

Sebastian Collett

SANCTUARY

What is belonging? Who belongs? These are some of the questions that photographer Sebastian Collett takes on in Sanctuary.

TEXT KERRY MANDERS

Emerging from the sexual revolution of the 1960s and 70s in the United States, the Radical Faerie movement evolved in the 1980s as a rejection of the commodification and dilution of LGBTQ identities by mainstream, patriarchal culture. Incorporating elements of paganism and environmentalism, Faeries foster queer consciousness by means of communal living and eco-spiritual observance. Crucially, Faeries place a premium on individuality: within the decentralized movement, no Faerie, gathering, or community is the same.

Sebastian Collett stresses that *Sanctuary* is not representative of Radical Faeries in general or even of this sanctuary in particular but is, instead, “a subjective, momentary glimpse into a community that’s always in flux.”

Collett has been a regular visitor to this sanctuary in the American south for two decades but most of his portraits were made within a single month in the summer of 2011. The work is “documentary” in that has clear geographical and temporal boundaries yet it resists literal narrative: no establishing shots, no sense of region or regionalism, and no historical context. Unmoored from common visual cues, Collett’s audience is invited into a thriving, intimate space that defies easy categorization.

“There are *different* intimacies. There’s an intimacy that comes out of a shared experience of intensity that living on a commune entails, even when there’s nothing particularly happening. Just being in and sharing that special space, which is separate from the outside world. There really is that sense of family: we’re eating

together every night, spending the day together, working on projects together.”

NO PLACE LIKE HOME

Protective of the freedom that anonymity affords and cautious of outsiders, many Faeries do not want the sanctuary named or publicized. Collett is careful and respectful. For years, he did not even take his camera to the commune.

“I have relationships at stake. I’m cautious about showing the work,” he says.

“At the same time, I don’t just want to keep the pictures in a box forever. If I worry too much about not offending anyone, I’ll never show anything: someone is *always* going to be offended. It’s a balancing act, the ethics of it, and a question that will never fully be resolved.”

A tacit policy of “no photography” at the sanctuary remains. Unwritten rules, of course, evolve over time, and cell phone cameras are now ubiquitous. Still, people are generally discreet and refrain from posting and tagging images on social media.

Red shoes recur in various portraits. They’re immediately reminiscent of the magical ruby slippers in *The Wizard of Oz*, which is fitting as another name for faeries (also reclaimed) is “friends of Dorothy.” The blood red slip-ons are a sartorial reminder of the larger queer culture to which these faeries belong but from which they also distinguish and distance themselves.

The ostensible lesson of *The Wizard of Oz* is complex and apropos. “There’s no place like home” might be interpreted as purely sentimental: nothing beats home.

But the language belies something deeper, queerer: there’s no place like home because home is not a place: it’s the name we give to the no-place. Home thus becomes an endless quest embodied in Dorothy’s incantation that home is not a place.

Constantly travelling, Collett’s CV contains more artist residencies than the average photographer. He has multiple home bases and is currently setting up a new studio in Philadelphia. In his life as in his work, “home” is a complicated construct, a nebulous idea. There’s no place like it.

(AT)TEMPTING UTOPIA

The sanctuary is no simple refuge. Living in community always entails conflict and compromise. Naysayers might argue that commune life is utopian in theory not in practice, but Collett dismisses the claim: for him, “utopian” is “aiming for.” The practice is the attempt.

“People are searching for something and trying to create something that’s different from the outside world or everyday reality.

“Protective of the freedom that anonymity affords and cautious of outsiders, many Faeries do not want the sanctuary named or publicized. Collett is careful and respectful. For years, he did not even take his camera to the commune.”

“A lot of my pictures are just people sitting around, not ‘doing’ anything. On the one hand, I suppose that misses the point: a lot of people go there precisely for the pageantry. But the pictures I like to make are more introspective. Maybe it’s the contrarian part of my personality, but if spectacle is what everyone is photographing, I want to do the opposite.”

They are trying to create something special. And that is utopian already. They may not agree on what they are creating. But the pursuit of something different is already utopian.”

