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GOOD NIGHT MR. LEWIS

Kenny Kenny: Not Overexposed

By Steve Lewis

May 04, 2010



I met Kenny Kenny 25 years ago in London. I was there "buying" talent including fashion shows for the Palladium on East 14th street. It was \$25,000 here for a Katherine Hammet fashion show or \$20,000 there for a body map show. A lot of the fabulous of British "downtown" culture waited on line to see me to peddle their art and export it to America. Palladium was the biggest club NYC has seen. It was 108,000 square feet and needed to be filled with at least 4000 people nightly. That was in a time when you could get 4000 or even 8000 great people to an event. People of all types mixed in a joint so you would have 1000 of these and 2000 of those and it was more fun than a barrel of monkeys... or any club out there today. Kenny waited to see me and when it came his turn he revealed he didn't actually want anything from me. he just wanted to "meet the asshole giving out the money." I immediately adored him. In a few years he came to NY and worked with Susanne Bartsch. I hired him to be my doorman and so he was throughout most of my club career. He was Kenny Kens to the Brooklyn kids who he taught not to be afraid of people like him.

He was an inspiration of fashion to those who found inspiration in clubs. He was a teacher more than a doorman and when he turned someone down you could see it was always with reservation. He

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could see potential in people often when they didn't see it in themselves. To owners he was a money making machine as he turned rejects into next week's valued customer as he told the unwanted how to get past his ropes next time. They so often Returned. Many became regulars. Many got themselves together in club life and regular life. He also dealt with the mass messes and the superstar messes. He recognized that the edge has its distractions, infractions and pains. He was always a rock for these types, an honest and strong voice in the dark of the night. Kenny is showing his photographs this Sunday, May 9, at Collective Gallery, 173-171 Canal Street, 5th floor from 6-9pm. The exhibit benefits Ghar Sita Mutu house. Photo shown here is Taboo.

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I've known you for 25 years mostly as a friend/doorman and party host/promoter. Now you are showing a different side, Kenny Kenny the photographer. How long have you been taking photography seriously?

I guess I started taking photos in India 5 years ago and I got the bug. I just thought I would take photos when I traveled because other cultures seemed so beautiful to me, then I realized there was beauty on my door step and I needed to embrace it.

Who are your artistic inspirations?

I have so many inspirations. It used to be more focused around fashion, but now I feel that has lost its impact and doesn't say much culturally anymore, though when I see good photo journalism it makes me speechless. I find it so powerful, emotional and beautiful. It has something important to say and is a form of art, people like Ara Guler and Eddie Adams and many more. Also John Dugdale who is a fine art photographer and is blind, just the fact he's doing his work blind is so powerful. Brian Kenny painting, Gio Black Peters painting are both full of energy and life. I love both of their work.

As one of the greatest door persons in New York club history you must possess a great eye for detail and what lies beneath the surface. Tell me the message you are trying to show us and the process.

I want to tell a story. I want that story to be interesting emotionally and in its own way beautiful. I am in awe and revere the people I photograph as an extension of myself. In a way I love them and respect them so much, I think most of them are so brave and talented. They're usually relegated to the term club kid, which the press really made up to negate people who they found disturbing, I'd like to shed a new light on them and show them in a positive way.

Tell me about the subjects of your photos.

The subjects are the others in society, they're very much part of the puzzle, the mystery of life. Although society thinks of them as a lower caste, they defy gender and social norms and so I think they are like shamans, part of society though still separate, being the "others" they mostly follow their own rules and are an example to society to question its own norms. These people love to laugh, dance, dress up, celebrate, even though some have nothing and some are doing incredibly well.

You have spent many hours telling me about your journeys to India and the things you learned there, especially about the poorest quarters and of course the spirituality. The orphanage that is associated with your photography showing is in Nepal. How has it caught your attention and tell me what you are trying to do with Bon Vivant.

The orphanage "Ghar Sita Muta" is a home that is run by Beverly Bronson who has a small store in the East Village. I am overwhelmed by what she does. She started the orphanage from scratch after finding two abandoned babies in a dumpster. She runs the house like a home and the kids thrive. She creates employment for local women by selling the creations in her store. Someone once said to me they realize there is nothing you can really do after seeing the overwhelming suffering in India. I think this home says there is something you can do and Beverly did it.

Tell us about the transition from the door to hosting fabulous events and weekly parties?

When I started doing doors in New York, it was considered a fabulous job. It was the 80s and New York was a very fun town. There were the people who got in and people who didn't. There were so many amazing people going to the clubs, even the bathroom attendants were fab. Then the tide began to change and it became hard work, there were less amazing people going out and more... well you get the picture. I wasn't enjoying it any more and you gave me a job hosting promoting at spa and I started to enjoy clubs all over again.

What is the difference between this generation and the infamous club kid generation when we were growing up?

I think it was a pretty hostile environment. Most of us were outcasts and being different was a tougher sell. We all fought to be who we were, and with that came some baggage and defense mechanisms. I guess every new generation breaks new ground. I think we broke our fair share. Only 20 years ago my friends were dropping like flies, there was a lot of hate. The new kids are more open, they don't have that baggage. They're inspired by us and are creating their own way. The new kids will make their mark, it will just be different. I am excited for them.

How does Kenny Kenny want to be viewed by both the general public and by this new generation?

A lover. In the end it is how I view myself. I am basically a shy, introverted extrovert, an artist who does give a shit about the world and people. I am a lover and a fighter

You have over many years talked to me about transgender lifestyles and particularly Amanda Lapore. We both agree that Amanda transcends



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traditional or even non-traditional labels and is indeed a living art form. Tell my readers about that, and also is Kenny Kenny a living art form? Leigh Bowery, Michael Alig, who else?

A big part of me views life as art, living as an art form. I am not part of a traditional gender. I am my own gender really, as I feel gender is a continuum, so I am pretty free from the confines of society. I am a lifestyle artist and my other art comes from that. I think there are many others: Joey Muffinhead is living art and a great painter, Joey Arias, Brandon Oldson, and many more. I do think it's become harder in some respects as gay people have gone closer to the mainstream we largely lost them as a support group, the world has gotten more generic so we really stick out. I wouldn't have it any other way. I've learned so much and grown so much, I can't say it's an easy life though it's a great life.

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This is a beautiful interview. Kenny is truly inspiring

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Kenny Kenny Rocks !!!! Such a huge inspiration. Hall of Fame!!!!

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Love, love, love me some Kenny Kenny!

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