

Documenting S.F. gay tribes with pride, love Daniel Nicoletta's photos essential historical material

David Bonetti, EXAMINER ART CRITIC

Friday, June 28, 1996

(06-28) 04:00 PDT SAN FRANCISCO -- TO ACKNOWLEDGE The City's annual Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Pride Celebration, which peaks this weekend with a parade and post-parade party, the Lesbian & Gay Employee Association of Levi Strauss & Co. has organized an exhibition of photographs by Daniel Nicoletta in Levi Strauss' Atrium Lobby, 1155 Battery St. (It closes Sunday, and is open daily from 9 a.m. to 7 p.m.)

The Levi Strauss employees couldn't have made a better choice. Nicoletta, who worked in Harvey Milk's camera shop, has been documenting San Francisco's gay and lesbian populations and affiliated tribes since the mid-'70s with a love and dedication that has positioned him close to the heart of those sometimes colorful, sometimes rambunctious, sometimes outrageous communities.

Of course, it has been Nicoletta's conscious choice to photograph the more, shall we say, theatrical members of a community that has been famous for putting the pizzazz in theater since the first fabulous costume was worn on that stage just East of Eden. (Who, after all, invented sequins?) So, those looking for photographs of straight-looking, straight-acting same-sex couples posing in their homes in Orinda might be a little disappointed in the show.

But if you love flamboyance, drag queens, discos, alternative theater, pretty boys, powerful women and the in-your-face politics of Queer Nation, you'll probably find Nicoletta's photographs just your cup of tea.

Since queer people were forced to live in the shadows, their history remains little known. The study of gay history in recent years has grown exponentially, and the knowledge gained has been enlightening, but that history is still sketchy. It is an exciting time to be a gay historian - there's so much work to be done, so much to discover. (The MacArthur Foundation's recent "genius" grant to local gay historian Allen Berube acknowledges as much.)

Those who want to study San Francisco's gay history during the past 20-plus years - a study central to the gay history of our time - will find Nicoletta's photographs essential material. (The recent acquisition by the New York Public Library of a portfolio of 20 of his prints is an acknowledgment of their important documentary value.)

The history you find in Nicoletta's photographs is a little sad because so many of his subjects have died, and some of the more moving passages are those that show certain local superstars - the ebullient Crystal May, the brilliant Miss Kitty Litter - at their peaks and then shortly after during their quick decline into death.

But it is also a story that is filled with hope and optimism because Nicoletta shows a self-creating,

self-recreating community that is, above all, resilient. Is it any wonder that a favorite drag queen song is "I Will Survive" ?

Nicoletta's recent work is a fine documentation of a community enduring both political and medical crises. There are on-the-spot images of ACT UP demonstrations and Pride Parades from recent years. And there are portraits - Nicoletta's strong suit as an artist - of many of the celebrities who have made the '90s a time of revival in San Francisco. You'll find Justin Bond, Ggreg Taylor, Jerome Caja, Flynn, Connie Champagne, Stafford and Diet Popststitute represented here, all in fine form.

But inevitably it is Nicoletta's photographs from the past that are most haunting: Sylvester on the stage at the Trocadero Dance Club. Hibiscus, co-founder of the Cockettes, performing in "Femme Fatale." The "Gay Widows" weeping along the Pride Parade route. The legendary Angels of Light. Harvey Milk on stage with Jose Sarria, the drag performer who helped launch the modern gay liberation movement in San Francisco by simply insisting on his rights as a citizen (and running for supervisor). New York carpetbagger Divine, terrorizing the audience at the Trocadero Dance Club. And lots of ordinary people trying to create a life that made sense to themselves, if not the people back in Kansas.

It was a different world then. San Francisco is lucky that Nicoletta has been there with his camera recording it through all of its changes.

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