possibly new members, international support and a watchful international eye, increased interest in Zimbabwe's alleged human rights violations - has had on Zimbabwean lesbians and gays.

If we take a step back in the chain of events, if GALZ had not made themselves publicly visible, they may not have been seen as a direct challenge to the status quo and therefore demanding of a response, or have received governmental censure.

Social visibility, as we have seen, is context bound. It is easier/possible to be visible in a supportive environment in a time when, as in South Africa, *The Constitution* affords some protection. Although there are more possibilities for lesbians to construct their identity in diverse ways than ever before, the public's perception of lesbians and gays is still distorted and inaccurate.

## CHAPTER TWO: Stereotypes

Jo Spence (1995:169), in *Cultural Sniping* says ‘The images in circulation in a particular culture act to mould and set limits upon how each of us will “see ourselves” and “others”. Although we are never totally fixed by these images, they do shape our sense of reality’. This chapter explores the naming, labelling and defining by ourselves and others, that is implicit in the concept of stereotypes and how they function. Our ‘images’ are also shaped by beliefs, opinions, prejudice and popularity. I will also discuss *Lavender Menace* in relation to the complexities of the concept of stereotyping.

Names or labels convey meaning. However meaning is not necessarily fixed; unless a label is specifically defined, its intended signification may not be apparent, as was noted in the discussion of the term ‘lesbian’. In contrast to a name or a label, a stereotype tends to bear relatively stable ascribed connotations, because a defining feature of a stereotype is that its meaning is consistent amongst the group that ‘believes’ it. A stereotype as a tool to structure thought is useful, but the manner in which it is applied is often distorting and limiting.

The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary (Brown 1993:3052) offers us the following definition of ‘stereotype’: ‘A preconceived, standardised, and oversimplified impression of the characteristics which typify a person, situation, etc., often shared by all members of a society or certain social groups; an attitude based on such a preconception. Also, a person or thing appearing to conform closely to such a standardised impression’.

Social psychologists define stereotypes in a more complex, and for my purposes, a more appropriate way.

‘A stereotype is a summary impression of a group of people, in which a person believes that all members of that group share a common trait or traits. It is one of the cognitive schema by which we map the world. Some stereotypes are negative. Some are positive. Some consist of neutral impressions of categories of people. ...A stereotype is a way of organising experience, of making sense of the differences among individuals and groups, and of predicting how people will behave’ (Wade & Travis 1987:660).

Although stereotypes allow us to function in the world - by making sense of an overwhelming amount of information - they distort reality in a number of problematic ways. They emphasise differences between groups, effectively 'othering' particular groups, rather than looking for shared experience or features. They encourage a view of the othered group as homogeneous and don't allow for differentiation within that group. Stereotypes are therefore an ideal way to perpetuate mis-information and prejudice. Adrian Piper (Berger 1990:217) talks of '...the divisive illusion of otherness...' in the context of racial prejudice. This can, however, be applied equally to otherness in the context of sexual prejudice. 'The ideology of otherness is a pernicious symptom of the inability to gain self-worth except by differentiating oneself from others implicitly viewed as inferior. It's a false ideology, based on invalid inductive generalisations with a low probability of truth' (Berger 1990:217).

Prejudice based on a negative stereotype often resists rational argument to change for one or more of the following reasons. Ideas appear consistent, there is support from others who share the idea, one feels proud of one's own group and superior to others, and there may be economic benefits gained by maintaining the prejudice. Excluding economic benefits, all the above criteria apply to homophobia and could account for the reluctance by the general public to relinquish prejudiced beliefs.

Ainley (1995:145) states that 'For straight society, lesbian is synonymous with butch' (fig. 11) and this is the dominant stereotype of lesbian in South Africa<sup>47</sup>. This, of course, means that 'butch' needs definition. At this point it can be deemed 'masculine' and assertive. Stereotypes are not always entirely inaccurate, some contain a grain of truth, although this 'truth' is interpreted and influenced by the dominant culture and its values. It is worth considering why society in general would hold the opinion that lesbians are butch. In thinking about visual signifiers of difference, there are few visual clues to

---

<sup>47</sup> This is not necessarily true in the porn industry, as represented on the internet or in magazines that although published elsewhere, are widely available in South Africa. Here 'lesbian' may be stereotyped as voluptuous, model-like, blondes who really want to fuck men. Pornography is one of the places images of 'lesbians' are prolific.

lesbians' sexual orientation. Ainley talks about how clothing can be an expression of a range of affiliations and alliances.

'Where this differs for lesbians, and for other groups who are not necessarily immediately identifiable, is that, given the continuing invisibility of many aspects of lesbian life, lesbians have had to find ways to find and recognise each other. Many lesbians have also used clothes to differentiate themselves from straight women, and refuse the limitations of straight women's dress as part of their visible lesbian identity' (Ainley 1995:145).

Perkins raises the issue that stereotypes can therefore be utilised positively as a way of identifying members of the same group. Stereotypes are linked with visual visibility and there is a degree of conformity in sub-cultures. Hence stereotypic dress codes and haircuts will be understood by and used to identify members of the same group, and these same visual codes would not necessarily be interpreted by members from a different group in the same way. Morgan discusses how, with the lack of opportunity to differ from the dominant fashion in the 1950s, lesbians resorted to other identifying techniques. In reference to Shey's experience in finding a 'code' to establish lesbian identity, Morgan writes, 'This was done by asking whether she [Shey] had read "The Well of Loneliness" by Radclyffe Hall. This code was referred to in many of the other life stories' (Morgan 1999:9). There was very little opportunity for dressing differently and Shey recalls a solution. '...a lot of the butch girls used to carry their spare clothes in a suitcase, a small suitcase and that's how you would go to a party. You'd have this suitcase and then you'd go there and change and have a ball and then change back to go home which was absolutely hysterical' (Morgan 1999:10).

Many lesbians created visual clues through adopting masculine clothing and/or behaviour, hence the creation of 'the butch'. Lesbians who chose not to, or could not<sup>48</sup> visually differentiate themselves from mainstream society remained 'invisible'. It makes sense therefore that the stereotype of lesbian would be based on the easily visually identifiable lesbian. However this stereotype comes with negative connotations. Not only do 'out' butch lesbians receive societal censure but also disapproval from (in)visible

---

<sup>48</sup> Some lesbians have the choice of coming out, but for many the pay off in terms of familial or societal rejection and ostracism is too great. It therefore makes sense to pass as straight and be safely assimilated

lesbians who see butches as an assault on their credibility<sup>49</sup>. As fashion has changed over the years dress codes have become more difficult to identify and of course mainstream fashion/media has assimilated previously codified lesbian dress into the high fashion of lesbian chic.

Joan Nestle made the following observations about the 1950s and 60s in her book *A Restricted Country* quoted here from Smyth (1998:83): 'Butch-femme women made Lesbian visible in a terrifying way in a historical period when there was no Movement protection for them. Their appearance spoke of erotic independence, and they often provoked rage and censure from their own community and straight society'.

She also writes positively about butch women of that time. 'None of the butch women I was with ...ever presented themselves to me as men; they did announce themselves as tabooed women who were willing to identify their passion for other women by wearing clothes that symbolised the taking of responsibility. Part of this responsibility was for sexual expertise'<sup>50</sup>. Butch, as an identity, has to a certain extent been reclaimed in the 1980s and 90s in the United Kingdom and United States where role 'play' has gained new currency and is celebrated by the emergence of various 'identities' such as boy dykes and drag kings.

The predominant interpretation by society, as presented through the media, of the butch lesbian is negative. If the group is 'liked', the stereotype will be positive, but if the group is 'disliked' the stereotype will be negative (Wade & Travis). It is not surprising therefore that lesbians, with their pariah status in Southern Africa, tend to be negatively stereotyped by the dominant culture. An example of negative media stereotyping

---

into mainstream society.

<sup>49</sup> How to present yourself to the world and what to wear and has been a recurring issue in lesbian social circles. This reflects the diversity of individuals that make up the lesbian population. In fact lesbian organisations are often not very tolerant of difference. An example of this is the sm dyke vs lesbian feminist argument in the UK in the mid 1980s. As there have been fewer lesbian organisations in South Africa this has not been formalised to such an extent as in the USA/UK. However this does still operate on a personal level in a freedom of association kind of way. For instance a closeted lesbian might not hang out with a known lesbian or a visually out lesbian.

<sup>50</sup> Quoted from Joan Nestle (1987) *A Restricted Country: Essays and Short Stories*. London: Sheba. in (Lewis & Rolley 1996:185)

appeared in a newspaper article on women's tennis ('The frill is gone' *Mail & Guardian* June 18 - 25, 1999). Jim White refers to 'A lesbian built like a brick outhouse...' This is clearly derogatory and is consistent with media prejudice<sup>51</sup>. However articles in the *Mail & Guardian* are generally unprejudiced and *Fair Lady* (July 8, 1998) published a non-judgmental article on the struggle of lesbian, Gertruida Greyling, to have her daughter returned to her custody.

The media play an integral role in 'informing' the public, and as such in sustaining or creating stereotypes. An interesting development in the early 90s in the United Kingdom and United States was the creation of a new stereotype, that of the 'lipstick' or 'chic lesbian'. This stereotype portrayed lesbians as being straight-looking, hip, sexy and sexually aware, fashion/beauty conscious, chic women and appeared in high fashion glossies such as *Italian Vogue* and *Elle* while in the United Kingdom every soap opera had its own lesbian character. Healey somewhat cynically comments, although not unrealistically so, that '...it is no coincidence that the media now loves the lesbian because she is so exciting but so intensely non-political. The chic lesbian is interesting to a male-based media because she is far more untransgressive than her lesbian feminist foremothers' (Healey 1996:197). This stereotype of the chic lesbian did not really receive much exposure in South Africa<sup>52</sup> except for the attention devoted to a few select international stars such as kd lang, and some movies and TV programmes that mentioned or featured lesbians.

Although Perkins argues that stereotypes can be redefined to a certain extent, I would argue that new stereotypes are created, sometimes replacing the old ones or existing parallel to them. For instance the butch lesbian stereotype is still firmly in place and the lesbian chic stereotype exists along side the former without constituting a challenge to it. This could be attributed to one of the characteristics of stereotypes, i.e. that they produce

---

<sup>51</sup> The entire article was appropriately objected to in a letter published the following week. 'It creates oppressive prescriptions of how women should look and behave if they are not to be considered freaks' said Alison Moultrie (*Mail & Guardian* 25 June-July 1, 1999).

<sup>52</sup> South Africans were busy with the first democratically held elections and were very politically active, lobbying to get sexual orientation into the Equality clause of the Bill of Rights. I don't want to suggest that all lesbians were involved with this but most were affected by politics in some way or other.

selective perceptions where cognisance is taken only of new information that reinforces the dominant feature of the stereotype, and information that challenges or debunks the stereotype is disregarded.

One of the ways of debunking negative stereotypes and prejudice is through contact with, and therefore experience of, the affected group. For this contact to be effective in reducing prejudice between groups, a number of criteria need to be met. These are inter-group co-operation, the recognition of equal status, support by authority figures and opportunities for informal socialising (Wade & Travis 1987:683). In this regard, while the arts and literature may not debunk stereotypes, they might - amongst other things - create a more conducive environment for contact that could facilitate the criteria mentioned above to be met or to occur<sup>53</sup>.

Ryland Fisher, while editor of the *Cape Times*, used a similar premise for the 'One City, Many Cultures' project that was launched in his newspaper in February 1999. 'Fisher realised that, more often than not, prejudice was based on ignorance and that, if a way could be found for people to get to know each other better, this hopefully could also make them understand each other better'. He also stated, 'The project aims to promote tolerance and understanding among people of all cultures and religions throughout the metropolitan area.' ('Major push to unite our city' by Priscilla Singh, *Cape Times* February 1, 1999). Unfortunately this project emphasised religion and viewed marginalised communities from a religious perspective. This had the effect of exaggerating difference and not really concentrating on shared experience. However at the very least the project raised public debate.

As part of the One City, Many Cultures project, the *Cape Times* (February 17 1999) published a supplement on same-sex relationships. However, despite the intentions noted earlier, the resulting article was problematic. The *Cape Times* had written that Rayda

---

<sup>53</sup> Reney Warrington (Artthrob November 1999) concurs with this possibility when she writes 'Brundrit's calendar depicts an aspect of lesbian life not often heard of or seen. The everyday working class routine of holding down a job and building a career. Something we all have to deal with. A common denominator. This could possibly convince the broader, straight public that we are not freaks, perverts, cat owners or

Jacobs would examine religious and cultural attitudes towards same-sex relationships. The article did raise some issues such as the pain of familial rejection and the joy of familial support but owing to its emphasis on religion it simply became a forum for religious leaders to hold forth. The article quoted an Imam and a Rabbi, who stated 'As in Islam, Classical Judaism does not condemn the tendency, but the act'. Bishop Frank Retief of St James Church, Kenilworth concurs, 'God doesn't make mistakes. You're not born with the condition. I recognise that there are people who have strong homosexual tendencies who will never enter into heterosexual relationships, but they're to remain celibate'. This article united the three major religions in Cape Town in their condemnation of homosexuality.

Two people, who clearly hadn't read the article closely, wrote in criticising the *Cape Times* for including same-sex relationships in this project.

'For the Cape Times to attempt to normalise what is deemed sinful to all religions, is of course, disrespectful to, and intolerant of, the fundamental beliefs of the proponents of those religions' (Errol Naidoo *Cape Times* February 18 1999).

'By printing this kind of article you are making people believe that it is acceptable to be homosexual and whereas a well-adjusted person is not going to suddenly become homosexual, there are people who are on the verge of making such decisions and, by making such a way of life seem a viable alternative, your article may be the "straw that breaks the camel's back"' (Brent Russell *Cape Times* February 22 1999).

Although the dominant stereotype of lesbian is one of butch, the dominant concept of the lesbian relationship is one of butch and femme. Much has been written about butch/femme roles from the 1920s to the present times<sup>54</sup>, specifically regarding whether these are either an imposition or adoption of heterosexual values and aspirations or an erotically charged relationship of choice. Again the 'grain of truth' aspect of stereotypes may be cited by way of explaining the existence of this view. The point is that some lesbians do structure their relationships in this way. These relationships are more visually

---

living life as a series of wild orgies where we swing from chandelier to chandelier. On the other hand..'

