The Cementing of an Empire
ABSTRACT: In this photo essay on the Regias del Drag competition in Monterrey, Mexico, photographer Laura Patricia Alvarez meditates on the experiences, identities, and things that comprise northern Mexico’s queer communities.

KEYWORDS: Drag queen, queer, drag queen culture, photography
Laura Patricia Alvarez is a Mexican visual artist based in Monterrey, Nuevo León, Mexico. In the series *Imperio de ilusiones*, they explore identity, gender, and sexuality in northern Mexico’s drag scene through candid portraits and poetically staged setups. Initiated in 2017, *Imperio de ilusiones* is a living and recurring project, which grows and expands over the years addressing specific places and groups.
In September 2017, after a year of living away, I returned to my hometown of Monterrey, Mexico.

I had little hope of finding an even slightly less homophobic city than the one I left. I arrived on a Tuesday night and a Facebook post informed me that the finale of the second season of the Regia del Drag competition would happen that Thursday. The event would take place in an obscure gay bar, Brut33, located in a problematic part of town. Brut33 was as small and dark as the closet in which most queer people in Monterrey have to live for much of our lives.
Now, almost four years later, that night at Beut is still one of the best nights of my entire life. That night did not just celebrate the end of a drag competition’s season. On that night, the freedom to be ourselves and to exist in a society that insists on nullifying and erasing us was also being celebrated.
I had been to Venice, Italy, that summer and had a chance to experience one of their magical street festivities. I planned on returning the following year to see their carnival. So, when I arrived at Brux, I could not help but think about that European festival. There were painted faces, masks, colors everywhere. Yet, in this case, the costumes and makeup were not supposed to hide anyone's identity. Each line drawn on a face and each fold on a costume sought instead to reveal individual essences.
Masks are what we use to navigate the streets of Monterrey on a daily basis—the ones we use when we go to work or when we talk to our families. On Regia del Drag nights, the masks disappear and make way for our mutilated identity to finally be released from its chains. For those who wear it for themselves, drag is an individual tribute. In a bar full of people whose identity has been repressed since childhood, that tribute becomes a collective act of celebration and resistance.
Femininity is a device imposed on many but denied to others. The individual and collective identities of the drag community are composed of symbolically charged elements. In my photographic work, legs and high heels are always prominent. The latter has historically served as a device of repression for women and a symbol of femininity denied to many men. High heels are probably the only element that all drag queens had in their dressing rooms.
A drag queen is not complete until she puts on her heels, and it is not until she puts them on that her transformation is complete. The stage is not the illuminated platform at the center of the gay bar. The heels are the stage. High heels injure, exhaust, cause pain.... But so does being queer in Monterrey.
Dressing rooms are another recurring element in my photographic work. In dressing rooms, identity is constantly at play. There is an ambiguous vibe between what we think we are, what others think we are, and what we want to be. During the transformation process, there are fleeting moments of brutal honesty of being. Being half-dressed is a moment of limbo in the show. It is the threshold between the mask and the soul.
Drag is about being everything you were told you should not be and breaking all the social rules that restrain and police the development of our individual identities.
Portraying Monterrey’s drag and LGBTQ+ communities has allowed me to deal with personal issues related to the construction of my own identity while asking new questions about the dynamics that shape a collective queer identity.
A majority of LGBTQ+ people come from broken family stories. We have histories of rejection, abandonment, and repression derived from our sexual orientation or gender identity. Spuxes like Regias del Drag stem from the need to fill a general void of acceptance and belonging. A tribal need.

Regias del Drag is an empire of illusions that allows us to reclaim ourselves and play at being who we have always been. It is a permanent celebration of community, a tribal rite of healing, and new beginnings.
Cover. Cinema Rio 70. Pearl. 2018

01. Portrait of Laura Patricia Alvarez by Luis R. Carza, 2018
La Colorina. Vickoo Bullins, Luisa Queen, Laura Patricia Alvarez & Diamond Andrews, 2019

02. Arena Femenil, Kim De Leon, 2018

03. Brutus. Guajardo, 2017
Patio Barrio, Emily Evans, 2017

04. La Carniceria, Barbara Fundijon, 2019
La Carniceria, Barbara Fundijon, Deborah Vergas & Samantha Klein, 2019

05. La Carniceria, La Gagis, Ashlin Rose & Samantha Klein, 2019

06. La Colorina, La Carniceria, Ruby the Meme, 2019
La Carniceria, Ruby the Meme, 2019

07. Musicante, Baby Paris, 2020
Esteban/Shakra, 2018

08. Musicante, Vera Cruz, 2020

09. Japi. Soro Nasty, 2019
La Colorina, Laura Patricia Alvarez & Maria Bonita, 2018

10. La Colorina, Audience, 2019
La Carniceria, Billy Dulay & Laura Patricia Alvarez, 2017

11. La Carniceria, Pity Pilata, 2017
La Carniceria, Mama Bee, 2019

12. La Carniceria, La Gagis, Ashlin Rose & Samantha Klein, 2019

13. La Carniceria, Deborah Vergas, 2019


15. Esteban/Shakra, 2018

16. Antonios Eia Noel, 2018

TRANSLATED BY: Isabel Machado
GRAPHIC DESIGN: Daniel Wildberger