

# VICE

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### CULT ART LEGEND TABBOO! TALKS ABOUT THE NEW YORK DRAG SCENE OF YESTERYEAR

by Whitney Mallett



JIMMY PAUL AND TABBOO!, CIRCA 1988. PHOTO BY LINDA SIMPSON, COLLECTION OF JIMMY PAUL.

In the 80s, the artist Tabboo! was a legend among New York's gritty and glittery Lower East Side underground art scene, then headquartered at the Pyramid Club on Avenue A. The regulars there included RuPaul and Jean-Michel Basquiat, and it was the heart of the city's drag resurgence; the annual drag festival Wigstock, founded by Lady Bunny in 1984, was supposedly the brainchild of a drunken night at the Pyramid.

Tabboo! arrived in New York from Boston, fresh out of art school, in the early 80s. She lived and painted in a loft a stone's throw from the Pyramid, and in addition to performing avant drag there, made flyers by hand for the club. They were alive with doodles and collages, cute cartoons, and portraits of queens, the same mix of wit, glam, and scrappy spirit that oozed from Tabboo!'s performances. A celebration of bad taste and disobedient sense of humor carpeted the scene. Tabboo! played in a few irreverent art bands—Fuckin' Barbies, Chihuahua Squad, the People Tree—and starred in projects like Mark Oates's campy horror parody *Psykho III the Musical*. These performances veered into deliciously absurd territory at times. In one clip I found of Tabboo! onstage at the Pyramid, she rapped like the Lorax ("I speak for the trees") and shrieked like an animal-rights activist ("Even Mister Goldfish needs some love").

Tabboo! remained a fixture of the downtown drag scene, performing well into the 90s, even as her peers burnt out around her. Jimmy Paul, a.k.a. Jimmy Paulette was one of them. Now a prominent editorial stylist in the New York fashion scene who does covers for Vogue and W, Paul only performed drag for a few years, but together with Tabboo!, the two were immortalized putting on their makeup in photos snapped by Nan Goldin, a close friend. These pictures are considered some of the most iconic images of New York's queer community from the late 80s and early 90s.

All through the years, Tabboo! has always painted, and since hanging up the wig, it's her main practice. A diaristic impulse spans her work—she's always painted what's around her. Decades ago, that was drag queens. Today, however, her subjects are more idyll and intimate—a portrait of a friend or a still life of flowers. In 2013, Damiani published the artist's first monograph. Coming up this week, SITUATIONS gallery is presenting a selection of Tabboo!'s art, which includes her drag-queen portraits as well as her later-day paintings, at the Outsider Art Fair in New York from January 21 through 24. To better understand the context this work emerged from, I chatted with Tabboo! and Jimmy Paul about how they each grew up and out of New York's 1980s drag scene.

VICE: When did you first move to New York, and did you move to the Lower East Side right away?

Tabboo!: I moved to New York City in the summer of 1982, meaning “Manhattan.” I was a big drinker back then, living in a dumpy old-age home known as the Homo Hilton, drinking Manhattans, working at dead-end jobs, yet still making out an artist's life. What little money was left after my frequent trips to the liquor store was spent on art supplies! I was always painting away and “doing shows.” With my friend Pat Hearn and her new French husband, we were performing in a sort of no-wave band called Wild and Wonderful. We figured our chances were better if we headed to the Big Apple. Pat found a loft for rent (way over our collected budget), so within a month we split up and I ended up in a big, bright, sunny six-room tenement dump off of Avenue C. So many years later, I'm still here, painting away!

Jimmy Paul: I moved to New York the day after my 19th birthday, August 28, 1982. I'm from a small town outside of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. It didn't take very long before I ended up in the East Village. Tabboo! and I met maybe in '83. I moved in shortly after we met.

I wanted to move away from where I grew up as soon as figured out that it was an option. During high school, I started to take the bus downtown to hang out with the gay folks. Believe me, there were some good ones. That is where I met my first trans friend, Angie. Her image continues to inspire. Gorgeous.

How did you each start performing drag at the Pyramid Club?

Tabboo!: The very first day of getting to New York, I ran into Anne Craig and Jean-Michel Basquiat, and they said come do a show at the Pyramid! So it was off to the races from the very start. Wild and Wonderful did shows at the Mudd Club, CBGB, and Club 57, but those clubs were far past their prime. The Pyramid was exploding. As fate would have it, it was just a few blocks from my apartment-studio.