<sup>54</sup> In *The Well of Loneliness* Radclyffe Hall firmly placed butch/femme on the lesbian agenda. Joan Nestle's *A Restricted Country* (1987) makes a valuable contribution in re-examining these roles, as do critical writings such as the texts that appear in *butch/femme: inside lesbian gender*, edited by Sally R. Munt.

apparent due to the visually differentiated butch. Many lesbians however, do not structure their relationships in this way and therefore remain visually invisible since they do not sustain the stereotype. Felicia Mabuza Suttle, on her popular talk show on South African television in the early nineties, asked an incredulous lesbian couple ‘who played the man?’

Definitions tend to create an essentialised, homogenous picture. Names for lesbian (of which there are many), generally carry the same societal negative prejudice and connotations as the stereotype of lesbian. Ainley (1995:97) comments that the negative connotations of the word ‘lesbian’ itself are so strong that it is not surprising that there is opposition to this term by lesbians themselves.

An example of the disapproval placed on ‘lesbian’ by society in South Africa is discussed by Edwin Cameron in an essay entitled ‘Unapprehended Felons’. He refers to a legal case in 1981<sup>55</sup> where a man’s wife had left him and was staying with another woman whom he called a lesbian. He was then successfully sued by her for defamation of character, the implications being that it ‘diminishes a woman’s name and reputation in the eyes of “right-thinking persons”’ (Cameron 1994:90).

Naming was explored in some detail in a study conducted during 1998 by Triangle Project, a gay and lesbian health organisation in Cape Town. The demographics of the participants varied in age, language groups (English, Afrikaans, Xhosa), religion, occupation and level of education. 48% of the twenty-five participating women identified themselves as ‘lesbian’ and 32% as ‘gay women’. ‘Homosexual’ and ‘queer’ were not used, although these omissions could be attributed to the small size of the participating group. While none of the participating women used the term ‘dyke’, this is however, a word that is in general circulation in Cape Town.

The study indicated that there was widespread resistance to being labelled, as this was seen to be negative. Some of the participants felt that; ‘It is almost as if people use labels

---

<sup>55</sup> The case is *Vermaak v van der Merwe* 1981 SA 78 (N).

to describe something abnormal to judge people' and 'If you label yourself you give people ammunition,' presumably to discriminate against you (Griffen, Stein & De Pinho 1998:17). 'Lesbian', in particular, was seen as an undesirable term.

Naming, although complex, is important as it informs the process of identity construction and how that identity is understood by the individual involved, by members of that particular group and by those outside that group. There are many names in use for homosexual women, for example, some of the more mainstream are: lesbian, gay woman, gay lady, dyke, diesel dyke, bulldyke, bulldagger, baby dyke, queer, butch, femme, designer dyke, lettie, lipstick lesbian, SM dyke, manvrou,<sup>56</sup> sister, loslet,<sup>57</sup> and others. This list is by no means complete. Words also range from historical for example, invert, third sex, variant, sapphic, daughters of Bilitis, passing woman, to obscure slang, for example, wendy,<sup>58</sup> lettuce leaf, letambula,<sup>59</sup> vanilla,<sup>60</sup> and to specific geographically-bound usage, such as zami and khush<sup>61</sup> (used in England), as well as other words that would not be used in polite conversation.<sup>62</sup> As proposed in Post-structuralist and Deconstructionist theory, meaning is unstable. The core meaning (denotation) of all of these words is similar but the context in which they are used, and by whom, changes how they are intended and understood. This understanding may, therefore, also vary from individual to individual and as there is no fixed meaning, definitions should be clearly spelt out (fig. 12 ).

Another way of resisting some of the negative connotations associated with particular words is to use a strategy to reclaim 'derogatory' words. Names that have been used by a dominant group pejoratively to differentiate an other group, are adopted by the othered group to describe themselves. This transforms the meaning of the word and the way that it is understood, and confers respectability with regard to its new context. Reclaiming

<sup>56</sup> Manvrou is an Afrikaans word literally translated as a 'man woman'.

<sup>57</sup> Loslet is slang for slut, translated from the Afrikaans 'los' meaning loose.

<sup>58</sup> Wendy is a white lesbian.

<sup>59</sup> Letambula, a fun word in use in the Western Cape although not widely used.

<sup>60</sup> Vanilla, sexually conservative.

<sup>61</sup> Zami and khush are words used by black lesbians of Caribbean and Indian descent respectively.

<sup>62</sup> These seem to refer mainly to specific sexual acts that are not specific to lesbians e.g. carpet eater, lip licker.

words is a '...sly, ironic weapon to steal from the homophobe's hand and use against him' (Smyth 1992:11). An example of this is the successful appropriation of 'queer' in Britain and the USA to describe a 1990's politicised movement and philosophy. Reclaiming words is not particular to gays and lesbians, but can be seen as a global semantic strategy utilised by marginalised groups. For instance the use of 'nigger' by some black Americans, or 'girl' by politicised women's groups e.g. gorilla girls.

It should be re-emphasised that usage is context bound and group specific. As lesbians are not a homogenous group, not all will understand how a particular word might become used as a positive term of identification. As such reclaimed words may still hold their negative potential (Olivier 1994:219)<sup>63</sup>. As Cameron & Gevisser note (1994:5) 'What for one is a submission to language stereotyping is for another an assertive re-appropriation of language'. As a result of this it is not always appropriate for an outsider to use a reclaimed word without creating discomfort for the group who have reclaimed it. This would depend on the context and who was using what word.

Societal attitudes influence the way names are understood. In a group where homogenous ideas are held on a particular topic, a label can be understood to signify a set of prescribed attributes. For instance, in a conservative community 'lesbian' could signify a dangerous, sinful, insane, sick person. This could lead to enforced visits to priests, sangomas or medication, guilt, confusion, and/or potential ostracisation by the community. In a liberal community the same label could denote independence and cause very little response, other than possibly some curiosity.

Names can be inclusive or alienating depending on how they are understood. One series of my images, and the calendar, both use the word 'dyke' in their titles. On the title page of the 'Dyke career calendar' the use of the word 'dyke' is explained. I state 'The word 'dyke' has a variety of meanings and interpretations, and not all the participants would refer to themselves this way. 'Dyke' is my name of preference, hence the title, and I

---

<sup>63</sup> Although Gerrit Olivier discusses mainly gay 'language' in his essay 'Ada to Zelda', he raises some language issues that apply to lesbians as well.

would define it as ‘a lesbian with attitude’ in keeping with the Mason-John and Khambatta reading of the term, cited below. It has however become clear that dyke is not a name that is understood or accepted in the same way by everyone.

The word ‘dyke’ is bound to historical time frames. It does not appear in the 1976 edition of *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English*, other than to describe a ditch or low wall built to hold back the sea. It does however appear as bulldike, in dictionaries of American slang dating from the 40s, to name women who adopt masculine or butch roles (Mason-John & Khambatta 1993:40). Dyke was definitely in use in American 50s bar culture and in the 60s to mean butch. Dyke has retained its meaning of butch and can be used as such, or it can also mean a lesbian with attitude, or it can be used as an insult. *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (Brown 1993:770) defines Dyke as derogatory slang to mean a masculine lesbian. However during the 1980s dyke was reclaimed as a positive term; ‘for a lesbian who is stropky, independent and strong or a lesbian with politics’ (Mason-John & Khambatta 1993:40). If one takes dyke, meaning butch, as an insult, it only holds potency if butch is viewed as undesirable. Tilla Jantjies, in *Defiant Desire* says ‘I was always a tomboy, a dyke. I love that word, dyke! It’s me! I look at other women on the street and if they remind me of myself or look butch I think, ‘What a dyke’ (Chan Sam 1994:189).

Names are also used by members of a particular group to conceal the topic being discussed from outsiders to that group. This would apply to the more obscure terms because, obviously, a term in general use would be understood. The ‘need to hide’ comes from a history of homophobic oppression where concealment was equated with survival. An example of this is the use of the word ‘family’ as a coded reference to sexual orientation. For instance in a conversation amongst lesbians, ‘The cinema was full of family’, ‘Here comes family’ or ‘Is she family?’ is a particularly useful term as it has everyday usage and therefore is less likely to get noticed and queried than say; ‘Here come the lettuce leaves’.

Accepting naming means taking on an identity and its social construction. For instance it

should be noted that in some traditional cultures same sex unions occurred or do occur. In the past<sup>64</sup> rural Basotho women, although having primary heterosexual marriages, have been documented as having unions of a homosexual nature. These unions were based on the premise that as there is no penis present, therefore no sex, and as such these relationships were openly condoned as part of social structures. In her article, 'Women in Lesotho and the "Western" Construction of Homophobia', Kendall (1999:172) notes that although formalised 'marriages' between women no longer take place various sexual activities between women do still occur (noted in the early 1990s). She writes

'What the situation in Lesotho suggests is that women can and do develop strong affectional and erotic ties with other women in a culture where there is no concept of or social construction "lesbian" nor is there such a concept of erotic exchanges among women as being "sexual" at all. And yet, partly because of the "no concept" issue and in part because women have difficulty supporting themselves without men in Lesotho, there has been no lesbian lifestyle option available to Basotho women. Lesbian or lesbian-like behaviour has been commonplace, conventional; but it has not been viewed as "sexual", nor as an alternative to heterosexual marriage, which is both a sexual and an economic part of culture'.

If these relationships were to be seen as sexual and as such excluding men and were thus named, there would undoubtedly be societal censure. This is a prime example of how language, and the way meaning is constructed, influences thought and actions.

Most terms used that refer to lesbians have negative connotations in the general context of a predominantly heterosexual world. However objections around rejecting labels are complex. These could include a reluctance to take on the perceived negative stereotype of 'lesbian' and its associated societal condemnation. Or one might view lesbian as only one aspect of one's identity and prefer to be labelled woman or artist. If one claims the label one sets oneself up in opposition to heterosexuality and potentially also in opposition to sub-cultures e.g. lesbian feminist vs SM leather dyke.

As Ainley (1995:96) says in a discussion on labelling, 'Having a language to describe

---

<sup>64</sup> In 1995 Judith Gay wrote; "...elderly informants told me that special affective and gift exchange partnerships among girls and women existed 'in the old days' of their youth" (Kendall 1999:167). In this article Kendall interviews a woman who refers to these 'homosexual' marriages as taking place up until the late 1950s.

yourself means you exist'. The stereotype discussed may influence and encourage a woman to identify herself as lesbian or may deter her from defining herself as such. Thandazo Alice Kunene quoted in an article 'Black lesbian life on the Reef' (Chan Sam 1994:188) says

'My family does not discuss homosexuality, and if they do, they talk about *stabane* and all that. So maybe I was scared to face up and say I like girls better because they would call me *stabane*. I knew that logically I couldn't be *stabane* because that is a hermaphrodite, someone with both male and female genitals. ...It was only later, when I was older and I saw the word lesbian in a magazine that things became clearer. I remember the word almost jumped off the page! I thought for a long time about it because I knew I was one'.

*Lavender Menace* was produced in response to public prejudice against lesbians<sup>65</sup>, specifically as implemented and supported by the dominant stereotype, i.e. the butch 'othered' lesbian. Some of the pejorative characteristics ascribed to this stereotyped lesbian<sup>66</sup> include the following: she is a loser, she can't get a man (probably because she is too fat and ugly), she is butch, masculine in appearance and behaviour. As characteristics may vary across age and colour the only consistent attributes then would be the stereotype of how the butch lesbian appears in the world, her 'masculine' dress and behaviour. It seemed to me that the stereotype of lesbian needed to be challenged, as it is through this structure that prejudice is maintained. In a review of *Lavender Menace* Reney Warrington (artthrob November 1999), a free lance writer, comments on the *Dyke Career Calendar*.

'...it breaks away from the stereotypical portrayal of lesbians - said stereotypes being overly butch dykes who would beat the crap out of any man. Or the two big-boobed nymphettes getting it on in a porn video or magazine. Any man's fantasy. In between these stereotypes you have your pretty normal gay women with a family, job, heartache and joy going about her everyday life'.

What is important to note is that the images make meaning when read in sequence as part of a series, and read differently to this as individual works.

---

<sup>65</sup> I have a vested interest in homophobic discrimination being eradicated as this will improve the quality of my life and those of other lesbians.

<sup>66</sup> I am basing these characteristics primarily on my own experience and that of lesbians in my immediate peer group who are 30/40 something and white.

One place where I make an obvious visual reference to butch/femme roles is the cover image of the *Dyke Career Calendar* and exhibition invitation (fig. 33). This is a collaged double portrait of myself standing, dressed in a tuxedo and in a black dress holding a handbag. Sue Williamson describes the figures ‘as a somewhat dowdy handbag-toting housewife out for the evening next to a much cooler self dressed in man’s clothing (Artthrob. September 1999)’. In both the images I look as if I am in drag. The figures interact with each other in a constructed performance that sends up ‘role play’ and my facial expressions of ironic self awareness add to this impression. That I am dressed in evening wear makes reference to a long tradition of images of butch and femme shot at night in bars and clubs (e.g. starting with Brassai in 1930s Paris photographs).

In the *Dyke Career Series* the alternative to the dominant stereotype is presented, one of independent women, surviving without male support, happy, healthy and by implication, successful. One of the criticisms of this series is that the difference between these lesbian women and heterosexual women is not visually apparent. Benita Munitz in her review of *Lavender Menace*, says of the *Dyke Career Series* ‘As pictured here, the women do jobs like everyone else, dress, look and laugh (a lot!) like everyone else, live and love as many of us do. There are few hints of anything “other” (*Cape Times* September 9 1999 ‘Seeing fun, humanity in lesbian love and life’). Cobus van Bosch (*Die Burger* September 2 1999) also queries if photographs like these would have made any impression if they had been of heterosexual women.<sup>67</sup> In these images there are few visual differences between lesbian and heterosexual women. Difference is complex and not necessarily about surface ‘identification’ but rather about an internal construction of identity. Context, and text, contribute significantly to constructing meaning.

Munitz grasps this issue and notes ‘For the exhibition, we are told “explores lesbian identity” - something we might not have guessed from the photographs alone. ...’ The images rely on the additional information brought to the series by the text, which is vital in making meaning as it is only through the text/title/context that the viewer knows that these are lesbians.

