

Creative Creatures

The ideas and the work of the American and European painters, songwriters, photographers, fiction and non-fiction authors, musicians, film makers, architects, designers, poets, and dreamers I met during my 20 years in America.



28 / Risk Hazekamp, visual artist, Berlin, Germany

One day, she drove from Matfield Green to the Deep South. Entering Louisiana she decided to drive John Howard Griffin's route as documented in his 1961 book 'Black Like Me', in which Griffin, a white man, describes his experiences while traveling disguised as a black man. Risk Hazekamp, in Matfield Green as artist in residence with The Gallery at Pioneer Bluffs, decided to take photographs of the places where Griffin felt most vulnerable and insecure: the towns deep inside Alabama and Mississippi. She also decided to combine Griffin's approach with the gender theme: she took to the road not as a woman, but as a man, with a fake beard and bound-up breasts. Her photographs were self-portraits recording her experiences in these states far from the transgender subculture. It wasn't the first time Risk traveled as a man and photographed her "new" identity. One could say, it's her job—she is a professional artist who uses the medium of photography to establish that gender is fluent. Her photos portray her as James Dean in 'Giant'; as Captain America in 'Easy Rider'; as Hunter S. Thompson on the cover of 'Rolling Stone' magazine. They are images that make one reflect.

"The smell of rotten eggs combined with the presence of alligators in the swamps made my imagination run wild with lynching and other racially charged murders that took place at these sites. Moving towards the coast I found myself surrounded by huge fields of cotton slapping the memory of slavery into my face, no matter how pretty they looked." New Orleans was the end of a long trip filled with a constant awareness of possible danger, since the position of transgender and gay people in these parts is not that great. "I arrived in New Orleans around the Halloween weekend. Everywhere I looked I saw jack-o'-lanterns, weird skeletons and other ghost-like attributes. I felt at ease in my subtle disguise. Me and my beard. I walked to Bourbon Street and immediately fell madly in love. Such an amazing place, so many

people, shouting, flirting, trying to make contact. Someone dressed as the Tin Man from 'The Wizard of Oz' wanted to know where I would be that evening. I was too excited to speak, afraid my voice would squeeze out of my throat like a mouse's. And then, finally, at the corner of St. Anne Street: rainbow flags, gay bars! It gave me a strange mixture of feelings: the relaxation of coming home combined with the excitement of entering a gay place for the very first time. I placed myself in the middle of the crowd and started taking pictures, watching, enjoying. After a while I felt someone was watching me. I looked around and saw this blond short-haired person staring at me. I smiled shyly and looked away. This continued for a few minutes and then she came towards me. She said: 'Sorry, but I just have to talk to you. What are you?' Strangely enough I did not even feel offended by the 'what' in her question; it felt like a compliment." It was the first time in all these weeks of traveling-in-drag that someone addressed Risk as a trans*--Risk, who never asks *what* you are, but wants to know *who* you are.

Risk's analog photographs from this journey have been already exhibited in Berlin and Amsterdam, and will continue their museum travels. The show's title is 'Solitary Fruits'—which refers to Billy Holiday's 'Strange Fruit' songs ("fruit" standing for male homosexual) and to Johnny Cash's 'Solitary Man'. For much of American history the world of gay love has had to be a world of codes and obfuscations, of close reading and uncovering--the perfect schoolroom, in Blake Gopnik's words, for subtle artists. In 1898 already, Thomas Eakins painted males in such a way that the issue of erotic energy is not confined to who likes doing what to whom. John Singer Sargent, Grant Wood, Georgia O'Keeffe, scores of others including even Walker Evans—Risk's inspiration for another trip, to the Dust Bowl—in their art suggested the odd possibility that being gay, or being straight and paying close attention to the twists of gender and desire, makes one a more careful observer... See also www.riskhazekamp.nl.

Today, in America there is 'Candy', a style magazine named after Andy Warhol's muse who also inspired the Velvet Underground song 'Candy Says' and Lou Reed's 'Walk on the Wild Side', and dedicated to "transversal"—that is transsexuality, transvestism, cross-dressing, androgyny, and any combination thereof. Gender nonconformists are abundant nowadays; many celebrities flirt with "the other side"; a new male fashion model actually appears to be Lady Gaga; and gender-bending is saturating the news media. Risk's "fluidity of gender" is discussed nationwide (although I don't know about Kansas...). Even Oprah Winfrey welcomes transsexual men to her show. And President Obama's nanny appears to have been a "tranny nanny", a transvestite from Jakarta—one more reason, of course, for the ultra-conservatives to take the stand against him. Yet, "There have and will always be people who don't fit into boxes," says Risk. "What is considered to be normal is evolving and changing. That frightens many people, but it is the nature of our times. You know, there's already a transgender trial judge in America."

When in America, whether in the Southwest, the Midwest, or Deep South, Risk drives my 1991 F-250 Lariat 4WD long-bed pick-up. "I feel safe in this truck. I am recognized as one of the boys wherever I go. Everyone waves at me." Or stops to help if she is wrestling with a flat tire, as happened more than once deep in the New Mexico desert. Meetings with Risk always lead to intense conversations even if the rescuer is a highly bigoted redneck. She may not "convert" these guys, but she makes them think twice, and they sure come home to mama with a tall tale to tell.