



Martijn

A PHOTO ESSAY BY QUINN PALMER

Quinn Palmer, a founding member of the London-based photojournalism collective Lacuna Media, recently completed this reportage documenting the growing transvestite and transgender scene in Britain's capital. The intimate photographic project focuses particularly on the life of Dutch professional drag queen Martijn Smit, also known by his professional alias 'Vanilla Lush'

Since his teenage years, Martijn Smit has been exploring alternative aspects of his gender and sexuality. However, he only began openly dressing in drag regularly after moving to Amsterdam and London, cities that are home to some of the biggest and most vibrant transvestite scenes in Europe. That's where he began to realise his unconventional dream of becoming a professional Drag Queen.

Now 31, Martijn performs on stage in central London and around the UK. His diverse and sensational act consists of vibrant song and dance routines, which are well-received by large audiences and critics.

Despite cross-dressing having been relatively common practice ever since gender-specific clothing was introduced thousands of years ago, millions of transvestites around the world endure significant amounts of persecution, discrimination and mental stress.

Martijn is generally open and confident with his gender and sexuality, but many in the transgender community often feel inclined to hide these integral parts of their personality from society and their family or friends. And, globally, transvestite and transgender people face much prejudice over their unconventional lifestyle.

Many western societies are at ease with



What to wear: Martijn sorts through piles of clothing in his London flat before transforming himself into Vanilla Lush



Above: Martijn straightens his wig with an iron.

Right: Martijn spends a minimum of two and a half hours applying make-up before going to work as a professional drag queen under the name, Vanilla Lush.

post and pre-op transgender and transvestites, but in many parts of the world however, such people still regularly face ridicule, exploitation, and even murder or execution – most notably the hijras of the Indian subcontinent.

Hijras are men (usually Indian or Pakistani) who have undergone the process of total and irreversible emasculation (removal of the penis, testis and scrotum, usually with no anaesthetic – the procedure often part of an involuntary religious ritual.)

In this situation, ultimately the transgender person is often removed to the very fringes of society and is obliged to adopt low social status – discrimination is common and little employment is available.

Many are coerced into slavery or prostitution; and violence against hijras, especially hijra sex workers, is common and often brutal.

It's known to occur in public places without any consequence for the aggressors – such can be the life of a transsexual in a less-accepting culture.

Palmer says of his project; “Most western societies speak today of equality and universal rights to freedom of expression and speech. Yet as we all know, prejudices still exist for a great many people, even within our ‘open-minded society’ but especially in less-developed and less-democratic countries.

“The transgender people I’ve spent time with recently are all too familiar with those prejudices and the ignorant, hurtful actions of those who will judge them. You will, however, be hard-pressed to find a more lively, up-beat or optimistic person than Martijn’s alter-ego, Miss Vanilla. I hope that this work stands out as a poignant visualisation of our diverse, accepting and changing London.”

– **Jack Laurensen**





Sight for sore eyes:
Two men stare at
the drag queen as
he travels by train
to a performance
central London

Below: Vanilla stands outside Escape, a gay club in central London, ready to hand out flyers to attract customers on an extremely slow night.



Right: A final touch up of the hair as Vanilla waits backstage at the Trannyshack Beauty Pageant.





Dutch courage: A few shots of brandy and coke calm the nerves before the Whitney Houston night at Madam JoJo's in central London.



Above: Getting ready for the night's performance.

Right: Vanilla smokes a cigarette backstage at Trannyshack before wowing the audience.

Opposite:
Performing on the stage of Madam JoJo's in London's Soho

● Quinn Palmer is a photojournalist and founding member of Lacuna Media, based in London. To see his whole photo-essay visit: www.lacunamedia.org





That's all, folks:
Martijn reflects
on the night's
show as he awaits
the train home.

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