---

<sup>67</sup> ‘...die vraag is net: so foto’s soos die oor heteroseksuele enige indruk gemaak het?’

In contrast, *Does your lifestyle depress your mother?* asserts the notion of difference. In this series the couples do ordinary public activities together and, in that, parody heterosexual roles of equivalent social class and standing. More importantly, this seemingly ordinary behaviour is disrupted by the fact that it is lesbian couples that are depicted and not heterosexual couples. By photographing the other as the ordinary, the images create unease as they directly challenge the boundaries of heterosexual concepts of otherness. As Gertrude Stein wrote ‘She always says she dislikes the abnormal, it is so obvious. She says the normal is so much more simply complicated and interesting’ (Lagrace Volcano & Halberstam 1999: 152). If the images depicted visually differentiated lesbians it would be easy to position the women in the categories of ‘own’ and ‘other’; these categories would then remain static and unchallenged.

A contrasting example is the content of queer artist Steven Cohen’s performance pieces, which are provocative and confrontational. For instance, a performance at Cape Town’s 1999 Dance Indaba, *Tradition* is described as a ‘haunting, scatological’ new work ‘in which Cohen is suspended from the ceiling wearing Gemsbokhorn heels and then, as a clip from a porn video plays behind him, douches on Elu who is dancing below on point to ‘Tradition’ from *Fiddler on the Roof*’ (eMail & Guardian, October 29, 1999). His work has caused a consistent public outcry<sup>68</sup> as, in a sense, he performs straight society’s worst fears about gay men. This reading of his work re-inforces, rather than contests, the boundaries of ‘them’ and ‘us’.

The group depicted in *Does your lifestyle depress your mother?* and the *Dyke Career Calendar* is white, middle class, 30/40 something, and out. The fact that this is a selective representative of lesbian experience should be visually apparent, but it is also stated in the text on the title page of the calendar. To present this as a definitive group of lesbians would create the impression that lesbians are a homogenous group. As such this would be

---

<sup>68</sup> In response to the public’s dis-ease Cohen comments. ‘I’m messing with a society that is more shocked by the violence of my self-presentation as monster/queer/unrepresentable or whatever than by the actual violence they live with every day. It’s almost as if, because I’m alive and present, I’m more real and more threatening than reality’ (*artthrob* May, 1998).

problematic, and my information would therefore be as untrustworthy as the butch lesbian stereotype. By reading the accompanying text it should be clear that the lesbians depicted in these images form a subgroup within the lesbian population, and within that subgroup there are some unifying similarities.

In recent years there have been intense debates about representational politics<sup>69</sup> in South Africa. One of the positions taken in the more recent surfacing of the issue, documented in *Grey Areas* (Atkinson & Breitz 1999), is that imaging a group or person is the same as speaking for that group or person. In reductive terms one could then argue that only blacks could image blacks, women image women and lesbians make images of lesbians. However often the value of visual representation of lesbians and other marginalised groups lies in raising debate in previously inaccessible forums, rather than representing some lesbian experience, essentialised, or not.

In making visual representations of lesbians it is impossible to ignore the dominant stereotypes of lesbian as their societal following is too present. The possibilities of how we see ourselves and the way others see us are intertwined with historical, economic and social structures, and cannot be divorced from the context in which we find ourselves. Lesbian identity is complex in its relationship and varied in its response to the available butch stereotype. This 'identity' is embraced, rejected, subverted, modified, eroticised, condemned or ignored. The lesbian visual representation in *Lavender Menace* challenges the established stereotype by putting forward another view, another way of being, that will possibly contest the stability of this established stereotype.

---

<sup>69</sup> This debate was sparked by an essay written by Okwi Enwesor, 'Reframing the black subject: Ideology and fantasy in contemporary South African art' originally published in an exhibition catalogue for *Contemporary art from South Africa* curated by Marith Hope. Issues raised by the ensuing debate were published in Atkinson, B & Breitz, C (eds.) *Grey Areas* (1999) .

### CHAPTER THREE: Readability

In this chapter I look at the accessibility of my practical work - the photographs entitled *Lavender Menace* - in relation to the discourses of social documentary photography and portraiture. I examine how these images are perceived and how meaning is constructed by the viewer, taking into account Barthes's 'floating chain of significance, underlying the signifier' (Sekula 1982:91). The relationship of text to image and absence of information (the participants' names) and how that influences possible meanings, are also discussed.

'Readability' is defined in *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* as 'the quality of giving pleasure or interest when read; legibility' (Brown 1993:2492). 'Legibility' or 'legible' is, for the following discussion, the crucial aspect of this definition. 'Legible' is defined in terms of the written word (Brown 1993:1562) 'Of writing: clear enough to be read; easily deciphered. Of a literary composition: accessible to readers; easy to read, readable'. As I'm concerned with visual representation, for my purposes, I will define 'readability' as visual legibility, as form visually clear enough to be easily deciphered. This would include formal photographic aspects such as sharpness, depth of field and framing as well as other conventions of image making, such as composition, likeness and tonal values.

In looking at how photographs are perceived in the world, Burgin (1982:142) talks of the massive amount of photographs that we encounter in our daily existence<sup>70</sup>. He comments that photographs seemingly present themselves gratuitously to the viewer and are often perceived as 'an environment' rather than objects for critical attention. In viewing photographs critically, Burgin (1982:153) states that: 'A fact of primary social importance is that the photograph is a *place of work*, a structured and structuring space within which the reader deploys, and is deployed by, what codes he or she is familiar

---

<sup>70</sup> Sekula (1982:87) also notes the diverse uses of the photograph. 'Photographs are used to sell cars, commemorate family outings, to impress images of dangerous faces on the memories of post-office patrons, to convince citizens that their taxes did in fact collide gloriously with the moon, to remind us what we used to look like, to move our passions, to investigate a countryside for traces of an enemy, to advance

with in order to *make sense*'. Sekula (1982:85) elaborates on the relationship between the photograph and the production of meaning. He discusses the photograph as an 'incomplete utterance',

'a message that depends on some external matrix of conditions and presuppositions for its readability. That is, the meaning of any photographic message is necessarily context-determined. We might formulate this position as follows: a photograph communicates by means of its association with some hidden, or implicit text; it is this text, or system of hidden linguistic propositions, that carries the photograph into the domain of readability'.

Apart from the content, the formal and technical conventions of photography contributes to the way images are read. Including the formal aspects mentioned above, whether the photograph is colour or black and white, the scale and the fact that it is an image executed photographically and not in another medium, for example in oil paint, will all contribute to the way meaning is ascribed. And while these formal issues are not discussed in detail, their influence should be noted.

Photography has a complex relationship to the 'real'. 'Whilst we know, intellectually, that photographs are not "real", do not "tell the truth", but are specific choices, constructions, frozen moments, edited out of time, we invest them with meaning. Most people believe that photographs have the power to signify "truth" (Spence 1995:173). Sekula (1982:86) explains why the relationship between reality and truth is misinterpreted. 'Put simply, the photograph is seen as a re-presentation of nature itself, as an unmediated copy of the real world. The medium itself is seen as transparent. The propositions carried through the medium are unbiased and therefore true'.

It is interesting to note that the camera is constructed on laws of geometric perception that is a single point perspective, and not based on how the eye sees. However one could argue that we have learned 'to see' as the camera does; that we have come to accept the particular mimetic characteristics of photographic 'seeing' as natural. This way of seeing and that photography is constructed through what is perceived as a neutral process (the camera and chemistry) lead to the photographic image being equated with the 'real'.

---

the careers of photographers, etc.'.

Tagg (1988:2) points out that ‘the existence of a photograph is no guarantee of a corresponding pre-photographic existent’. He unpacks this statement further by asserting ‘On a more subtle level, however, we have to see that *every* photograph is the result of specific and, in every sense, significant distortions which render its relation to any prior reality deeply problematic and raise the question of the determining level of the material apparatus and of the social practices within which photography takes place.’ In other words, formal and technical considerations influence intended meaning. How an image is understood by the viewer and the context in which the photograph is presented and viewed also contribute to interpretation.

Owing to political circumstances in pre-liberation South Africa<sup>71</sup>, and the role of social documentary photography as a source of information and means to engage the international community<sup>72</sup> to pressure the apartheid government to begin political reform, documentary became the dominant photographic practice<sup>73</sup>. Consequently it is a genre that is familiar to most adult South Africans and, as such, is supposedly easy to access and decode.

Social documentary<sup>74</sup> is predicated on assumptions that photographs can present a ‘neutral’, faithful record of a given situation. This is in direct opposition to the theoretical framework discussed above and leads to problematic statements being made when social documentary is discussed in South Africa.

---

<sup>71</sup> The time period I’m referring to is from the early 1980s, with the intensification of the liberation struggle (the formation of the UDF) and the declaration of the first State of Emergency in 1985, up until the first democratic election in 1994.

<sup>72</sup> Under the State of Emergency the restrictions placed on written and visual accounts of ‘unrest’ were so harsh that photographs were more likely to be published in international than local publications. Photographers were routinely searched and had film confiscated to prevent images from being published.

<sup>73</sup> South African photographers started Afropix, an agency that distributed images, supported and fostered a culture of documentary photography.

<sup>74</sup> This tradition of social documentary originates in the USA as part Roosevelt’s New Deal programme (Tagg 1988:8) in the 1930s, particularly the Farm Security Administration photographers. Later it informs publications such as *Life* and *Picture Post*, which in turn influenced the South African *Drum* magazine during the 1950s.

Ken Oosterbroek<sup>75</sup>, winner of three Ilford Press Photo Awards, said in an interview on TV (Good Morning South Africa in 1994) 'I am a news photographer, and I try to force my neutrality on all people. The reason I'm there is to shoot pictures' (Nicol 1998:10). This implies that the photographer is merely a passive record maker.

In *South Africa The Cordoned Heart* (Wilson<sup>76</sup> 1986:18) the following explanation on photographic essays appears: 'These men and women, from differing backgrounds and regions of the country, sought to document as truthfully as they could the conditions of poverty and the people who endure it in the South African economy'. The implication is that it is possible to document truthfully. The Reverend Frank Chikane, General Secretary, South African Council of Churches in the foreword of *Beyond the Barricades* (1989:9) writes about truth as well. 'The pictures convey more powerfully than words ever could the grief and yet the determination of such people. Because of such pictures, *the truth* can be conveyed and remembered long after the tears have dried and the people have passed on' (my emphasis).

Chikane's statement conflates the actual event with the photographs made during the event. This can be partly attributed to the context in which the photographs were made (the liberation struggle) and the existence of a clear political agenda (to overthrow the apartheid government). Under the State of Emergency, with the suppression of information including photography, photographs were sometimes used as evidence that an event had actually occurred. Because of this evidential quality, struggle photography is often conflated with life. While I don't wish to diminish or undermine the role that photography played in the struggle in disseminating information, it is important to note that photography in South Africa has perpetuated many assumptions about what photographs do and how they mean.

One of the intentions behind *Lavender Menace* was to produce images of lesbians in a

---

<sup>75</sup> Ken Oosterbroek (1962-1994) was shot dead while photographing for the *Star* newspaper where he was the Chief Photographer.

<sup>76</sup> Francis Wilson was the Director of the Second Carnegie Inquiry into Poverty and Development in Southern Africa. Part of the Inquiry involved commissioning twenty photographic essays by different

public sphere and thus to raise issues around lesbian sexuality. Richard Brilliant (1991:19) comments that ‘To kill an image is to kill the possibility that the image will cause someone to remember the original’. However, an image can only be ‘killed’ if it was made in the first place, and owing to particular oppressive social circumstances in Southern Africa, there have been few images made of lesbians. In view of this, the very act of imaging is instructional in that it declares the existence of lesbians. By acknowledging the existence of lesbians, viewers will possibly engage with and question their own and society’s homophobia. Grover (1993:177) supports this argument when she writes about the photographers she interviewed during 1984-6 in the USA. ‘Central to all these photographers’ work is a conviction that it is a positive act to represent lesbian lives, that, in the words of Tee Corinne, “The images we see, as a culture, help define and expand our dreams, our perceptions of what is possible. Pictures of who we are help us visualize who we can be”’.

The lesbians photographed in *Lavender Menace* look more or less like ‘regular’ women<sup>77</sup>. In these photographs there is seemingly little to offend a conservative viewer; no explicit nudity and no sexual acts. This is a conscious attempt to negate objections from the viewer. If any objections exist they will have to be based on antipathy to the issue of sexual orientation, since they would be difficult to substantiate without the visual ‘evidence’. For instance the objection to images from *Does your lifestyle depress your mother?* by the Christians for the Truth<sup>78</sup>, was based on the fact that these photographs

---

photographers that were then published together in this book.

<sup>77</sup> Bernita Munitz, in her review of *Lavender Menace* comments on the lack of distinguishing physical characteristics between lesbian and heterosexual women. ‘As pictured here, the women do jobs like everyone else, dress, look and laugh (a lot!) like everyone else, live and love as many of us do. There are few hints of anything “other”’ (*Cape Times* September 9 1999).

<sup>78</sup> In a letter dated July 7 1997 to the Bellville Library (where the exhibition *Bad Books* was held), George Ochse, Western Cape Chairperson for the Christians for the Truth, described which artworks he objected to. Included were five images from *Does your lifestyle depress you mother?* ‘Die een reeks foto’s van ’n lesbiese paartjie lewer duidelik positiewe kommentaar op lesbiese verhoudings’. The Christians for the Truth published a book, *Die Kunste: vir of teen die Drie-Enige God?* (The Arts: for or against the Holy Trinity?) in which they present their objections to *Bad Books* and art in general. The tone of the publication is set by this warning that appears on the first printed page. ‘Due to the nature of the vulgarity and lack of morals of the attack on our Christian values by the arts, there has not been any photographic material included, to protect our sensitive reader. However to portray a realistic picture of what is happening it is necessary to quote newspaper and other articles as accurately as possible, therefore this document contains sensitive reading matter which could upset sensitive readers. The document is therefore not appropriate for children to read’ (Translated from the Afrikaans).

showed a 'clearly positive comment on lesbian relationships'. For the Christians for the truth the very act of naming the word 'lesbian' connotes negative (sinful) meaning. However for others this is really no objection at all, being merely a comment on the content of the photographs.

