

BEAUTIFUL FREAKS

Photographs by Ralf Obergfell^L_{SEP}

Words: James Anderson

London 2009

Photographer Ralf Obergfell first picked up a camera at the tender age of 15, swiftly finding willing subjects in the form of class mates at his local school in Staufen, Germany. Tellingly, for a young man confused and curious about his own sexuality, one of his most memorable pictures from this time was taken of his friends Thomas and Marc frolicking in the bath. Through Obergfell's lens, the cheeky twosome inadvertently emerged as teen sex symbols - wearing little more than soapy bubbles.

The intimacy, friendship, humour, reinvention and sexuality captured in this particular image are qualities that have continued to permeate much of Obergfell's subsequent photography, not least the series of ravishing images of his friends and cohorts now found in the exhibition, Beautiful Freaks.

As a resident of Dalston since the late 90s, Obergfell - like many others living and working in and around the area - began frequenting gritty-yet-culturally ground breaking watering holes such as the Bricklayer's Arms, The George & Dragon, The Joiners Arms, and the regular gay parties held at 333, all of which have redefined London nightlife since the outset of the current decade. The body of work that makes up Beautiful Freaks finds its origins specifically back in 2005, at the time when East London's Electro scene started to gain real momentum. Obergfell became a regular attendee of the much-loved Trailer Trash nights, capturing the magic of this polysexual party's own after-dark legends and befriending many of them, too - not least Mikki Most, Per QX and Tony Hornecker. One of the initial photographs from this era, now included in Beautiful Freaks, was Lipgloss - an image of the legendary Tasty Tim, whose reign across London's clubs spans right back to the early 80s. Continuing to chronicle the more extreme enclaves of club kids, disco freaks and trannies, Obergfell has persistently zoomed-in on the new generation of exotic creatures at a new wave of events, including Gay Bingo, GutterSlut, Horse Meat Disco (at their first NYC Downlow as part of Glastonbury), and other knees-ups of note, such as Jonny Woo's birthday party or Tony Hornecker's regularly staged Pale Blue Door restaurant.

Obergfell's photographic interpretations of the remarkable characters he has discovered on his nocturnal travels avoid the distant stance of the voyeur, though. Instead the pictures he presents to us make for a celebratory and highly-involved testament to those whose lives - reinvented, transformed; made better, brighter, louder, wilder and lived-out to the max - are a fantastic confusion of reality-meets-performance, with the disco as a stage.