Jimmy Paul: A friend of mine from the Pittsburgh scene was working at the Pyramid Club doing lights. I heard he was working there, and I also heard they had drag queens dancing on the bar. He got me a job there when I was very new in town. It was the beginning of my new life.

What was the transformation like to get to become this drag persona?

Tabboo!: As far as trans-forming into Tabboo!, with the safety of having big, strapping doormen to protect me from being fag-bashed, kicking around on five-and-a-half-inch patent leather pumps for an appreciative audience, not to mention money at the end of the stick, it was no problem at all. As a child, I was always getting told, "Stop flitting around the house and take off that ridiculous outfit." Drag was freeing, fun, and there was a huge community of like-minded souls!

[As far as the name], just because I haven't worked the clubs as a queen [in recent years], doesn't mean people haven't called me Tabboo! I mean, it's not a woman's name; it's an art name—a tag name, in graffiti slang.

How was the punk (for back of a better word) drag that was happening at Pyramid different from the stuffier, old-fashioned drag people were used to?

Tabboo!: The old-school queens seemed to always be "doing" a famous diva: Peggy Lee, Barbra Streisand, Diana Ross, Judy, Liza. So, of course, they lip-synced. The greats could actually create the voices like Craig Russell, Jim Bailey, and Jimmy James. All the queens I knew were just into jumping into drag to be themselves. Once the lashes were on... HELLO!

Jimmy Paul: I never really thought about the previous drag performers who did traditional female impersonation. I never aspired to that. I much more related to the Warhol queens and glitter rockers: Candy Darling, Bowie, the New York Dolls. What were the bands like that you played in?

Tabboo!: Fuckin' Barbies was sort of like the group Pylon. We played with toy

instruments and banged on metal folding chairs and other found objects. Our two “hit” songs were: “She Never Had Eyebrows, She Painted Them In” and a cover version of the That Girl TV theme song. By the way, Jack Pierson was in that group with me, and we were all in drag. There were real girls, too. Seven of us.

The next band was Chihuahua Squad with Philly, Hapi, Jimmy Paulette, myself, and this girl who was the lead guitarist from Flipper, a famous LA hardcore band. Again, it was all drag, and this time our hit was a cover of the Troggs’ “Wild Thing.”

The People Tree was the most successful of all. Deee-Lite opened for us! We were a glam-rock band. I played drums in all the bands, but this time we even had a rock cello and matching outfits.

How did drag influence and interact with all the art, music, and fashion world in New York at the time?

Tabboo!: Well, I would say every single person I knew in the 80s and into the mid 90s—I dropped out of the drag scene around then, 20 years ago—was a drag queen or at least did it now and then. Yes, it influenced everything. I still refer to everyone as “she.” When I met my first queens as a teenager in the gay bars, I couldn’t get enough of the wild lingo, the gestures, the history. I gobbled it up with a passion. The gay world seems so conservative now, everyone wanting to blend in. We were the opposite—children of Bowie and T. Rex and International Chrysis.

Jimmy Paul: I didn’t realize it at the time, but drag was edgy then. Without trying, we were ahead of the curve. Still, I was burning out fast. I was in a few bands, but I didn’t feel like it was going anywhere. At the same time, [designer Stephen] Sprouse exploded on the fashion scene. Teri Toyne [one of the first openly trans-gender models] was around. I always loved fashion, but this was happening right alongside all the stuff we were apart of. I saw a place for myself there.

Ethyl Eichelberger, a legendary [drag] performer, suggested I do hair or makeup as I spent so much time on my own. I think she would see how much I loved it. The scene supported me. For my first hair salon job, Agosto Machado, a major queen, gave me designer clothes to wear. Danilo, a genius hairdresser, later helped me. I apprenticed with him. My first photo shoots were with people I met through the scene. Tabboo! was a muse. I practiced my craft by doing wigs for him. He has a tiny head like models do, and sort of Anjelica Houston bone structure—not to mention very inspiring style. It was always a collaboration.

What’s the relationship between your performance work and your painting?

Tabboo!: Well, they’re both two different art forms. When I was doing those ads for a drag club, of course I drew cartoon queens. That was the job. On the other hand, my paintings have always been more realistic and the form and content more classic. Still lives of little setups I do around the house with house plants and figurines, flowers in vases (imagined or real), portraits of friends, landscapes, all on stretched

Belgian linen, with me doing all the work myself, old school. I haven't done drag in decades, but people never get tired of bringing it up!

You have this presentation coming up at the Outsider Art Fair. Do you identify with the term "outsider artist"?

Tabboo!: Call me what you want, but just call me.