My aim is to make positive images of lesbians that are accessible to viewers from differing social backgrounds, not just a gallery-going population. By 'positive' I mean images that draw in rather than alienate the viewer. This is hardly an attempt to represent the entire range of lesbian experience and some viewers may find it problematic because of its omissions. The photographs that form *Lavender Menace* image a specific group of lesbians; white, 30/40 something and economically independent. By doing so, lesbians of colour, lesbians older and younger than thirty something; and lesbians who are not economically independent, experiences are not represented. In addition specific things that could be construed as 'negative' have purposely been excluded. For example there is no evidence of the stereotypical ideas that people, familiar with first world representations of lesbians<sup>79</sup>, might have about lesbianism - no sex, sado-masochism or other 'deviant' sexual practices, genderfuck, domestic violence and barely a tattoo or a piercing is visible.

Jan Zita Grover (1991:185) asserts that positive images talk as much about what is imaged as what is left out. 'Thus it is naive - or very cynical- to dismiss positive images as merely sentimental or old-fashioned. To do so is to treat them as if they proposed no arguments, embodied no aspirations, reflected no ongoing struggles.'

There are specific reasons why I have chosen to make 'unsexual', 'ordinary' images. While I don't want to deny the sexuality of lesbians, sexual images would not have contributed to my desired objective of increasing the public awareness/visibility of lesbians. I have rather attempted to present a representation similar to one the public is likely to 'see', as lesbians (or anyone else for that matter) do not generally engage in

---

<sup>79</sup> Photographers such as Del Lagrace Volcano (UK) and Catherine Opie (USA) whose work deals sado-masochism, genderfuck, sex among other things, command a high public profile.

sexual acts on the streets, and I make the point that sex is only one attribute of human identity.

The dearth of locally produced South African lesbian sexual imagery is a separate issue to my concern but is worth raising. Grover (1991:186) asked lesbian photographers in the USA in the mid 1980s why sexually explicit images were not published<sup>80</sup>. The response was that the institutions distributing photographs were not prepared to handle such images, and that communities were not ready to see this type of image. Arguably the same is true in Southern Africa in 1999. On the one hand the South African Constitution protects the 'freedom of artistic creativity' and defends equality on the grounds of sexual orientation, and on the other Southern African leaders<sup>81</sup> and members of the general public equate homosexuality with a white western imported disease.

It needs to be reiterated that in spite of a liberal constitution that entrenches gender equality, South African society is still dominated by patriarchy, and despite cultural diversity, socially very conservative. Any inclusion of sexual imagery (fig. 14) would most likely have sparked a public outcry in much the same way that Koalin Thompson's *Useful Objects*, a vagina shaped ashtray with cigarette, did during 1996<sup>82</sup>.

In *Does your lifestyle depress your mother?* my intention was to utilise some of the conventions of social documentary photography; the assertion of the photograph as a 'neutral', 'unmediated' and 'truthful' document and one that can convey real information about its subject/s. On appearance the images in *Does your lifestyle depress your mother?* conform to this 'true-life' quality associated with documentary<sup>83</sup>; they capture a slice of

---

<sup>80</sup> This changed soon after Grover's research was conducted, and there is now plenty of published explicit sexual images of lesbians in the USA/UK.

<sup>81</sup> Mugabe's and Nujoma's homophobic leadership in Zimbabwe and Namibia respectively, as noted in Chapter One.

<sup>82</sup> A detailed account of this debate, 'Censorship, Censoriousness and a Colourful Commotion: The *Useful Objects* Controversy' by Brenda Schmahmann, appears in *Grey Areas* (1999).

<sup>83</sup> It is interesting to note that the sentiments expressed in the first edition of *Life* in 1936 regarding photojournalism have not changed that much. Henry R Luce wrote under the title 'A Prospectus for a New Magazine', 'To see life; to see the world; to witness great events; to watch the faces of the poor and gestures of the proud; to see strange things, machines, armies, multitudes, shadows in the jungle and on the moon; to see man's work, his paintings, towers and discoveries; to see thousands of miles away; things

life', they are situational, taken in a 'real' environment and carry information about a marginalised, powerless group to the mainstream, powerful group (Rosler 1993:306). This is supported by reference to formal aspects of documentary syntax, namely, photographing in black and white and using a 35mm camera with a wide angle lens and a good depth of field to ensure that the final image is sharp.

However, unlike much of South African documentary over the past three decades, which was focused primarily on the socio-political conditions of apartheid and consequently produced dramatic 'newsworthy' images, in my work, the events depicted are of the ordinary, the everyday. In addition they image the subject in a self-conscious manner; most of the subjects return the gaze, aware of the photographic act.

On a close reading of *Does your lifestyle depress your mother?* there are clues that these are in fact constructed images. Firstly they are presented in a narrative series arranged sequentially from morning, through the day, to nightfall. It could be argued that the photographs were just arranged in this way, but the fact that the subjects/actors are repeated in this narrative/performance, and are self-conscious and responding to the presence of the photographer should prompt the viewer into starting to question the 'authenticity' of the photographs' content. It was my intention to challenging the common assumptions made about social documentary photography through introducing constructed and staged aspects in these images.

In her paper entitled 'Photography and the Performance of History' Elizabeth Edwards (1999:4) examines how theatricality in photography influences how history is understood. She discusses examples of anthropological or documentary photography and the points that she raises have relevance to the readability of my work. She comments on

'...different ways in which the idea of performativity might be understood in relation to history and photography, the theatre of the frame, the performance of making and finally theatre or performance within the frame. These are not mutually exclusive but rather integrally interconnected in the performance of history'.

---

hidden and behind walls and within rooms, things dangerous to come to; the women that men love; to see and to take pleasure in seeing; to see and be amazed; to see and be instructed' (*Life* Autumn 1986).

With regard to *Lavender Menace* there is a very considered, constructed aspect to 'the theatre of the frame'. What I chose to include/exclude in the frame largely depended on the conditions in a shooting situation. In preparation I drew a rough diagram of the photograph I wanted to make (fig 15).

'The performance of making' incorporated setting up a situation in which the shoot could proceed and my performance in interacting with and directing the subjects/actors. Although I do not appear in any of the images, as the photographer my presence is acknowledged by the response of the subjects.

Finally the 'performance within the frame', is the subject's contribution. Each subject/actor brought their own stuff to the shoot, such as, their previous experience of being photographed, how they wished to be portrayed, how they felt in front of a camera at that particular moment - all this influenced the acting within the frame<sup>84</sup>.

The second theoretical framework that influences the readability of my work is the genre of portraiture. Avedon (1987:55) writes

'Because portraiture is performance, and like any performance, in the balance of its effects it is good or bad, not natural or unnatural. I can understand being troubled by this idea-that all portraits are performances-because it seems to imply some kind of artifice that conceals the truth about the sitter'.

Avedon raises two important issues: firstly the way portraiture is understood, and secondly the artificial nature of the manner in which a portrait is constructed. Brilliant (1991:7) speaks of the illusion of realness when viewing portraits. 'It is as if the art works do not exist in their own material substance but, in their place, real persons face me from the other side or deliberately avoid my glance'. Because of the mimetic quality of the photograph, the connection between the image and the original person seems natural and incontestable. However as Avedon (1987:55) asserts, 'The point is that you can't get at

---

<sup>84</sup> There is an assumption that if the photographer and subject know each other (as I did), the subject will be more relaxed than with a unknown photographer. I think that in this area it is difficult to generalise. Each shoot produces a unique interaction that may work, photographically speaking, or could be disastrous.

the thing itself, the real nature of the sitter, by stripping away the surface. The surface is all you've got. You can only get beyond the surface by working with the surface. All that you can do is to manipulate that surface-gesture, costume, expression-radically and correctly'. In other words a portrait can't capture all aspects of a person, it can only hint at what lies beneath the surface.

Portraiture is a popular genre and most people have direct experience of it<sup>85</sup>. As a genre portraits possess 'readability' - they communicate easily, without threatening the viewer. Despite the theoretical debate embedded in the issues of performance and documentation, portraiture offered me a means of exploring lesbian identity in a way that would, at least initially, be comprehensible to viewers.

The *Dyke Career Series* consists of twelve portraits of lesbians and focuses on their careers. If the images were to be seen separately they would probably be read simply as individual portraits of specific women. Therefore the images need to be read together, with the title (presuming the word 'dyke' is understood), for the viewer to have sufficient information to start to decode my intention.

I utilised the genre of portraiture, because apart from its accessibility through familiarity and its interactive nature, it can visibly commemorate and confer importance on the person represented. In a time when lesbian histories are all but unwritten<sup>86</sup>, and where they are recorded it is through the eyes of institutionalised prejudice (church, state, society), it is important to create and celebrate potential role models. Consistent with this desire, the portraits in the *Dyke Career Series* were intended to have an air of official formality about them. Lauren Shantall (eMail and Guardian November 2 1999) comments on what she calls 'standard, almost traditional portraits' and notes that 'Despite their engaging scale, this compositional unadventurousness lends the photographs a certain blandness, or flatness'.

---

<sup>85</sup> Most South Africans have some direct experience of formal portraiture, for instance family portraits at events like weddings, barmitzvahs, 21<sup>st</sup> birthdays, school photos, sport team photographs and work photos, or at the very least Identity Document photos.

<sup>86</sup> Apart from GALA's attempts to rectify this situation, Zackie Achmat has directed two 52 minute docu-

All the subjects were photographed against an uncluttered background, removed from their actual work environment. I wanted to concentrate on the subject, thereby emphasising the lesbian component of the image, not the trappings of career. This also created a formal cohesion throughout the series. In arriving at this formal solution I initially photographed the figures in situ at their work place but decided that this detracted from what I was trying to convey (fig. 16). Also by placing the subjects in a specific environment the images appeared stylistically similar to *Does your lifestyle depress your mother?* and I wished to move away from work that could be viewed as social documentary.

The *Dyke Career Series* is realised in two distinct forms. It is, firstly, a series of large (1100cm x 1392cm), almost life size, digitally printed images (fig. 17). This scale is central to the reading of the images. Unlike the works in *Does your lifestyle depress your mother?* where scale determines a more intimate relationship with the viewer, it was my intention in the *Dyke Career Series* to engage the viewer in a more direct and embodied relationship with the images.

In addition, I produced an A3 calendar that is commercially printed in a run of 500, for the year 2000. This shifts the series to a functional artwork, one that differs substantially from the large prints viewed in a gallery context<sup>87</sup>. My motivation for making a calendar was to increase the visibility of lesbians within a public, everyday environment. It seemed appropriate that the calendar format would be a means of reaching a wider audience than just regular gallery patrons. It would also have an existence after the exhibition and, as such, be a separate entity functioning as not only a calendar but also a partial catalogue for the exhibition.

The calendars have been sold through the galleries that exhibited *Lavender Menace* - reaching an art public, through organisations such as the Gay and Lesbian Library in

---

dramas on South African gay and lesbian history - *Apostles of Civilised Vice* (1999) Idol Pictures.

<sup>87</sup> In a gallery the images are viewed simultaneously whereas in the calendar the images appear in

Johannesburg (that is affiliated to GALA) - reaching a lesbian and gay audience and to the general public through bookstores such as 'Exclusives' in Cape Town and Johannesburg. While it is difficult to ascertain the sexual orientation of who is buying the calendar as there is no structure in place (like a questionnaire) for feedback, I would assume that most calendars have been purchased by lesbians or those within that community.

In *Lavender Menace*, text plays a vital role in providing written information that contributes to the visual component and resulting interpretation. It also provides a framework that will stay with the images, in the case of a *Dyke Career Calendar*, when this is viewed outside of a gallery context.

Each participant was asked to write a few sentences about being a dyke and having a career. It was left up to the individual to decide which area, if any, she would emphasise. In group photos one member of the group spoke for everyone or members spoke in different voices. This text does not appear underneath the images but at the front of the calendar. The only text that does appear with the images are very simple titles for example 'Restaurateur', 'Stop-frame Animators' or 'Production Designer in the Film Industry'.

Sometimes - in cases where no visual clues point to the specifics of a career - titles are vital in understanding what career is represented e.g. 'Deaf Adults' Literacy Teacher' (fig. 37) or 'Travel Agent' (fig. 41). The reason for the absence of visual signifiers in such works is the difficulty of choosing an object that would successfully connote the career. Other images like 'Cordon Bleu Chef' (fig. 42) which portrays a woman in a chef's jacket or 'The Revolting Inner Child' (fig. 32) which shows a group of women with guitar are self explanatory. The texts written by the participants vary in many respects - the seriousness, the content, what the participants felt was important and the image they wished to project.

---

sequence, one at a time or a single image is displayed for a month.

There is sometimes a marked difference between the images and the text. By including text, additional information that can emphasise particular aspects, giving a more comprehensive overall picture. For instance, although the image ‘Triangle Project Lesbians’ (fig. 45) is a light hearted interpretation of a group of health workers, this mental and physical health organisation serves a marginalised community, hence the seriousness of the message within the accompanying text:

‘Triangle Project is a health and development organisation based in Cape Town which serves gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered communities. As lesbians working in health care and community development, we need to be strong for our community, be aware of what our health care issues are and, above all, we need to have fun together and support each other, to deal with the stresses of the work in our environment.’

The informative nature of the text is in keeping with the self promotion Triangle Project requires to be able to work effectively within this community.

Another photograph where the text initially appears at odds with the image is ‘Deaf Adults’ Literacy Teacher’ (fig. 37). The text reads ‘I seduced her by signing the words to the song she was singing’ which seems to speak of sexual confidence and yet in the image the subject is holding the hand of someone outside the frame, gaining support from an unseen person. Another possible interpretation of the invisible person’s presence is that she could be a lover who is not ‘out’ or a relationship that has to remain hidden from public knowledge. The image and text combination in ‘Deaf Adults’, Literacy Teacher’ speaks of vulnerability visually and self-assurance textually. These should not then be seen in opposition to one other, but as compatible facets of this individual’s identity.

