



STORY **BENJAMEN JUDD** PORTRAIT **NIC WALKER** ARTWORKS **GERWYN DAVIES**

While a self-confessed lover of 'the hermit life', Gerwyn Davies takes the art of flamboyant expression to a whole new level

MASTER OF ILLUSION

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THE FIRST THING that stands out as we enter photographer and costume maker Gerwyn Davies' studio is how neat it is. A short trot from Oxford Street and Taylor Square in Sydney's Darlinghurst, his workspace has a library-like tidiness – nary a sequin or feather is out of place, and everything has a place. On one wall sits a line of dressmaker's mannequins draped in current projects in various colours, textures and shapes; along the other, scraps of fabric and prosthetics that are destined to become one of Davies' aesthetic creatures depicted in his surreal self-portraits. Even his desk is fastidiously lacking in detritus.

As we settle in to begin the interview, Davies warns that these scenarios – talking at length about himself, revealing elements of his life – don't come easily to him.

"I'm very private. I like order in my life. I do interviewing, public talks, things like that. I have enough confidence to do these things. It doesn't send me into a spiral, but it's not something that comes easily. I think there's an expectation of seeing this very loud, campy work, that I'm going to be this very overly confident and very expressive theatrical person. Of course, there are elements of that to my personality."

This self-assessment prompts an observation, half joking: “What are you, a Capricorn?” But it turns out the observation is on the money.

“A triple Capricorn!” Davies says. If you put any faith in the language of astrology, take even a cursory glance at a Capricorn’s attributes, then yes, perhaps they do sound quite like the 36-year-old artist. Driven to the point of being a workaholic, ambitious, with lofty goals and a preference for strict boundaries, yet becoming ever more playful, mischievous even, as they become older...

Does he believe this describes him? “It’s not something that I put a great amount of stock in, but I’m not a disbeliever. But there are all these things about those archetypes that are so spot on to my personality, and that’s hard to ignore. Because it really does sum up the way that I live, but also the way that I work. I’m so anal, I’m so uptight, and I’m incredibly independent and solitary. It’s all very kind of regimented and contained. So I guess I can’t ignore those facts... but also I like it when it tells me what I like to hear.”

Doing interviews may not come naturally to Davies, but it’s soon apparent that, contrary to the way he sees himself, he is surprisingly talkative. And very good at it too. Especially when it comes to his art.

A graduate of Queensland’s College of Art at Griffith University, where he studied photography before moving to Sydney to complete a PhD at the University of NSW, Davies explores the aesthetics of camp in his oeuvre – the exaggerated, the artificial, the performative that demands attention in its luridness. Yet at the same time it elicits an almost instinctive revulsion from the viewer. His costumes, ranging from upcycled materials to the “brightest, ugliest, most garish fabrics at Spotlight” are worked into bizarre, wearable sculptures. It was in fact photographing sculptures that he was making using found materials that first put Davies on the pathway to his current expression.

“I was constructing these dioramas or sculptures, and then mediating that through photography. And then that became making more sculptural costume on someone else and slowly then morphed onto myself. And now it’s surpassing the camera.”

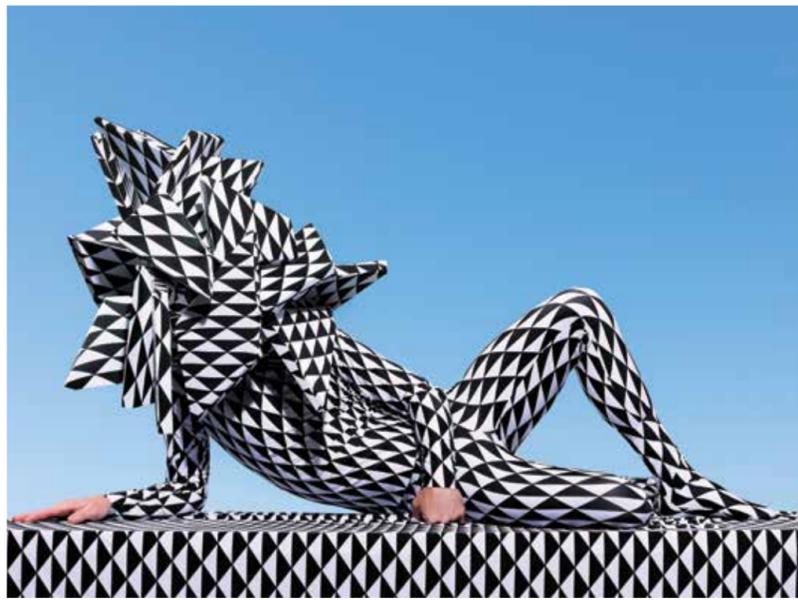
Perhaps what is most fascinating about talking to Davies is just how familiar parts of him are. Literally parts of him. Such as his arms and legs, their distinct tattoos becoming the details of association. His image is prolific, appearing in the windows of Hermès’ flagship stores in Sydney and Melbourne and in a fashion spread in the relaunched *Harper’s Bazaar*. He’s just completed a project for the ultra-chic Calile Hotel in Brisbane and is working on a new series that will show at Jan Murphy Gallery in Brisbane. Promotional material for his exhibition *Iridescent* for Sydney Living Museums has been plastered throughout the city, and all that is recognisably Davies in his art are his illustrated limbs as they peek out from beneath the folds of latex and feathers or are engulfed in a labyrinth of gold-covered pool noodles. His image is everywhere yet Davies’ face remains hidden, as he thumbs his nose at the traditional interpretation of the portrait. It’s an odd sensation – to feel so familiar with someone yet not actually know what they look like.

