

# SECRETLY VALENTINE'S CHERA

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## ALIENS LIKE US: @PARMAHAM ON QUEER EMBODIMENT



*How do you see your work in relation to mainstream queer performance? How do you see it in relation to practices like 'drag'?*

I don't consider what I do drag. I know some people use the term 'drag' colloquially, as a way to describe that everyone carries multiple drag forms. But the Artform of drag seems to be an artist performing an exaggerated gendered character, usually of the opposite sex. There are people shaking up the status quo with different variations and styles (such as AFAB drag queens), but it's largely men dressed as women, who perform a character to an audience, and then go home and return to their boy version and life. I like the idea of drag evolving, but if it changes too much from that initial premise, then why bother calling it Drag?

Parma Ham is not a performance, look-based, gendered, or a character; this is simply the way I exist day-to-day. The reason I look the way I do is because this is what I find beautiful. My personality or confidence does not change from when I am bare faced and naked in the morning, to when I am extravagantly adorned and 'made up' by night.

*How has Parma Ham evolved?*

I was drawn to the darkness of Goth, like many teens before me, and because of my queerness, I started to play around and go further with it. My hair started small, but as the years went by I made it bigger. As my hair was big, I had to compensate with more extreme clothes, and then my makeup also had to fit. I love self-improvement, and I always encourage myself to always go one step further, so in this case my appearance has evolved and expanded.

*Where did the name Parma Ham come from?*

Those in sub-cultural tribes have always carried nicknames, in the Punk scene there was Amyl Nitrate, Beki Bondage and Poly Styrene... so I called myself Parma Ham. A consumable, sexless, genderless, anonymity that suffered at the hands of human gluttony. It's absurd, it's disgusting, and also not too serious, I like that it makes people smile. A few years ago Facebook banned everyone - including myself, who went by nicknames, or their stage names, so in order to get my account back, I legally changed my name, so I'm officially Mx Parma Ham. A small, but poignant rebellion against the rules of social media, but also a step in destroying the idea that there's a duality between myself and Parma Ham.

*Your work is never afraid to embrace a look that's abject, stuff that blends human with the inhuman or monstrous. Were you going for something that blurs categories?*

The human aspect is because Goth is a subculture rooted in society and culture, and much like punk or fetish, it is about adorning the body and celebrating individual identity, Goth particularly celebrates your shadow, and the darker human traits and desires. I guess you can describe my style as monstrous as many elements have been grossly exaggerated. I think I've always been drawn to the grotesque, and that stems from my curiosity in questioning authority. "Good" taste and beauty are authorities, and their values are based on our western imperialist past; so it's right to reject these standards and seek other ways, even if they at first appear ugly.

*Do you think queer performance art is becoming depoliticised in the way it gets assimilated into mainstream culture?*

The problem with mainstream drag (in considering RPDR and the trickle down affect), is it's gay men pulling sick looks in padding, doing a lip sync to a pop song and being catty; it's not particularly subversive, and it's become predictable and almost boring? RPDR is a reality TV show, and it's a pageant, so it's not a reflection of drag



as a whole, but that is what the mainstream sees it as. That's not to say those queens aren't progressive in many ways, or political, or using their platforms for good; but I don't consider that kind of drag a transgressive art form anymore. Drag will always uphold important values such as self-love, confidence and the message don't dream it, be it, which is something I have been greatly inspired by; but these days I'm managing to do these things in my day-to-day life, and I don't need a reason such as art, drag, performance or having an audience to do it.

*Who have been your inspirations, with regards to your aesthetic and/or your lifestyle?*

I remember finding a Marilyn Manson CD in a supermarket at age 12 and that was a life changing moment where I realised I loved the darker things in life. Watching Pete Burns (of Dead or Alive) in Big Brother UK also opened my eyes to seeing how one could transgress gender whilst not getting bogged down by questions concerning identity politics.

*I remember reading an interview with Fecal Matter, where they talked about how in Paris people spat at them on the streets, calling them the devil. Have you ever faced similar forms of anger from the public?*

I've been verbally attacked a few times, and physically assaulted once; but it's never been about my extreme image; it's usually about my gender or sexuality. In developing countries where religion is more prominent, I've been called the devil, or a Satanist. Otherwise people generally respond positively.

*With figures like yourself, Salvia, Fecal Matter, Hungry, was it a coherent movement? Was there a sort of zeitgeist in the air that there are alternative forms of queer embodiment that need exploring?*

I think aliens like us have always existed, the only thing that has changed and made it feel like these people are connected in a cohesion, is because of social media. As an audience, we view this group of people on screen, and they are presented to us together as one. As individuals in a similar stratosphere I think there are also going to be inspired by similar things that they come across (such as specific Instagram style edits) so there will be similarities and crossovers which are connected through the mood of the zeitgeist. I would love for there to be a new subculture, but I guess we won't know until after.

*Do you consider your work, and the work of figures like Salvia and Fecal Matter, as a new evolution of queer art? Or does that reduce queer embodiment to mere aesthetics?*

Though I agree there is something creative to what I do, I don't like to refer to myself as art or an artist. Don't get me wrong, I love art, but in comparison to real people, there's something about art that is in a state of privileged seclusion from the facts and practicalities of the real world. Art is an abstract thing in a frame or in a gallery, usually removed from the day-to-day life and its necessary audience. Art might make certain propositions about the world, as art is always about something else. But we are all better than that. We aren't artefacts saying things; we are agents living and doing the things that art likes to talk about