‘The Revolting Inner Child’ (fig. 35) write with deliberate self-irony and humour that is consistent with their public image; the band have toyed with the idea of dispensing ear plugs at their performances so as not to offend audiences with their musical ineptitude and tone deafness. They write

‘The Revolting Inner Child is a rock group of musically repressed lesbians who claim their right to perform their music in public spaces. Including a graphic designer, librarian, educator and director by day, at night the Revolting Inner Child ‘comes out’ dressed in what has been described as “Suzie Quatro-meets-Kafka”. We have succeeded in creating a unique and haunting music and fashion

style’.

Although they don’t have a vast repertoire, the audience response to their six songs<sup>88</sup> has been very positive and received in the same spirit that it was intended.

Similarly the ‘Logistical Co-ordinator for Contemporary Art Exhibitions’ (fig. 39) writes with a humorous self awareness that questions lesbian stereotypes with respect to assumed masculine and feminine ‘roles’.

‘I’m something between an artist and a handyman, but definitely a dyke. I produce, install, pack and export artworks for damsels in distress. I’m obviously mad about hardware stores, and have the edge on males at the timber merchant – I am a lady after all’.

Three of the texts referred to the experience of being a lesbian in a dominantly patriarchal and heterosexist-controlled economy. The ‘Stop-Frame Animators’ (fig. 38) wrote ‘We are feeling positive about being dykes in a historically male-dominated industry and if anyone has a problem with our sexuality, its their problem’. One of the goldsmiths (fig. 40) wrote ‘Being a dyke inherently informs every choice I make. I’m not conscious of it all the time although in this business I’m often reminded of my difference’. This comment refers to the symbolic role that jewellery plays in celebrating specifically rites around marriage. On a more affirming level the ‘Travel Agent and Professional Virgo’ (fig. 41) simply wrote ‘I love my work because I can be who I am’.

Obviously the texts do not reflect the trepidation and fear that a lot of lesbians experience in the work place. And thus one is again reminded that photographs reveal only selected information. Various lesbians declined the invitation to be part of the calendar. This could have been for a number of reasons such as not liking having your photo taken, but it seems that women working in school education, health care or any conservative sector and, surprisingly, acting (fear of being type cast) were particularly cautious. This series signifies absence as much as presence, in its affirmation of people who can and do practice careers openly. It presents a visibility that is relatively new and - for the

---

<sup>88</sup> The songs that were performed are ‘Knocking on Heather’s Door’, ‘Pretty Belinda’, ‘Lola’, ‘Rebel Rebel’, ‘I can see clearly now’ and ‘To all the girls I’ve loved before’.

informed viewer - it is a reminder of just how few lesbian women are able to be themselves in private and in the public workplace. Of the lesbians I did photograph most are self employed, others are employed by liberal institutions or are very out in their work environments, for instance the Triangle Project.

In the text I also introduce my voice and the following explanation appears with the comments of the participants.

‘I have omitted the names of participants, to guard these women against gaining unwanted attention. This artwork does not claim to be representative of all dykes or of all careers. The women imaged here are a specific group within a very diverse community. What they share is that they are dykes, have careers, and appear together in these photographs.’

The issue of protecting the identity of those individuals participating is a concern that affects the production and public exposure of lesbian images both verbal and visual. Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon preface their 1972 book, *Lesbian Woman*, with the following words. ‘The people described in this book are real. The incidents and situations are true. However, we have changed most of the names and places to protect the innocent lest they be punished for the infamous crime of being.’

If protecting the identity of the sitter is important, the photographer can do this in numerous ways. Given that the face and name of the subject are the crucial revealing aspects, the photographer can omit the subject’s name, and photograph in a way that obscures her face<sup>89</sup>. Different photographers appear to have dealt with obscuring identity in various ways. One can simply not photograph the face, photograph from the side, photograph or light so that you cannot see who it is, or cover it with hands or a mask.<sup>90</sup>

Lola Flash manipulates the colour in her photographs making them complex to decode

---

<sup>89</sup> In writing of photographs that have been donated to GALA by lesbians of 60 and older, Morgan noted that faces of everyone, besides the donor, had been blacked out to protect friends and family (Morgan 1999:2).

<sup>90</sup> In the series *Does your lifestyle depress your mother?* there are three images where the identity of women is withheld. The women are partially obscured or have their backs to the camera. This was because they wanted to control who they are out to. In *A Lesbian Couple in South Africa, 1995* (fig. 10) the faces are masked out during printing leaving a blank (white) area where the faces would have been. This image is

for example *Blue Gag* (1994) (fig. 18 ). Tee A. Corinne solarizes some prints and collages others (fig. 19 & 20). She makes the point that she had difficulty getting her unsolarized lovemaking images published.

‘I remember realising early on that [solarization] would give the models some protection. But at the same time I liked it because it gives them a mysterious, anonymous look rather than being, ‘Oh, right, that’s so and so’(Bright & Posner 1996:103).

Owing to the sensitivity of revealing identity it became important to negotiate permission when inviting a potential subject to participate in *Lavender Menace*. The nature of the project was clearly explained emphasising that the image was intended for a public exhibition and/or a calendar that would be distributed beyond my control. After the shoot I showed the participants the photograph I wanted to use, then entered into further negotiations (this might be referred to as the performance after the image was made). Two participants were unhappy with the way they looked in the resulting photographs (double chins) and I used other images, my second choice.

In *Lavender Menace* I am concerned with imaging a particular group of women - white, educated, middle class lesbians. I have attempted to work from lived experience and it should be noted that this body of work explores issues of lesbianism within this particular context only, and is not intended as a definitive survey of lesbianism.

## CONCLUSION

In Southern Africa there is a scarcity of photographic representations of lesbians. During the period of my research (1997 - 2000) there has been a marginal<sup>91</sup> increase in the number of photographs (and articles) appearing in the media/press in South Africa and this increase in exposure can be attributed to the historical circumstances that have transformed the state, the effect of entrenching human rights and the NCGLE's involvement in challenging unconstitutional laws. The media cover 'newsworthy' stories that require images to accompany the text. As a result there has been an increase of social documentary and 'staged' photographs to illustrate articles. For instance, a photograph by Brent Stirton (*Fair Lady*, July 8 1998) accompanied an article about a lesbian mother's fight to regain custody of her daughter. The image depicts Gertruida Greyling and her lover seated on either side of Gertruida's daughter, each holding a hand in front of the five year old's face. In the text, Mike Behr comments on societal homophobia and acknowledges the problems that might result from publicity. The accompanying caption reads, 'It was bold of Gertruida Greyling and Hermien Oosthuizen to face the camera. But they insist that it's in Anna's [not her real name] best interests to keep her identity secret'. The article is without stereotypical assumptions and prejudice and as such exposes a specific readership to an impartial account of events.

Increased media coverage of lesbian and gay events suggests an increase of societal tolerance. As these events become socially visible they gain societal acceptance. The Cape Organisation for Gay Sport (COGS) in their report for the year ending June 1999 support this viewpoint: 'For the first time we have been courted by mainstream media such as *Cape Review* and *City Life* for information for their magazines' "gay sections". This marks a new high in societal acceptance of gay folk' (*Cape Review*, September 1999).

*Cape Review*, a mainstream entertainment publication, lists 'gay interest' - including

---

<sup>91</sup> The increase is marginal in comparison with the artistic production dealing with lesbian subject matter from the United States, United Kingdom, Australia and other first world countries.

lesbian interest - among its entertainment guide. Various events are listed under headings such as balls, choirs, community notices, party outings, social, sport and stage outings. The annual 'Out in Africa' lesbian and gay film festival also receives mainstream media coverage in the form of pre-festival publicity and movie reviews. This illustrates the diverse activities that occur and serve the lesbian and gay population. *Outright* (September/October 1999), 'SA's only alternative lifestyle magazine' aimed primarily at gay men, lists contact details for 48 lesbian and gay organisations<sup>92</sup> in South Africa. Apart from societies and sport clubs, a third of the groups listed are religious organisations, although organised religion is often intolerant towards lesbians and gays. This has resulted in independent churches and support groups being established to fulfil spiritual needs in a country where religion is popular.

Apart from legal victories secured by the NCGLE there have been some societal shifts in attitude with respect to tolerance of lesbians and gays. An article 'Lesbian wedding lifts veil on prejudice in township' (Gcinikhaya Mbesi, *Cape Argus*, November 3, 1999) is about two lesbians, Funeka and Nokwanda Soldati, who 'married' in December 1998. Nokwanda feared the community would be hostile and she made the following comment about arriving with Funeka at their home in Macassar after the wedding: 'I was scared. I thought people would throw stones at us on our arrival in Macassar. Instead, they went out of their way for us. It was amazing'.

Nokwanda's apprehension is not without foundation.

'Zibonele Community Radio in Khayelitsha recently interviewed the couple, only to have them berated by many listeners, who said they did not want to listen to their story. "But other people wanted to know about us, they were happy that we came out the closet and that we were able to talk about our feelings and our relationship," said Nokwanda.

"Those who wanted to destroy us quoted from the Bible. You should not use the Bible to judge other people. It is only God who is a judge, no one else" (*Cape Argus*, November 3, 1999).

---

<sup>92</sup> Five years earlier *Outright* (October 1994) 'SA's only lifestyle magazine for the gay and lesbian community' listed only 21 lesbian and gay organisations. I think the increase in organisations over this

Black lesbians and gays are becoming more socially visible in South Africa. The 7th annual black male drag pageant, Miss Glow Vaal, hosted in a Sebokeng night club attracted 'double the biggest crowd ever'. Miss Meyerton, when asked about coming out in the township, declared; 'By now the community knows they must just accept us - that is what I'll tell my parents' (*Mail & Guardian* October 1-7, 1999).

Photographs from *Lavender Menace* have been included on two international shows, *Democracy's Images* (curated by Jan Erik Lundstrom and Katerina Pierre of the BildMuseum in Umea, Sweden - September 1998 ) and *African Photographers in Berlin* (January - March 2000). The South African component of *African Photographers in Berlin* was curated by Kathy Grundlingh and titled '(Re)imaging the self: Identity and Representation in Post Apartheid Photography'. It would be naive to think that the inclusion of my photographs on these exhibitions is only due to their quality and not the content in fulfilling curators' briefs. As my agenda is promoting lesbian social visibility the fact that *Lavender Menace* may be a token representative of a minority group does not overly concern me.

My research has been conducted at a time when South African society is becoming more tolerant, and *The Constitution* affords some protection, of lesbians. *The Constitution* is, however, potentially revocable so protection is not guaranteed and will only be maintained through active gay and lesbian participation. Compared with their immediate neighbours, South African lesbians and gays are legally in a secure situation. Although societal attitudes appear to be starting to shift, much must still change before lesbianism is regarded as just another expression or aspect of identity.

---

period is indicative of greater societal tolerance.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

### BOOKS

- Abelove, Henry & Barale, Michele & Halperin, David (eds.) (1993) *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*. New York/London: Routledge.
- Ainley, Rosa (1995) *What Is She Like? Lesbian Identities from the 1950s to the 1990s*. London: Cassell.
- Armour, M. & Lapinsky, S. (1994) 'Lesbians in love and compromising situations': Lesbian feminist organising in the Western Cape in Gevisser, Mark & Cameron, Edwin (eds.) *Defiant Desire: Gay and Lesbian Lives in South Africa*. Johannesburg: Ravan Press.
- Ashburn, Elizabeth (1996) *Lesbian Art: An Encounter With Power*. Roseville East (Australia): Craftsmen House.
- Atkinson, B. & Breitz, C. (eds.) (1999) *Grey Areas Representation, Identity and Politics in Contemporary South African Art*. Johannesburg: Chalkham Hill Press.
- Badsha, O. (ed.) (1986) *South Africa: The Cordoned Heart*. Cape Town: The Gallery Press.
- Bellis, Joan (1997) Queery: Some curatorial problems arising from the first South African national gay and lesbian art exhibition Gay Rights Rites Re-writes. Paper presented at the South African Association of Art Historians 12th annual conference 9-10 August 1997. University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg.
- Berger, M. (1998) Interview with Adrian Piper in Kester, G. H. *Art, Activism, & Oppositionality: Essays from Afterimage*. Durham & London: Duke University Press.
- Beyond the Barricades: Popular Resistance in South Africa in the 1980's*. (1989) London: Kliptown Books.
- Boffin, Tessa & Fraser, Jean (eds.) (1991) *Stolen Glances: Lesbians Take Photographs*, London: Pandora Press.
- Bolten, R. (ed.) (1993) *The Context of Meaning*. Cambridge (Massachusetts): MIT Press.
- The Boston Women's Health Book Collective (1998) *Our Bodies, Ourselves for the New Century*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Brassai (1976) *The Secret Paris of the 30's*. London: Thames and Hudson.
- Bright, Susie & Posener, Jill (eds.) (1996) *Nothing but the Girl: The Blatant Lesbian Image*. London: Freedom Editions.

- Brilliant, Richard (1991) *Portraiture*. London: Reaktion Books Limited.
- Brown, Lesley (ed.) (1993) *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Burana, Lily & Roxxie & Due, Linnea (1994) *Dagger: On Butch Women*. San Francisco: Cleis Press.
- Burgin, Victor (ed.) (1982) *Thinking Photography*. London and Basingstoke: Macmillan Publishers Ltd.
- Cameron, E. (1994) 'Unapprehended felons': Gays and lesbians and the law in South Africa in Gevisser, Mark & Cameron, Edwin (eds.) *Defiant Desire: Gay and Lesbian Lives in South Africa*. Johannesburg: Ravan Press.
- Chan Sam, T. (1994) Black lesbian life on the Reef as told to Tanya Chan Sam in Gevisser, Mark & Cameron, Edwin (eds.) *Defiant Desire: Gay and Lesbian Lives in South Africa*. Johannesburg: Ravan Press.
- Christians for the Truth (1997) *Die Kunste: Vir Of Teen Die Drie-Enige God?* Kuilsriver: Christians for the Truth, Western Cape.
- Clarke, Graham (1992) *The Portrait in Photography*. London: Reaktion Books.
- The Concise Oxford Dictionary*. (1976) Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996: Act 108 of 1996*. (1997) The South African Government.
- Daly, Mary (1978) *Gyn/Ecology*. London: The Women's Press.
- Fine, D. (1992) *Lesbian and Gay Rights: Developing Justice Series*. Institute of Criminology at the University of Cape Town: SJRP & LEAP.
- Gevisser, Mark (1994) A different fight for freedom in Gevisser, Mark & Cameron, Edwin (eds.) *Defiant Desire: Gay and Lesbian Lives in South Africa*. Johannesburg: Ravan Press.
- Gevisser, Mark & Cameron, Edwin (eds.) (1994) *Defiant Desire: Gay and Lesbian Lives in South Africa*. Johannesburg: Ravan Press.
- Gilbert, Harriett (ed.) (1993) *The Sexual Imagination: From Acker to Zola*. London: Jonathan Cape.
- Golding, Sue (ed.) (1997) *The Eight Technologies of Otherness*. London/New York:

Routledge.