In this way, Davies’ photography takes the tradition of portraiture and flips it on its head, “queering it”, by removing the subject – himself – almost entirely from the shot. He is, as he describes it, hiding in plain sight. Instead, the portraits centre around an interaction of the background – often suburban locations such as a street or culturally significant location – and the contrasting costume he wears in the foreground, turning it into a surreal performance between Davies and surrounding scenery: awkward stances, posing, grandiose posturing that are at times both ridiculous and erotic. This pandering to the moment is, says Davies, part of the artwork.

“There is a pleasurable experience to building these things. There’s something fetishy about them, the construction of them, the wearing of them. And then the posing – sometimes seductively and imagining myself being seductive for the camera.”

There’s also a strong queer history attached to this kind of performance. If you’re familiar with black LGBT culture, it could even be said to loosely resemble voguing and the ballroom scene of Harlem in New York. And yes, as in the Madonna song.

Davies explains that this posturing, more so than the scene itself, informs the final imagery. “A lot of it is drawn upon how the body moves



A new collection of work, *Strange Magic*, is inspired by the performances of stage magicians such as Houdini and Siegfried and Roy, and all the pageantry and fanfare behind them

Clockwise from top left:
Copa 2020; Swords 2021;
Caravan 2020
Opposite from top:
Cactus 2020;
Disappearing Act I 2021



in the costume,” he says. “A lot of it is obviously about the colour and texture, the materiality of the costume itself. But I’m more interested in form: what is the material that I’m going to be working with, and how is it going to be perverted and rearranged?”

Beneath the stillness of the image, however, the process is extremely physical. To get that one great shot, Davies can easily take several hundred photos of himself in various stages of pose. This requires a constant back and forth to his camera – checking the lighting, inspecting how angles work and which ones don’t – that also requires constantly removing and reattaching elements of his costume.

“You’re hopping in these costumes that have various weird dimensions, but weights and various degrees of comfort. And so even just stepping into that and taking on that skin, there’s this process of transformation. Sometimes you feel like a real bad bitch, and that’s a drag element. It’s an empowering process, but other times it’s really tedious. It’s sweaty; I might not be in the mood to be doing it, but there’s still a transformation that happens.”

For the *Iridescent* exhibition, Davies made his art in situ at various heritage sites across Sydney and NSW, including Seidler House in Wahroonga and the Hyde Park Barracks. The works were then shown alongside the photos themselves – a first for Davies – allowing viewers to get a more visceral understanding of their materiality, all the weight and texture that goes into each one.

To create and produce the 12 costumes for their locations, Davies

delved into lesser-known histories, rumours and myths attached to them, and in others he created his own mythology, such as Rouse Hill Estate, creating an S&M-like suit of black glistening plastic complete with a horse-tail like switch inspired by the saddlery and trappings of horse riding. For the Justice and Police Museum, it was a serendipitous moment that let Davies explore one of Australia’s very own queer bushrangers – Captain Moonlight, of whom Davies even sports a tattoo – and his lover, fellow bushranger Jim Nesbitt.

Davies’ foray into taking some of the most outrageous selfies was mostly pragmatic, if not entirely planned. Originally it was a friend who would brave the confines of the various costumes Davies would construct as he directed from behind the camera. But soon, he realised that it would be easier on him – and them – to become part of the image himself.

