

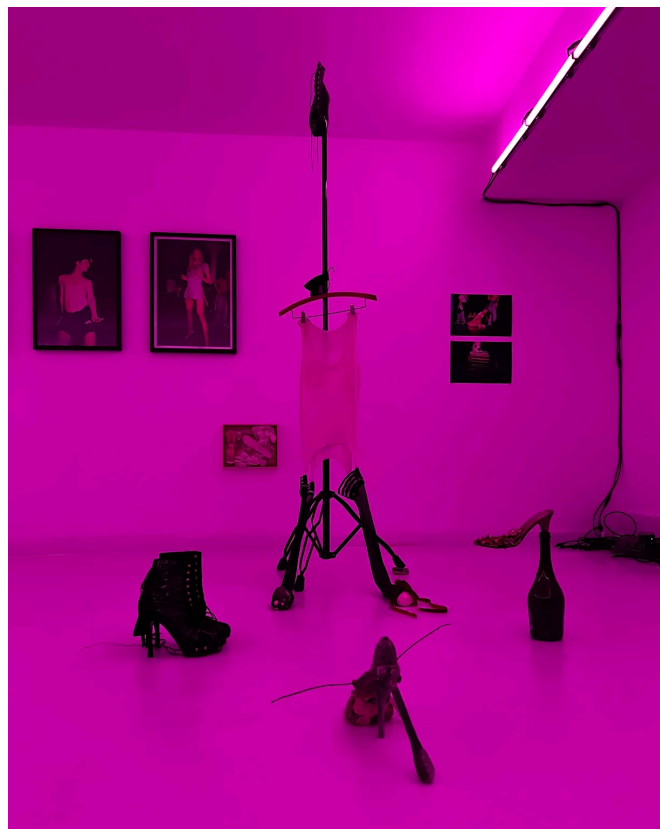
Filthy Dreams

For Minorities Who Don't Even Fit Into Our Own Minorities

Art

Nick Waplington and Lizzi Bougatsos Channeled 1990s Clubbing Chaos in “Before the Clean-Up”

Posted on April 9, 2025 *by* Emily Colucci



Floor: Lizzi Bougatsos, *Keeping the Creeps Out*, Installation (with FOSSE, 2024), 2025; Wall: Nick Waplington, photographs from the series *We Dance in Mysteries*, 1989–1995, and Lizzi Bougatsos, *Soul Shoes*, 2024 (Photo courtesy of S M I L E R S)

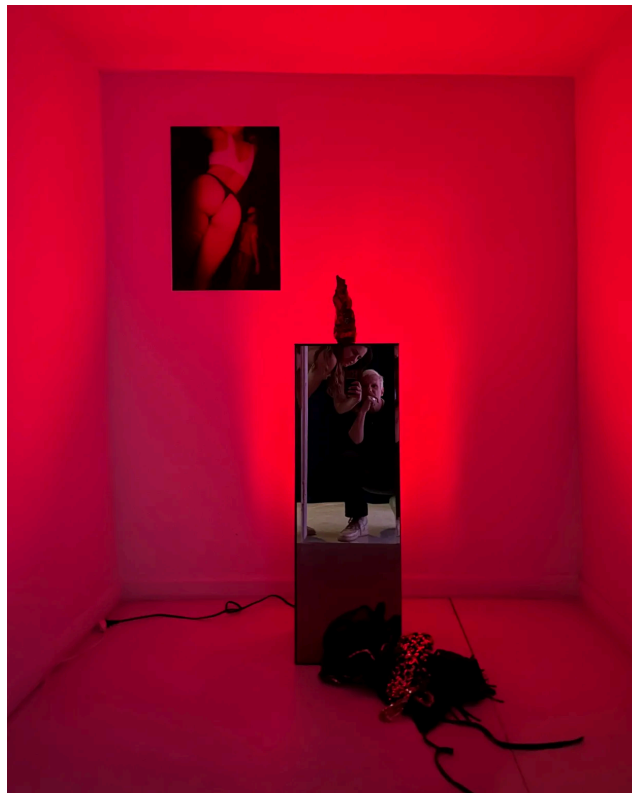
Nightlife photography should be kinda bad. Technical perfection is for shut-ins with a studio or all those photographers making photographs of photographs. Nightlife photos should be out of focus and crappily framed. Heads should be lopped right off dancing bodies, fixating instead on torsos bumping and grinding into each other (and the photographer). Flashes of over-lit limbs should cut into the image at odd angles as people slide by to get to the bar. Eyes with blown pupils should lazily wander in different directions. Mouths should dangle open without a care. At least one person should be caught in the lurching, dread-packed moment right before choking down a mouthful of puke. And absolutely no one should look all that good—even the hottest in the room should be bedraggled, caked in sweat with a halo of humidity-frizzed hair.

By these qualifications, photographer Nick Waplington nailed it, as seen in the now-closed *Before the Clean-Up*, a duo exhibition at S M I L E R S (only the basement gallery space's second show) alongside Gang Gang Dance and I.U.D.'s Lizzi Bougatsos's scattered clothes and shoe sculptures. As the show's title indicates, Waplington's photographs date to the 1990s right around the time pre-drippy hair dye breakdown, pre-Trump goon with a podcast, pre-Bloody Marys with Olivia Nuzzi, pre-turning over Lauren Bacall's Mercedes to Georgia poll workers, then-ferret hater Mayor Rudy Giuliani enforced an ancient cabaret law dating back to the Prohibition era to crackdown on nightlife like a crank right out of *Footloose*. More than the same, old, tired, those-were-the-days nostalgia, what made Waplington's photos so refreshing was their lack of pretense. This was reflected in their hanging, mostly tacked to the wall with push pins (in contrast, the few in frames seemed too preciously handled). Though there were a few exceptions like Kevin Aviance making the rhythm his bitch by strolling across the Sound Factory dance floor like a supermodel, Waplington's images were not of famous people or notorious club kids. They're also not fixated on the architecture of certain romanticized clubs, which lends itself to waxing poetic about this or that closed venue and its lost scene.

Instead, Waplington's photographs could have been taken pretty much anywhere, capturing the eclectic mix of dancers and the frenetic energy of clubbing. One dancer shoved her butt, with a thong wrenched up her crack, into the camera's lens. A person, sans visible head, held their arm cranked up like a T. Rex while twisting in a crop-top, shiny Rocky Horror short shorts, fishnets, and knee pads. Others relaxed, with Waplington zeroing in on their matching tragically 1990s towering platform sneakers. A girl stuck her head up from the crowd like she heard her name, while another's two twisty buns popped in front of Waplington. Another woman collapsed on the sticky floor in her undies. Yet another yanked a man's jeaned crotch in for a sniff. All of which provided a sense of immersion as if I was plopped in the middle of

the masses, huffing in the mix of stale beer, rank well liquor, poppers, and at least one person's stanky burger and onion flop sweat, or later reliving an inner slideshow of last night's party when blinking into consciousness the next morning (or afternoon).

That bleary-eyed, fuzzy-tongued, hungover morning-after experience was further evoked by Lizzi Bougatsos's sculptures, which livened up the exhibition, adding a much-needed figural dimension. Limp clothing and cast-off heels, often coupled with strange assemblages, were flung about the room. One tippy-toed leather fetishy shoe landed on the top of a light stand, under which dangled a flimsy tank-top and two stuffed thigh-high stockings, reminiscent of Sarah Lucas's sexy gams, Greer Lankton's pantyhose dolls, and even Eva Hessa's bizarro body amalgamations. Another shoe, which appeared to have grown some dried fruit foliage, was jammed into a bottle of prosecco. Taken together, Bougatsos's installations seemed as if you woke up, slowly becoming aware of what a mess you made of your apartment the previous night, whether frantically deciding what to wear or shucking off clothes right before passing out with the lights on. What the fuck happened last night?



Wall: Nick Waplington, photograph from the series *We Dance in Mysteries*, 1989–1995 (taken at The Sound Factory, 1991–92); Floor: Lizzi Bougatsos, *The Molting II*, 2022. Photo courtesy of S M I L E R S.

