



Modern Mystics

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How the House of Xtravaganza is using Art and Community as the Ultimate Resistance

When I was asked to write an article about the members of the iconic House of Xtravaganza, a staple in the Queer community of New York City and ballroom culture of the past 40 years, I questioned if I was the right person for the job. I remembered how I once wrote that I didn't need a community. I lamented at the fact that I couldn't relate to so many aspects of gay and Queer culture. I never sought a chosen family because my own was complicated enough with too many feelings and conflicting points-of-view. The truth, though, was while I searched for my own individuality, I was blinding myself from finding community. To see another, one can see themselves. We're able to learn what can happen when we work together, especially in times of oppression.

When I saw the photoshoot of Gisele, Maximo, and Tica adorned as mystics, creatives, and psychics, something clicked for me. The definition of a mystic is someone who uses the divine as creation. The three of them have created a life and opportunity for themselves

and their House using art, self-expression, and precision at a time when elected officials would rather see them be erased. The joke is on those who wish to see them cower in a corner. The joke is on those who will do whatever they can in their power to make them feel unseen. