

In Greek, *Pórnē* means a female prostitute, and *kratíā* is a ruler or government, link the two terms and we get some form of government ruled by the thighs—in other words harlots are running the show. The fin-de-siècle painter Félicien Rops, in washes of gouache and watercolour, personified Porno-crates clad in lingerie, and kitten heels walking her pet pig companion on a leash late at night.¹ Pornocrates was given to us by the same nimble-tongued Greeks that also named eros, and philosophy. The oldest profession of the world is full of historical anomalies; female prostitutes in biblical times may have exercised priestly functions, as in the case of Sarah, Abraham's wife.² Sleep with her and you might gain access to her clairvoyance and earn knowledge of your fortune; that is, of course, if you play your cards right...

The paintings in *tinted glass* by Charlott Weise redesign the theatre of worship, icons are reconfigured, abstracted away from a fixed sex, or identity: while rituals of care and spirit—performed in different hues—chart the female psyche. ‘The risk it takes to blossom’ writes Anaïs Nin ‘was more painful than the risk it took to remain tight in a bud.’ She writes past tense; *it* needed to happen, don’t look back, just a sidelong glance will do, to indicate that you are turning a corner. The professional hazard of playing yourself entails *coming out* on a daily basis, looking into the glass, and meeting your maker. The sybarite is caught off-guard courting danger; her *jouissance* means she will blossom over and over again after every new, fateful administering of *maquillage*.

Bringing blush to the table, the business of soft giggly spirits, gurgliness, and pansies, is part of the apparatus that constitutes the politics of aesthetics. There was a time when powerful heads of state could simply not afford *not* to perform their leadership in elegant, sanctimonious drag. Julius Caesar—by far the most famous Roman—was a queen before he ruled Rome appearing in drag so as to leave no doubt about his claim to divinity through his lineage to Venus herself “goddess of beauty” and ancestor of the Roman people. What springs to mind is Beyoncé’s lyric: ‘the female definition of a diva is a hustler’ (2009). Queen B interfaces the Italo-Latin origin for the word goddess with the slang term for a lowlife criminal.³ Perhaps what Caesar and Beyoncé would agree upon is that divas get things done, in spite of being demanding or difficult to work with. This sense of woman cast forwards by the diva is overflowing, and always more than bargained for: a deception for truth’s sake, like Weise’s painted ‘dancing membrane’, a glimpse of the essence of femininity before being overruled, something primordially *femme*.

Rouge is the secret *eau de toilette* of every *sanguine goddess*, which becomes available according to the Roman calendar, at *that* time of the month. As in Félicien Rops’

1 Beneath the figure of Pornocrates are engravings of classical male figures looking somewhat defeated. These figures represented the academic, burdensome painting styles Rops eschewed.

2 Sarah, the wife of Abraham, and other biblical, female personages are thought to have originally been survivors of pre-christian, matriarchal societies. This would explain their promiscuous relations to various heads-of-state such as the pharaoh in Genesis. According to this theory, their characters were likely suppressed by prude Judeo-Israeli scribes at a stage when feminine agency would likely not have been thought appropriate. This history is elaborated in “Sarah the Priestess: *the first Matriarch of Genesis*” (1984) by Savina Teubel.

3 ‘Hustler’ is defined as a prostitute, a gambling shark or simply someone who ‘is active and energetic in business, a lively person.’ (Merriam-Webster)

paintings, divas here are in the company of cherubs, or rather their demonic counterparts, which, for want of a better word, I christen *babydemons*.

The oils splash, and are churned out and in around the finely delineated contours of visage whose blush extends beyond the cheeks onstage. A theatrical aside takes place between wigged actors. Perhaps they discuss the viewer, who is by now sitting perched on a stool applying eye-liner before her fateful denouement in the dressing-room mirror, like an all-seeing, mascara-heavy, smokey-eye of *Saurona*—Sauron's drag persona. The figures being watched, puffed cheeks from betrayal, are in negotiation with their own spectral sexuality as if peeping out from behind a hand of cards, ready to perform their reading. And like the figures in the court cards, some queens in the paintings appear doubled in top & tail position with their upside down selves floating alongside other apparitions. The paintings are translucent, using empty portions of the canvas to draw attention to their obverse. It is a world devoid of any male gaze where a homosocial androgyny between the sexes is reminiscent of opera's golden age, that realm where a star's longevity was still guaranteed by the *divadienst*—her fans. In this parallel universe of démi-opera, Gloria Esteban, whose well known contralto, or Britney—contralto-soprano—should, around about now, be approaching their absolute vocal apex—what we might call the *red giant phase* in terms of the lifecycle of a star.

Should there not be a celebration of a star's laryngeal descent towards the lower frequencies as she matures? Some remember Eve's fall as the moment when she finally came into her own due to her character becoming more tangible and real, and is also when she finally struts her own weight in a true grit showgirl *dernier cri*. Speaking of lower vocal registers brings me to the ultimate diva—Dietrich, whose Stygian notes made us gaze deeper into ourselves, beyond the realm of living and on into the underworld. Dietrich is the most recognizable reference in Weise's pantheon, besides Madonna through her older, biblical namesake. Liz Taylor's "Cléopatra" bangs are only visceral references, abstracted from pop culture and fanzines into dream illustrations of the popular female imagination. Dietrich, embroiled in her *masc'uerade*, watches us through those crescent moonlit eyebrows and lids, whilst Jagger as *lord of the riots*, Prince in *shining armour*, and Bowie in his *thin white duke* period, tread in her shadow. They are like hungry canine inheritors to her throne, though all the while holding designs of courtship. It was in *Morocco* (1930) that Dietrich famously delivered her trademark pansexual gusto only to follow Gary Cooper, playing her beloved foreign legionnaire, into the dunes in a pair of spiked heels. Here in the sand, she joins other lovesick women in pursuit of men in uniforms marching away. This surrealist, balletic dream sequence finale is at odds with the sex defying 'supreme lover' role she commanded. Yet something about the absurdity of spiked heels in sand says something about the human condition and thus elevates her beyond its sphere to the heights of stardom. Complexity makes the diva, whose theater lies always before her, with or without a stage. *The divadienst*, that is you and I, secure milady's rentrée; however infrequent the occasion, the more devoted the worship, the more splendid will be her comeback of Tina Turner proportions, under Turneresque skies, oh dear, it doesn't matter *which* Turner, as long as you turn *her!* She'll be back on that stage before you get the chance to say "break a leg, darlin'!"

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