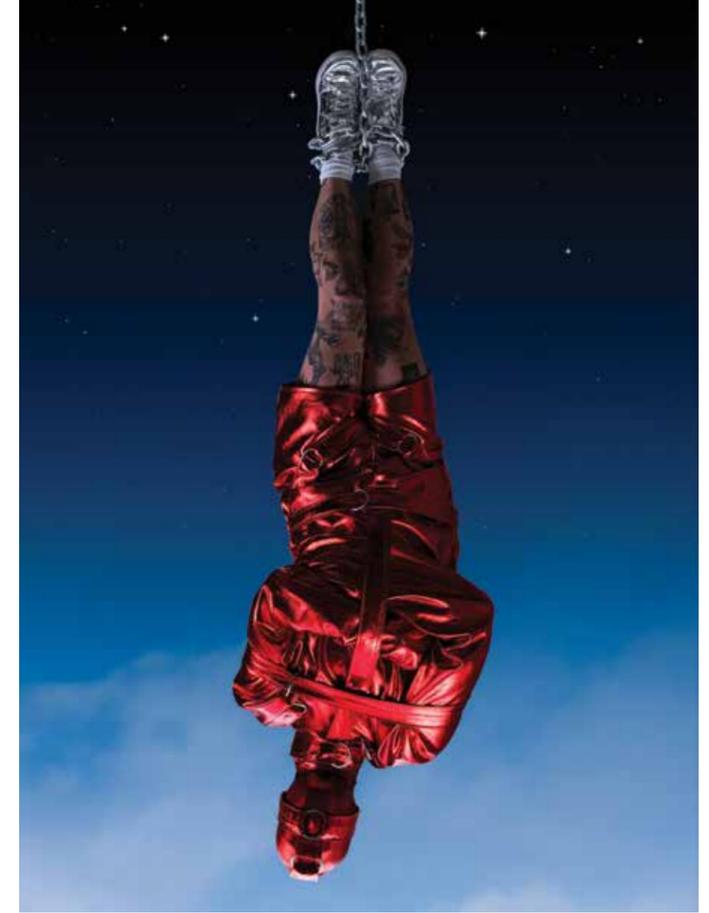
“I didn’t feel very comfortable about directing her as much as I wanted to,” Davies explains to *WISH*. “So I then took over that role. I didn’t have to stress so much about the photography part; that was easy. I could think about performing for the lens instead. So it was really, at first, just a practical working decision. And then from there it became more important and became, then, really quite reclusive.”

“I was getting all the control over the image-making process. I started to get a bit guarded about it and quite private about working, and so I would always make things in private and shoot in private. It wasn’t until the image was finished that I would then share it in any sense. Everything was happening behind closed doors. Now, as you can see, I’m a lot more comfortable about the working parts of the process.”

It’s true, Davies has no hesitation in talking about his art. But what an artist makes and the artist themselves aren’t always on the same ends of the spectrum. For starters,



Left: LA #1 (Paramount) 2020
 Right: Suspend 2021
 Opposite, clockwise from top:
 Rouse Hill Estate 2021;
 Rose Seidler House 2021;
 Zig Zag 2021



Davies never wears colour in his personal life. During our first meeting he's dressed head-to-toe in black: a hoodie, football shorts (he's an Essendon fan) socks and Birkenstocks. Davies the man is a stark contrast to the dazzling showiness of his art. It's a uniform he says helps him avoid needing to make unnecessary decisions.

Jan Murphy, owner of the eponymous gallery that represents Davies, explains that even she was quite surprised how dissimilar the art was from the artist when she first met him.

"We've been working together for five happy years now!" she tells WISH. "I was really surprised when I first met Gerwyn just how reserved and quietly spoken he was... I'd been aware of his work for some time when I approached him in 2017 about working together. He had his first solo show with the gallery in 2018 under our Protégé program and after a few stellar shows, he moved to full representation in 2021."

When it comes to discussing his personal life, as I was warned, there is slightly more reticence. It's not that he's unwilling to talk, Davies explains, but boundaries are somewhat important. Originally from Queensland, he describes an early childhood that was nomadic, courtesy of a military dad. The family – his mother Anne plus an older sister, Jessica, and brother, Roland – relocated to Victoria after Davies' birth in Ipswich in Queensland, then to the NSW Central Coast, before settling in Darwin. Not long after that his parents separated and Davies and his siblings stayed on with their mother in the Northern Territory capital, where he had, he describes, a fairly "stock-standard gay adolescence".

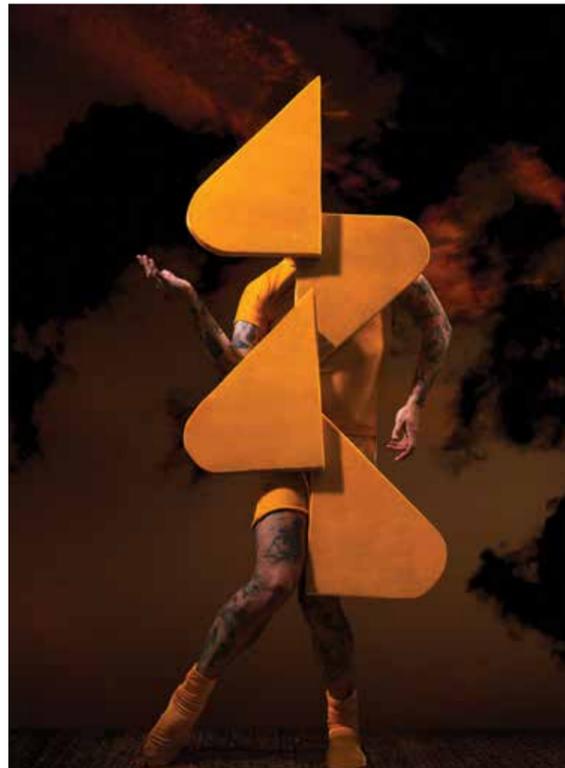
"I was given a lot of room. I had a very close relationship with my mum, which I think a lot of little gay boys do. I think also having a single mum, you glue onto them. So there was a lot of trust there, and my brother and sister were older and they left fairly early, so I was given a lot of room to do whatever I wanted. It was very adventurous, but at the same time I was a really responsible kid. I didn't stray too far. I knew the limits of that."

In 2015, the family's closeness was rocked when they lost their mother to pancreatic cancer and shortly afterwards Davies' brother Roland took his own life. While the conversation is still relaxed, when I touch on this topic it's the first time that the infamous Triple Capricorn effect appears and we move on.

It was around this personally painful time that Davies, who was lecturing at Queensland College of Art and living in the northern regions of NSW, met his now-fiancé, Andrew Henderson, via that modern cupid, an app. They met in person when Henderson travelled north for a New Year's Eve party and soon after it was clear that their summer romance was becoming serious, Davies relocated to Sydney, where he completed his doctoral studies, and now lives in Paddington with Henderson and their dog, a black labrador called Peggy. He likes the area, he explains, not just for its greenery but for the latent anonymity the suburb provides him. There's no risk of running into people and having to have a chat ("I'm all about that hermit life") and he can instead enjoy the company of his own thoughts and Peggy. He jokes that he's often stopped by neighbours who slow down to admire his dog, only to ask, innocently, if he's her walker.

While the wedding was planned to take place last year, Covid has put things on hold for some time. But Davies explains that he and

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Henderson aren't in a rush. "Eventually it'll happen. I just feel like the world is a very unsexy place at the moment. I'm just happy just showing up to work and going home. It's nice. Things are good at home and I couldn't be bothered having a big party."

It's not as though Davies isn't busy enough, however, without a wedding to plan. He's just revealed a new collection of work that will show at the Jan Murphy Gallery this month. Called Strange Magic, it's inspired by the performances of stage magicians such as Houdini and Siegfried and Roy, and all the pageantry and fanfare behind them. "I was kind of researching famous illusions and I knew that I kind of wanted to make work around there," says Davies. "So I was thinking about how this kind of magic functions. So, obviously the first things were the costuming, the lights and the spectacle; all that production is really, it's really campy and carnal, which is at the core of what I'm doing with my work."

The appeal of this topic, explains Davies, is the way that illusionists manipulate their audience. It is, he says, another way of seducing the viewer into participation, only this time it's to suspend their disbelief. "Which is exactly what I'm doing with the photograph – I'm drawing someone to look at the image, but at the same time I'm kind of arresting their attention."

It's this exhibition, explains Davies, that has inspired the photograph created exclusively for the cover of this month's WISH.

To create the cover, Davies asks the viewer to step through the looking glass, as it were. "The one for the cover is a kind of second in relation to a mirror trick; it's like a levitation hovering above the mirror." Floating in mid-air, Davies seems to defy gravity – and in his own way, invites us to join him, suspending our own disbelief as he suspends himself above the mirror. It can be argued that this is a reflection of the fundamental process of the artist – the magic of the finished product hides all the effort that goes into its making. To make something look so effortless is the true illusion, Davies says.

"The image on the cover is obviously really heavily manicured, like it's a body kind of levitating in this unrealistic space. So a lot of work goes into kind of assembling and choreographing that and shooting it, but then also massaging the image afterwards. But all of that stuff is hidden from the viewer, which is magic. It's magic-making." ☺