Griffen, G. & Stein, N. & De Pinho, H. (1998) *Divided in Ourselves: Cape Town Gay Men, Lesbians and Bisexuals Talk About Their Health Education and Care Needs*. Cape Town: Triangle Project.

Grover, Jan Zita (1991) Framing the Questions: Positive Imaging and Scarcity in Lesbian Photographs in Boffin, Tessa & Fraser, Jean (eds.) *Stolen Glances: Lesbians Take Photographs*. London: Pandora Press.

Grover, Jan Zita (1993) Dykes in Context: Some Problems in Minority Representation in Bolten, R. (ed.) *The Context of Meaning*. Cambridge (Massachusetts): MIT Press.

Grundberg, Andy (1990) *Crisis of the Real: Writings on Photography, 1974-1989*. New York: Aperture.

Hall, Radclyffe (1928) *The Well of Loneliness*. London: Jonathan Cape.

Healy, Emma (1996) *Lesbian Sex Wars*. London: Virago.

Hite, Shere (1993) *Women as Revolutionary Agents of Change: the Hite Reports and Beyond*. Sceptre Paperbacks.

Holmes, R. (1994) White rapists made coloureds (and homosexuals): The Winnie Mandela trial and the politics of race and sexuality in Gevisser, Mark & Cameron, Edwin (eds.) *Defiant Desire: Gay and Lesbian Lives in South Africa*. Johannesburg: Ravan Press.

Horne, Peter & Lewis, Reina (eds.) (1996) *Outlooks: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities and Visual Cultures*. London: Routledge.

Jaugey-Paget, Laurence (1999) *Nice Girls Don't: Erotic Photographs*. Tubingen: Konkursbuchverlag.

Kendall (1999) Women in Lesotho and the (Western) Construction of Homophobia in Blackwood, Evelyn & Wieringa, Saskia E (eds.) *Female Desires: Same-sex Relations and Transgender Practices Across Cultures (Between Men - Between Women)*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Lagrace Volcano, Del and Halberstam, Judith 'Jack' (1999) *The Drag King Book*. London: Serpents Tail.

Lewis, R. & Rolley, K. (1996) Ad(dressing) the dyke: lesbian looks and lesbian looking in Horne, Peter & Lewis, Reina (eds.) *Outlooks: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities and Visual Cultures*. London: Routledge.

- Martin, D. & Lyon, P. (1972) *Lesbian Woman*. New York: Bantam Books.
- Mason-John, Valerie & Khambatta, Ann (1993) *Lesbians Talk: Making Black Waves*. London: Scalet Press.
- Morgan, Ruth (1999) The fine art of evasion: older lesbians protecting their identities. Paper presented as part of a panel 'In the closet and coming out' at The South African Historical Society Biennial Conference - Not Telling: Secrecy, Lies and History, 11-14 July 1999, University of the Western Cape.
- Munt, Sally (1998) *Butch/femme: Inside Lesbian Gender*. London/Washington: Cassell.
- Nicol, M. (1998) *The Invisible Line: The Life and Photography of Ken Oosterbroek*. Johannesburg: Random House.
- Nochlin, Linda (1973) Why have there been no great women artists? in Hess, T. & Baker, E. (eds.) *Art and Sexual Politics*. New York: Macmillan.
- Olivier, G. (1994) From Ada to Zelda: Notes on Gay Language in Gevisser, Mark & Cameron, Edwin (eds.) *Defiant Desire: Gay and Lesbian Lives in South Africa*. Johannesburg: Ravan Press.
- O'Sullivan, Sue & Parmer, Pratibha (1992) *Lesbians Talk: (Safer) Sex*. London: Scarlet Press.
- Perkins T.E. (1979) Rethinking Stereotypes in Barrett, Michele; Corrigan, Philip; Kuhn, Annette and Wolf, Janet (eds.) *Ideology and Cultural Production*. London: Croom Helm.
- Phelan, Shane (1989) *Identity Politics Lesbian: Lesbian Feminism and the Limits of Community*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Pollock, Griselda (ed.) (1996) *Generations and Geographies in the Visual Arts*. London & New York: Routledge.
- Retief, G. (1994) Keeping sodom out the laager: State repression of homosexuality in apartheid South Africa in Gevisser, Mark & Cameron, Edwin (eds.) *Defiant Desire: Gay and Lesbian Lives in South Africa*. Johannesburg: Ravan Press.
- Reynolds, Margaret (ed.) (1993). *The Penguin Book of Lesbian Short Stories*. London: Penguin.
- Rosler, Martha (1989) in, around, and afterthoughts (on documentary photography) in Bolten, R. (ed.) *The Context of Meaning*. Cambridge (Massachusetts): MIT Press.
- Schmahmann, Brenda (1999) Censorship, Censoriousness and a Colourful Commotion: The Useful Objects Controversy in Atkinson, B. & Breitz, C. (eds.) *Grey Areas*

*Representation, Identity and Politics in Contemporary South African Art*. Johannesburg: Chalkham Hill Press.

Schneider Adams, Laurie (1996) *The Methodologies of Art: An Introduction*. New York: HarperCollins.

Sekula, Allan (1982) On the Invention of Photographic Meaning in Burgin, Victor (ed.) *Thinking Photography*. London and Basingstoke: Macmillan Publishers Ltd.

Smyth, Cherry (1992) *Lesbians Talk: Queer Notions*. London: Scarlet Press.

Smyth, Cherry (1996a) *Damn Fine Art by New Lesbian Artists*. London: Cassell.

Smyth, Cherry (1996b) Dyke! Fag! Centurion! Whore! An appreciation of Tessa Boffin in Horne, Peter & Lewis, Reina (eds.) *Outlooks: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities and Visual Cultures*. London: Routledge.

Smyth, C. (1998) How do we look? Imaging Butch/Femme in Munt, S. (ed.) *Butch/femme Inside Lesbian Gender*. London: Cassell.

Solomon-Godeau, Abigail (1991) *Photography at the Dock: Essays on Photographic History, Institutions, and Practices*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Spence, Jo (1995) *Cultural Sniping: The Art of Transgression*. London and New York: Routledge.

Studzinski, Kristina (1994) *Lesbians Talk: Left Politics*. London: Scarlet Press.

Tagg, John (1988) *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.

Van Wyk, Gary (1993) Drawing the Bead on Blacks: Eastern Cape People Painted by Baines, Shot by Pocock in *Ezakwantu Beadwork from the Eastern Cape at the South African National Gallery*. Cape Town: South African National Gallery.

Wade, Carole and Travis, Carol (1987) *Psychology*. New York: Harper and Row.

Wilson, Francis (1986) Introduction in Badsha, O. (ed.) *South Africa: The Cordoned Heart*. Cape Town: The Gallery Press.

Wright, Elizabeth (ed.) (1992) *Feminism and Psychoanalysis: A Critical Dictionary*. Oxford: Blackwell.

## **JOURNALS**

Avedon, Richard (1987) Borrowed Dogs in *Grand Street* Vol 7:1 Autumn 1987. pp52-64.

Botha, Kevan (1995) Mugabe's anti-gay campaign of lies in *Outright: SA's Only Alternative Lifestyle Magazine*. Vol 2:10 Sept/Oct 1995. Johannesburg: Liberation Publishers cc.

*Development Update: The Right To Be; Sexuality and Sexual Rights in Southern Africa The Quarterly Journal of the South African National Coalition and INTERFUND*. (1998) INTERFUND / SANGOCO.

*Equality* issue 2, July- September 1998. Johannesburg: National Coalition for Gay and Lesbian Equality.

*Equality* issue 4, June 1999. Johannesburg: National Coalition for Gay and Lesbian Equality.

*Equality* issue 5, September 1999. Johannesburg: National Coalition for Gay and Lesbian Equality.

Gouma-Peterson, T. & Mathews, P. (1987) The Feminist Critique of Art History in *The Art Bulletin*, September 1987, Vol LXIX No 3

Grace, Della (1991) Xenomorphosis in *New Formations: Perversity*. Number 19, Spring 1993.

#### **VIDEO**

Harriott M, 1994. *Tessa Boffin: Queer Photographer*

McCabe, Michelle *Playing the Part* 38 min. movie, USA, 1994

Oprah - *Ellen coming out episode*, April 30th 1997

#### **WEB SITES**

Artbio of Steven Cohen (May 1998) in *artthrob*. <http://www.artthrob.co.za>

Shantall, Lauren (November 2 1999) Women at work in *za@play*. <http://www.mg.co.za>

Warrington, Reney (November 1999) in *artthrob*. <http://www.artthrob.co.za>

Williamson, Sue (Sept 1999) 'Lavender Menace' at AVA in *artthrob*. <http://www.artthrob.co.za>

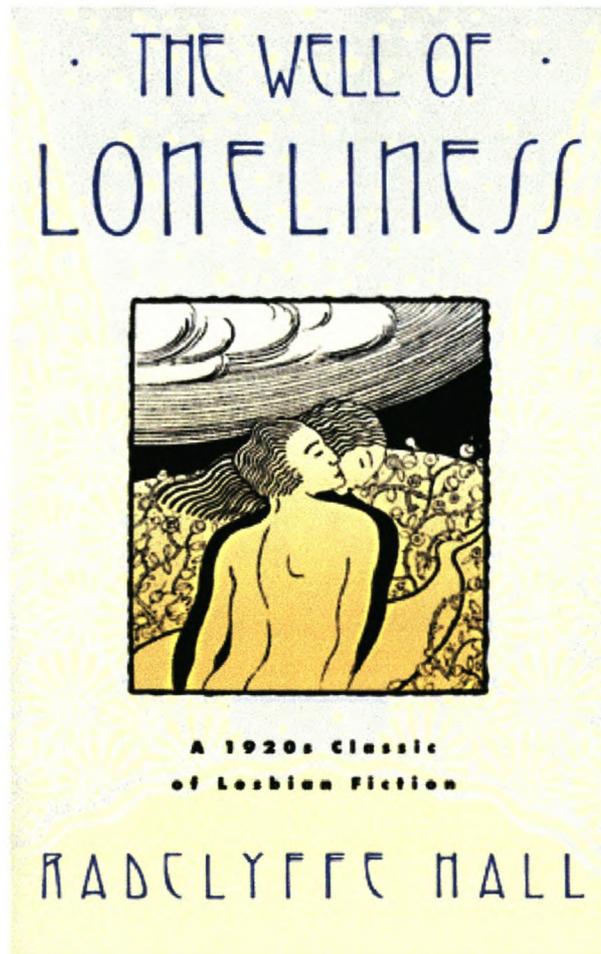


Figure 1

This 1990 reprint of Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* was available in 1999 in paperback (Anchor Books/ Doubleday) for \$10.36 from Amazon.com.



Figure 2

Brassai c.1932 *Le Monocle, the bar*. On the left is *Lulu de Montparnasse*. Published in Brassai (1976) *The Secret Paris of the 30's*. London: Thames and Hudson.



Figure 3

A crowd at the Grand Parade, Cape Town, being addressed by the newly elected president of South Africa, Nelson Mandela (May 1994). In this, his first public speech, he included sexual orientation on the list of rights that constitute the equality clause of the interim Constitution.



Figure 4

The first Mother City Queer Project (MCQP) event, *The Locker Room Project*, at the River Club in 1994. Pictured above are a group of 'queer' as opposed to 'cheer' leaders.



Figure 5  
The first gay and lesbian march in Cape Town (1993). The police escorted the marchers instead of arresting or harassing them.

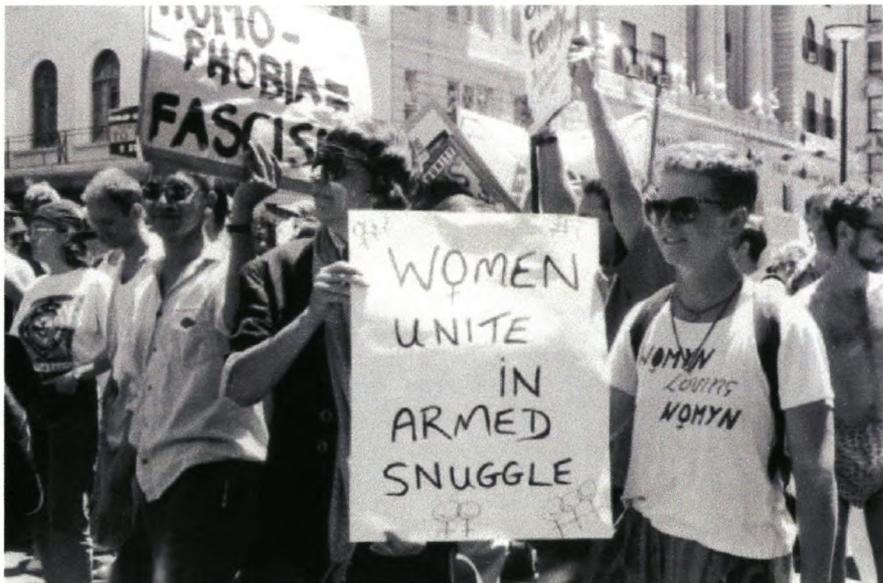


Figure 6  
The 1993 Cape Town march. Some participants wore T-shirts stating 'No liberation without Gay and Lesbian liberation'.



Figure 7  
The second Cape Town gay and lesbian march (1994). Marchers carried a huge rainbow flag.



Figure 8  
The second Cape Town march in 1994. The National Coalition for Gay and Lesbian Equality (NCGLE) was present as it was formed that year.



Figure 9  
Published in the *Mail & Guardian*. September 26 - October 2 1997.