“There is a lot of agreement, too, about what the pursuit does entail: creating a safe space for sexuality and gender expression, a certain political awareness, a certain communal ethos. I think all of that is beautiful and utopian. The flip side of that, the danger of it, is when it becomes exclusive in its own way. It’s supposed to be safe, welcoming space. But it can be hierarchical and cliquish at times.”

A few years ago Collett’s father, a Holocaust survivor, visited the sanctuary and he warned of the dangers of living in a ‘gay ghetto,’ referring to Collett’s grandfather’s experience in the Jewish ghettos of Poland.

“Of course these are worlds apart but even a self-created utopia can become unhealthy if cut off from outside world. Thanks to an ever-expanding circle of ‘gaybors’ and the constant flux of residents and guests, the sanctuary is more interconnected than ever before.”

SANCTUARY WITHIN SANCTUARY

Collett describes his style as “photojournalism of the psyche.”

“I’m interested in what these individuals are experiencing internally: emotionally or psychologically. I think it’s interesting how that intersects with the whole public/private question in this kind of community.”

We see layers of interiority and contiguity. Collett’s portrait from within the sanctuary’s cement water tank emphasizes the eroticism and intimacy of the everyday. Collett did not ask his subject to undress: they just happened to be naked together while cleaning the cistern.

“And, interestingly, he’s actually straight. He just loves the community here.”

The portraits can also be thought of as “sanctuaries within a sanctuary,” says Collett.

STILL LIFE

Shot on a large format camera in a relatively small geographic space, Collett’s portraits are more the result of synchronicity than strategy.

“I invite people to come and sit—it is all very organic. I wasn’t setting out to create

specific shots and I never asked anyone to dress up. A lot of photographers go there because they are looking for the spectacle—and there’s plenty of it, especially during a gathering.”

Gatherings attract hundreds of people and include drag performances, outrageous outfits, and massive parties: think Pride on speed, or camping meets campy. Collett made his portraits in the aftermath of a gathering when it was easier to photograph without distraction, festivity, or chaos.

“A lot of my pictures are just people sitting around, not ‘doing’ anything. On the one hand, I suppose that misses the point: a lot of people go there precisely for the pageantry. But the pictures I like to make are more introspective. Maybe it’s the contrarian part of my personality, but if spectacle is what everyone is photographing, I want to do the opposite.”

Collett’s are still portraits made in a place defined, at least in part, by transience and change. These are moody, sometimes broody photographs on which to meditate. Collett’s portraits of a black faerie holding a pumpkin is a cheeky still-life that distills a quiet, contemplative moment. Such moments are as integral to the sanctuary as its wildlife.

“When you photograph someone you can’t know what they are thinking and feeling. But that’s the beauty of portraiture—we feel like we know. If it’s a good picture, there’s a feeling of entering into that person’s psyche a little bit or into their emotional world.”

But there’s always a caveat.

“Whether [the feeling] is accurate,” adds Collett, “doesn’t really matter.”

A FAERIE AMONG FAERIES

Sanctuary is also a snapshot of Collett at a particular time and place. To assert that a portrait conveys as much about the photographer as his subject could be disregarded as cliché, but this work successfully counters such a criticism.

In one double portrait, Collett is nestled between his companion’s legs and meeting his own gaze. He interrogates his intimacies and attractions—his corporeal and mechanical lenses. Collett’s understated self-inclusion belies the negative stereotype of queer narcissism.

Ultimately, it is intimacy that draws Collett to portraiture.

“Making a portrait is a way of creating an intensely intimate experience in a very short amount of time: for 30 seconds or 10 minutes or however long you spend with that person, you’re in this very intimate experience together, a brief relationship, and hopefully that comes through in the picture.”

Collett’s skilled evocation of feeling, of a distinctive difference of feeling, amounts to a queering of perception in his portraits.

“When you go to an intentional community, you’re entering into a special, protected space that is intimate, even if you’re only there for a day. You step into this place and you know right away that it’s different. You feel it.”