



Kalup Linzy The New York Times April 2009

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ART REVIEW | 'IF IT DON'T FIT'

Video Artist as Video Art: Glimpses of an Alter-Ego Trip



Kalup Linzy/Taxter & Spengemann

Kalup Linzy in a scene from his work "Keys to Our Hearts," a sendup of "The Color Purple."

By KAREN ROSENBERG
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A drag queen named Taiwan is working the phone. His male lover has just proposed marriage, and Taiwan doesn't know what to tell him. He calls his mother, then his grandmother, then a psychic hotline. He weighs church and small-town values against love and commitment. Shrieking and soul searching ensue.

This antic, multigenerational conversation is really an elaborate monologue, written, directed and performed by the video artist Kalup Linzy. It's one of many riveting and, yes, topical sequences in Mr. Linzy's current solo show at the [Studio Museum in Harlem](#).

"If It Don't Fit" is the third appearance at the Studio Museum for the 31-year-old Mr. Linzy; his videos were featured in two group shows in 2005, "African Queen" and "Frequency." Others have been seen in solo exhibitions at his gallery, Taxter & Spengemann. Mr. Linzy also occasionally performs live in character. (He had a sold-out run at the Kitchen in February.)

That's a lot of attention in a short period of time, and the show is also meant to demonstrate that Mr. Linzy can handle it. The conclusion of the program's three hourlong segments is a wicked critique of the art-star system. It arrives via Mr. Linzy's newest persona, the emerging artist Katonya, and it's a hoot.

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Organized by the museum's curatorial assistant, Thomas J. Lax, with the assistant curator Naomi Beckwith, "If It Don't Fit" includes 22 videos made since 2002. The three hours of video are shown on a single screen (and are perhaps best viewed in two visits rather than one). Packaged thematically rather than chronologically, it begins with a series of late-night phone calls ("Ramone Calls Julietta") and ends with a set of upbeat musical sequences. In between are longer works like the series "Da Churen," Mr. Linzy's reimagining of the popular soap [opera](#) "All My Children."

Mr. Linzy's art has a complex ancestry. A family tree would have to include the Wayans brothers, RuPaul, [John Waters](#) and [Eddie Murphy](#) on one branch, and the highbrow canon of dress-up artists, from [Cindy Sherman](#) to Yasumasa Morimura, on another.

Just as important are two entertainment genres that rarely find their way into museums: the so-called "chitlin circuit" of black performance and the soap operas Mr. Linzy watched with his grandmother while growing up Florida.

Speech, in Mr. Linzy's videos, shifts abruptly from sonorous and drawn-out to rapid-fire and shrill. Just as disorienting, white actors often speak in "black" slang. Finally, there's the virtuoso element: most of these voices are Mr. Linzy's. (If you have never seen his work, you might not even realize this at first.)

Beneath all the clichés, costumes and sass Mr. Linzy connects with his audience in a deeply satisfying way. His art dissects relationships within and among different realms: family, friends, the art world. Each one of these groups is made up of queen bees and wannabes, strivers and hangers-on.

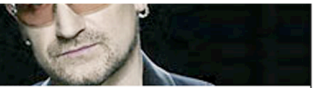
Mr. Linzy's displacements of voice and gender come from the world of drag, but because they infiltrate other spheres — mainstream television, the art-star system — they become less about a man dressing as a woman and more about the everyday role-playing and ventriloquism enabled by digital culture.

Technology helps him, to a point; he uses voice-modulation software to dial the pitch up or down, but his ear for dialect is unmistakable. In general his videos have a lo-fi quality. Most appear to have been shot in his apartment, and almost all of the plot unfolds over the phone.

The low production values extend to Mr. Linzy's drag getups. As the melancholy Taiwan, he wears a black leotard, an updo and a flower pinned behind his ear. The costumes are minimal, and Mr. Linzy wears no makeup, but there's no mistaking Taiwan for Labisha, the perky, attention-seeking diva in a tube top, or Katonya, the blond-wigged naïf who is trying to make it in the art world.

Many of these alter egos are introduced in a series of short music videos from Mr. Linzy's album "Sweetberry Sonnet." Some are more inventive than others. ("Becoming Jada" is little more than a homage to [Erykah Badu](#), set to her song "Don't Cha Know.")

Romantic relationships, of all persuasions, are the focus of the show's first hour. In "Lollypop" Mr. Linzy and the artist Shaun Leonardo lip-sync to the Hunter & Jenkins blues song of the same title, reinterpreting a bit of Depression-era raunch as a celebration of queer identity. "Keys to My Heart," a sendup of "The Color Purple," approaches [Alice Walker](#) by way of [Oprah](#), telenovelas and much else on daytime television.



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Viewers who are new to Mr. Linzy should make sure to catch the hour of videos that is devoted to his “Churen” series. The travails of the Braswell family — members include the aforementioned Taiwan; his sister, Jada; his mother, Nora Lee; and his grandmother Leelabel — unfold in a series of phone calls that amount to an opera of African-American vernacular.

The most recent episode of “Churen,” subtitled “As da Art World Might Turn” (2006), is Mr. Linzy’s self-immolating response to the enthusiastic reception that followed his breakout in 2005 (the art market’s peak, from the current vantage point).

As the emerging artist Katonya, Mr. Linzy, in a blond wig and negligee, makes black-and-white drawings beneath a sign that reads “This my live & work space.” (Some of those drawings, best described as bowdlerized [Kara Walker](#), are displayed just outside the video room at the Studio Museum.) After some false starts with lovers and dealers, Katonya triumphs with a boyfriend and a sold-out show.

In a related video, “KK Queen’s Survey,” a more established artist responds to a telephone poll. As her assistants toil in the studio, she fields questions along the lines of “How many movers and shakers in your art community do you sleep with a month?”

The key word is “community.” Mr. Linzy recruits his fellow “movers and shakers” to play the supporting roles in his videos, among them the artists Matthew Day Jackson and Mickalene Thomas (as Katonya’s best friend and lover) and the gallery owner Kelly Taxter. There’s an insulating magnanimity here; everyone is in on the joke, including, presumably, the “most important art critic” and “professors-collectors” name-checked by Katonya in her opening-night speech.

It’s all highly entertaining, but the most profound moments in Mr. Linzy’s work address arenas much bigger than the art world. Such is the case with “Churen III: Da Young and Da Mess,” in which Taiwan considers Harry’s proposal. He loves Harry, but can’t envision a wedding without the support of church, family and society. “It’s a small town,” he says. “Men don’t get married here.”

In “Da Young and Da Mess” Mr. Linzy doesn’t just nod to an of-the-moment topic and call it a day. His Taiwan is conflicted, indecisive and complicated. Katonya isn’t, but give her some time; it’s only her first museum solo.

“Kalup Linzy: If It Don’t Fit” continues through June 28 at the Studio Museum in Harlem, 144 West 125th Street; (212) 864-4500, studiomuseum.org.