Figure 10

*A Lesbian Couple in South Africa, 1995* by Jean Brundrit (1995). Pinhole photograph 48 x 48 cm. Collection of South African National Gallery. This was exhibited at SANG as part of *People's Portraits* 23 September - 5 November 1995.



Figure 11

*Butch* by Katie Niles 1994

The word 'butch' is used in this text to describe a lesbian who has taken on stereotypical 'masculine' clothing and/or behaviour. It can also be used to describe the 'masculine' partner in a butch/femme relationship that is so elegantly parodied in the image above.

*Butch* is published in *Nothing but the Girl* edited by Susie Bright and Jill Posener (1996:72).

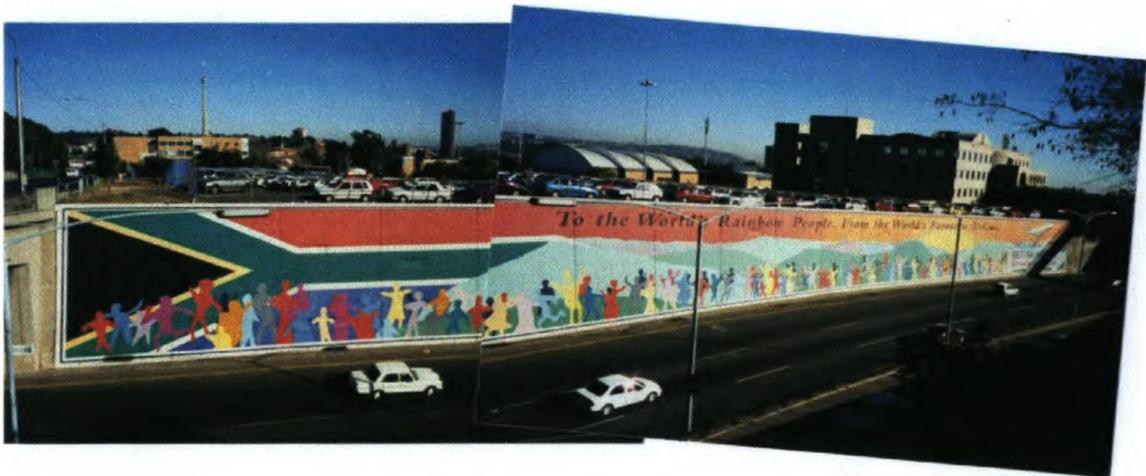
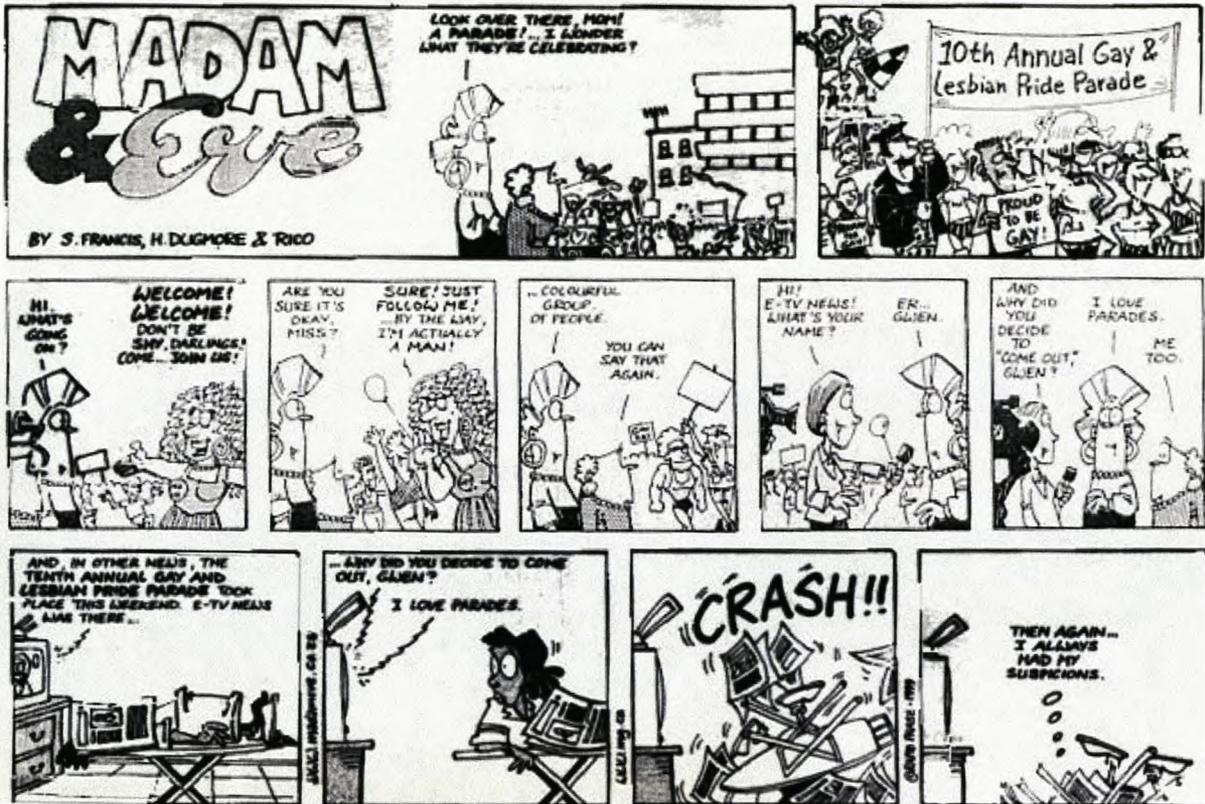


Figure 12

A mural on the M1 as it runs past Wits University, Johannesburg, 1996. The rainbow is the internationally recognised symbol for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered and transexual people. Who ever first referred to New South Africans in this way was probably not aware of its connotations, nor was British Airways when they commissioned this homophilic mural.

Figure 13

In this Madam & Eve (Mail & Guardian Oct 1-7, 1999) Gwen and Mrs Anderson don't understand what it means to 'come out'.



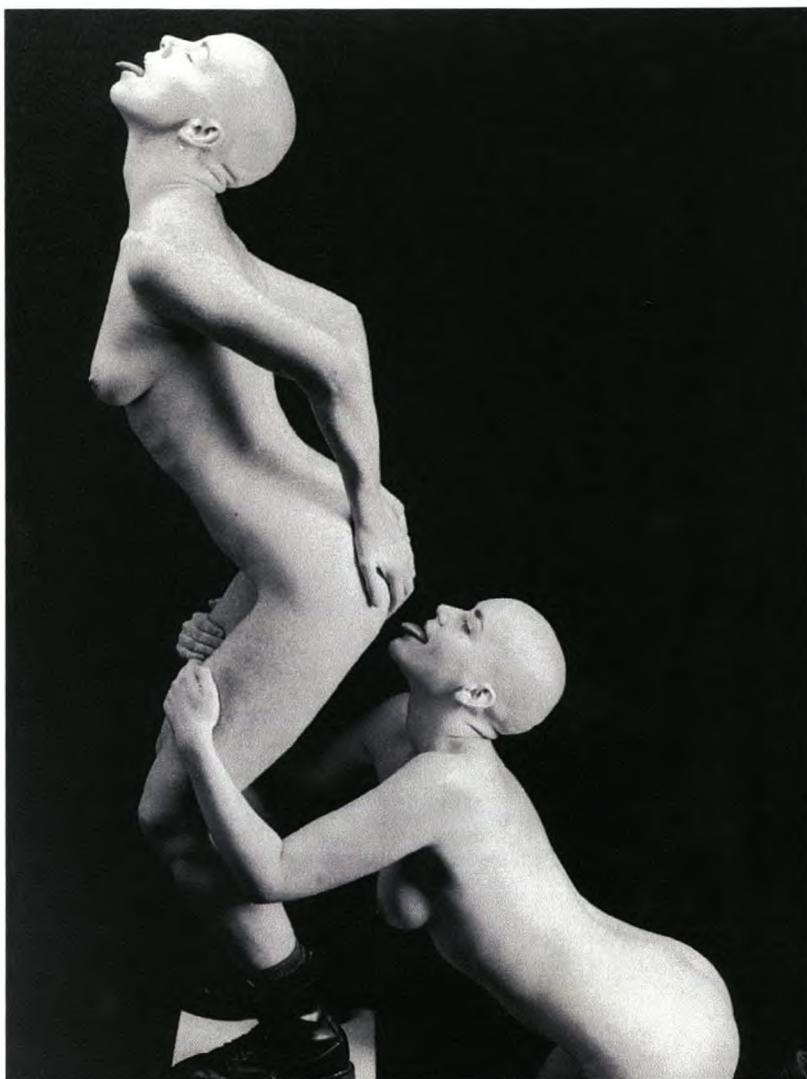


Figure 14

Della Grace. This image appears under two different titles. *Tongue in Cheek* or *Pussy-licking Sodomite* in *Nothing but the Girl* and *New Formations: Perversity* respectively. 1992.

This is an example of a sexually explicit image that is likely to be read as other. In writing about this series of images Della Grace (1993:123) defines a self made word, xenomorphosis, as among other things, 'embracing Otherness, a recognition of the Other within oneself'. This is a celebration of otherness and in that is unlikely that this would do anything but re-reinforce ideas of difference.

The aim of *Lavender Menace* is to make lesbians less other and create a space where contact can occur. As Sue Williamson says in her review of *Lavender Menace* 'Brundrit's photos are clearly destined to put the minds of everyone's mother at rest' (Arthro, September 1999). I doubt whether this would have been so if I had made images similar to *Pussy-licking Sodomite*.

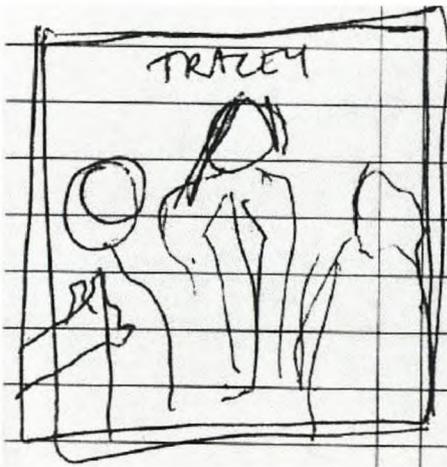
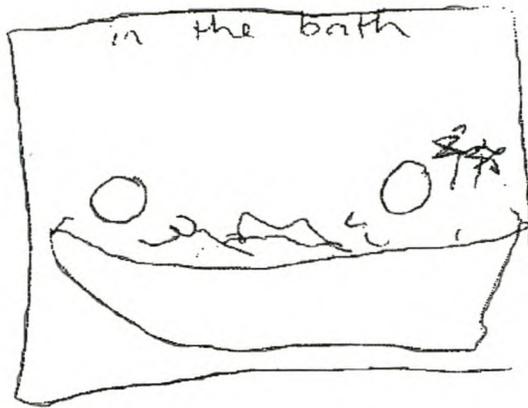


Figure 15

On the left hand side are the preconceived sketches corresponding to the photographs on the right. The top sketch (in the bath) works as a visual idea for the final image, when I went to make the photograph, the cramped physical space of the bathroom limited the available options. The dog too, was unconsidered but worked in the final image. In contrast the sketch for 'Production Designer in the Film Industry' closely approximates the final photograph. This is because the shoot was done with artificial light, in studio like conditions where I had control over most environmental factors.



Figure 16

On the left is an earlier version of 'Stop-frame Animators' where I experimented with photographing the subjects in a recognisable environment. On the right is the final image.



Figure 17

These photographs give an idea of how the large prints of the *Dyke Career Series* functioned in a gallery space. The top photograph was taken at the Association for Visual Arts (Cape Town) during the exhibition of *Lavender Menace* 30 August to 18 September 1999; and the lower two at the Market Theatre Gallery (Johannesburg) 31 October to 20 November 1999.



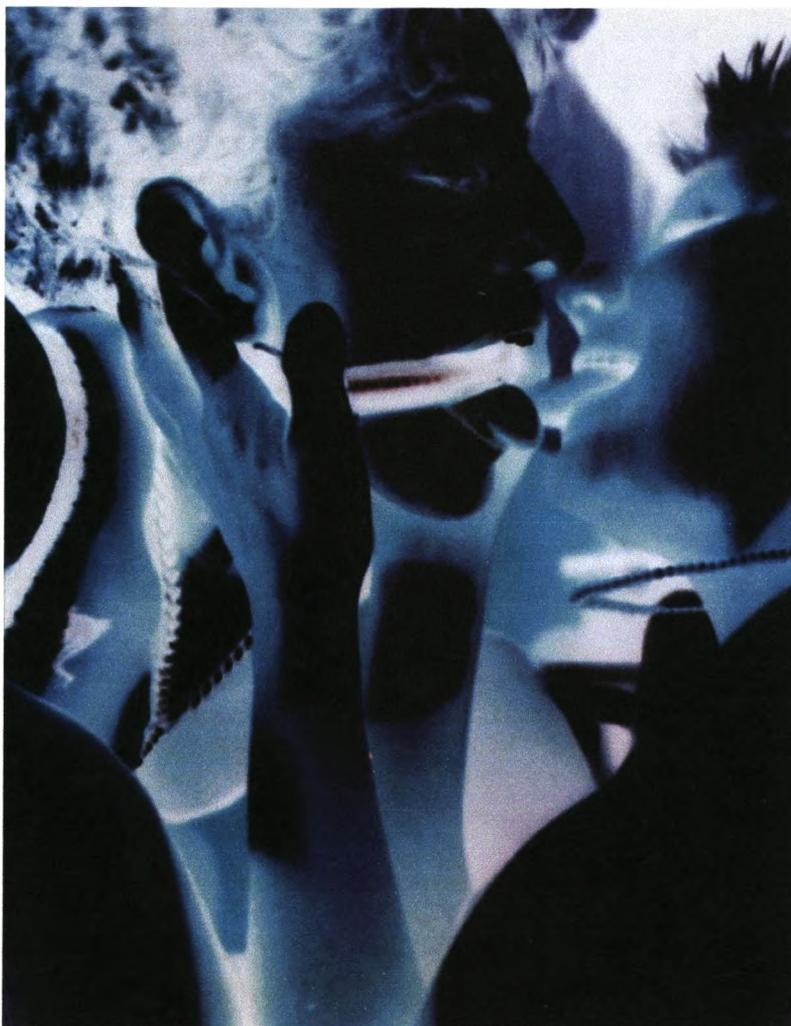


Figure 18  
'Blue Gag' (1994) by Lola Flash. Published in *Nothing but the Girl* (1996).