Bougatsos's shoe fetish inclusions had more than a little Genesis and Lady Jaye Breyer P-Orridge influence, appropriate given their presence in the New York nightlife scene during this period. One installation especially recalled the pandrogynous duo, shoved into a side gallery turned sleazy red-lit backroom featuring some of Waplington's fleshier photographs (though they are much tamer than I anticipated. I wanted more filth!). Surrounded by Waplington's pix of tits and ass, a ruffly sculptural heel plunked on a mirrored pedestal, perfect for cutting and snorting any powder of your choosing. Because of its reverential and kinky display, a singular shoe on a singular pedestal, this work reminded me of Breyer P-Orridge's series of shoe horns minus their woo-woo mysticism and sex magick. It's worth noting that *Before the Clean-Up* is not the only early spring show harkening to Breyer P-Orridge. The colorful wall-mounted sculptural butt smears in Nour Mobarak's *Recto-Verso* at Miguel Abreu also recall the *Candy Factory* ass print collaborations with Eric Heist.

The lurid red light infusing the seedier side gallery, mercifully in a softer red than the physically torturous shade used by the Brooklyn Museum in their Jimmy DeSana exhibition, was not the only playful install choice. S M I L E R S cheekily used all of their wonky basement location, including the bathroom, which featured an outfit hung in what may have once been a standing shower nook as if airing out the wrinkles, one of the many familiar inventive maneuvers required for those of us with little to no closet space in tiny East Village apartments. Consisting of a long trench, a threatening industrial chain, a pair of business casual shoes, and a graphic trucker hat, this outfit intended to honor late Vox Populi and American Fine Arts, Co. gallerist Colin DeLand, who was known for the trucker hat aesthetic before it became a wannabe white trash hipster accessory mainstay in the aughts. I'll admit I don't know much about DeLand, nor is an altarpiece to a gallerist all that inspiring to me, especially since I find most of the commercial art world and the people in it obnoxious. But some of our most cherished preeminent filth elders have endorsed DeLand. John Waters once described DeLand as "a cult gutter-couture icon." Intriguing! Gary Indiana observed DeLand's "perverse" approach to the art world in an Artforum memorial: "There was always some component of a joke in his relation with the art world, of just seeing the humor in the whole *Vanity Fair* aspect of this funny place where people make ridiculous things that become incredibly valuable and where overbearing rich people park their money." Ok, sold!



Installation view of *Before the Clean-Up* at S M I L E R S (Photo by me)

While I'm always a sucker for bathroom art, the outfit next to the john wasn't the only bold install move in *Before the Clean-Up*. The standout was the aggressive, color-changing nightclub lighting projected throughout the basement space. A band of lights encircled the main gallery, flashing from purple to pink to blue. Then, it all went black, and I was plunged into darkness. A few seconds went by. Hello?! Then, the lights blasted back on—not the same vibrant mood lighting, but that heinous, harsh, white glaring shocker of closing time. Yeesh! Turn it off! Or, in this case, I wanted the lights kept on a touch longer as I scurried around trying to take a good, hard look at the art before it all went fuchsia again. Sure, *Before the Clean-Up*'s lighting undeniably overshadowed and obscured the artworks, requiring viewers to squint closely at Waplington's photos, never quite appreciating them fully without an overwhelming wash of club color, and bend over, straining in confusion at Bogatsos's box of...I still don't know what...hanging on the wall. But somehow it worked. Are you supposed to see everything clearly at the club? You probably shouldn't!

Curating exhibitions about nightlife, particularly nightlife photography, is not easy. I know—I've done it a couple of times and was going to again until the museum I was working with disappeared off the New York City map, specifically their location associated with one notorious art world scammer (You figure it out). The challenge is that no matter how romanticized the bygone scene or how compelling the imagery, there is a limit to the enjoyment of staring at images of other people having fun. Even though recent years have seen an avalanche of nightlife photo books, it can become like scrolling through an Instagram post of someone's night out, a few swipes are just about enough. The key to an exhibition is finding a way to make the experience more exciting for viewers than your typical white-walled stiff gallery snoozer, a tiny bit closer to channelling the experience of rolling through a 90s club without the teeth-grinding side effects. Even if that means making a bit of a mess in the process, like the tangled fire hazard of wires required to keep the light show going, jumbled in the corner of S M I L E R S.

This isn't to say that S M I L E R S couldn't have pushed it farther. Though a silent basement disco is a definite vibe, my suggestion should come as no surprise: it really needed a playlist.

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