Figure 19  
'Sinister Wisdom' (1977) by Tee A. Corinne. Published in *Nothing but the Girl* (1996).



Figure 20  
'Yantra # 22' (1982) by Tee A. Corinne. Published in *Nothing but the Girl* (1996).

*Does your lifestyle depress your mother?*



Figure 21



Figure 22



Figure 23



Figure 24



Figure 25



Figure 26



Figure 27

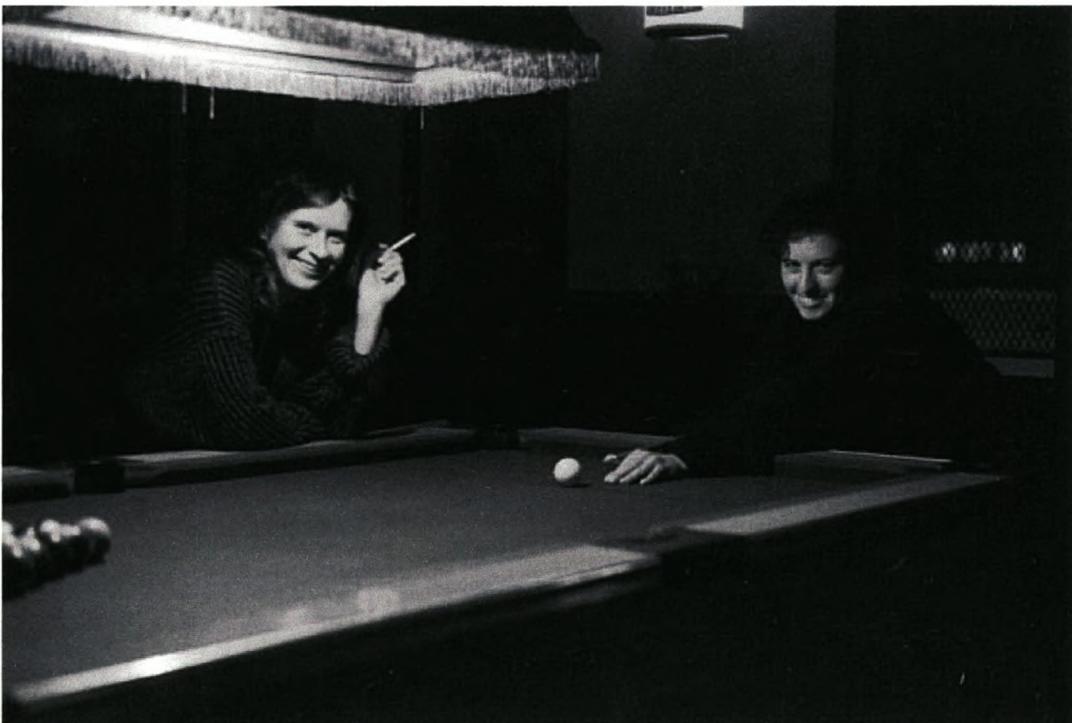


Figure 28



Figure 29



Figure 30



Figure 31



Figure 32

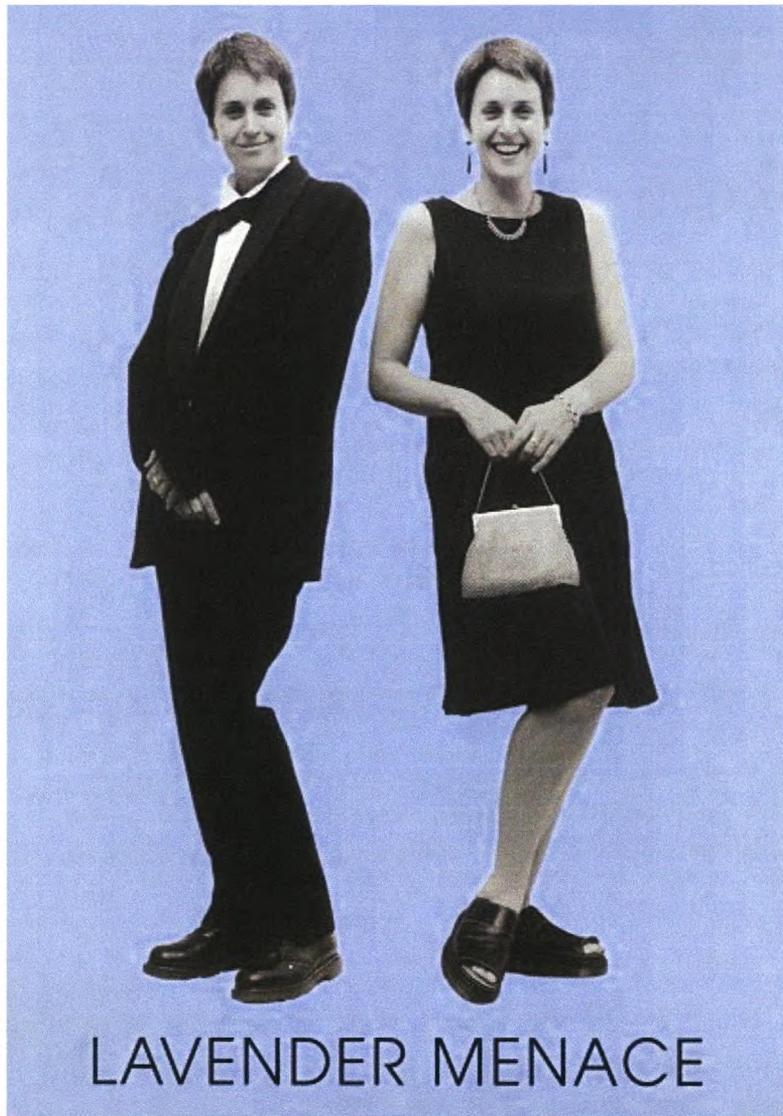


Figure 33



Figure 34 Restaurateur



Figure 35 The Revolting Inner Child



Figure 36 Mother and Community Worker



Figure 37 Deaf Adults' Literacy Teacher



Figure 38 Stop-frame Animators



Figure 39 Performance Artist and Logistical Co-ordinator for Contemporary Art Exhibitions



Figure 40 Goldsmiths

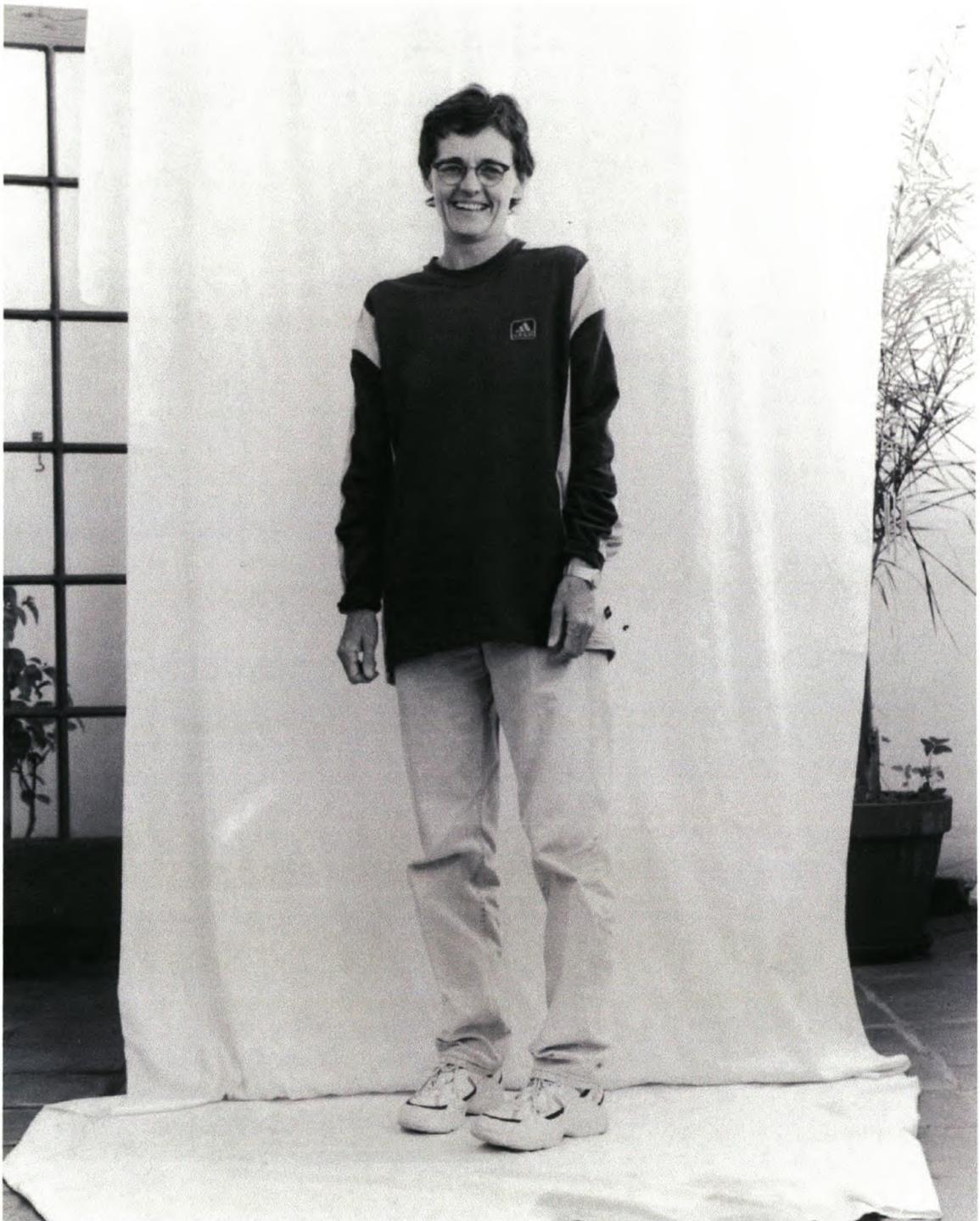


Figure 41 Travel Agent and Professional Virgo

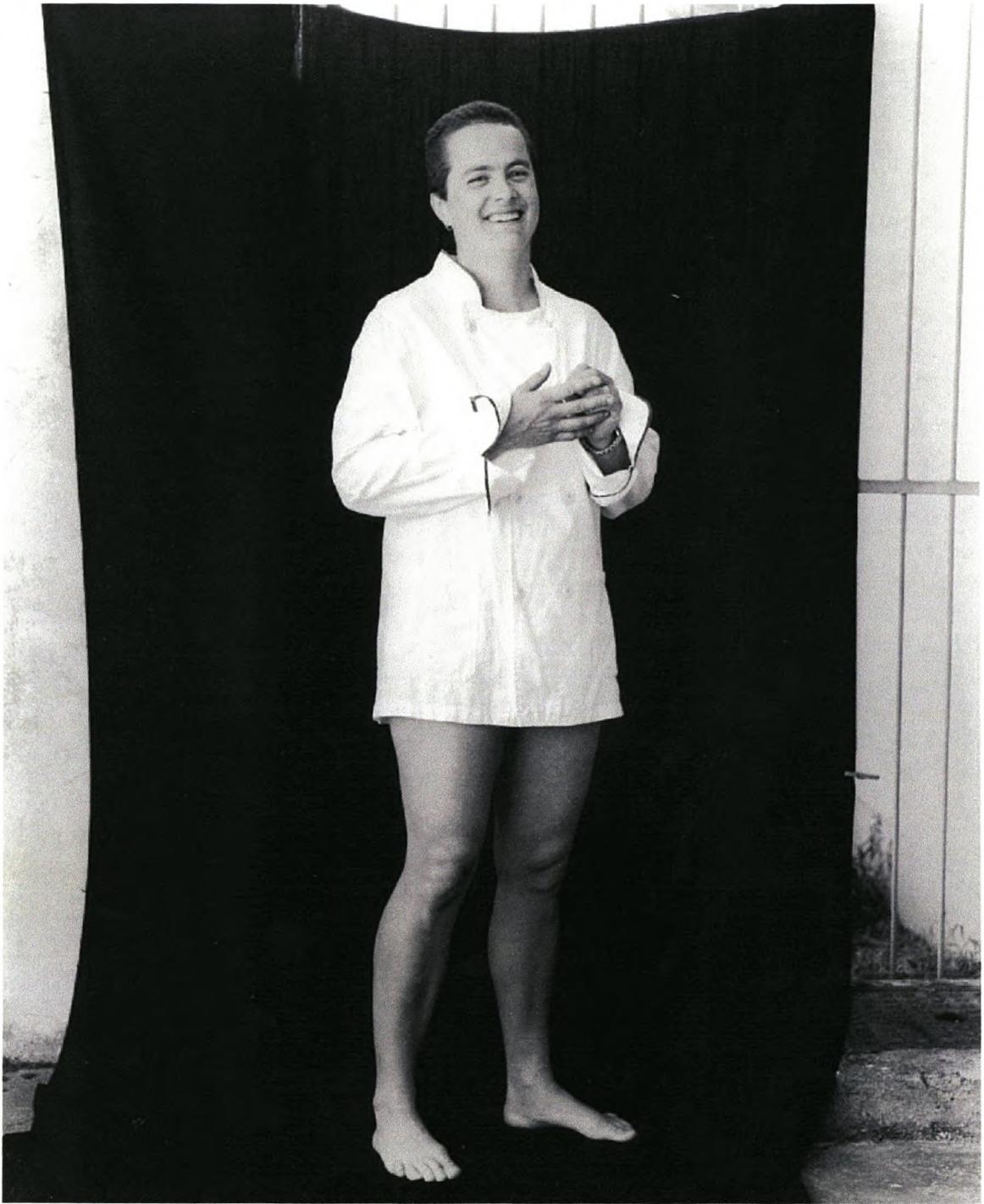


Figure 42 Cordon Bleu Chef



Figure 43 Production Designer in the Film Industry



Figure 44 Visual Artist and Aspiring Biker



Figure 45 Triangle Project Lesbians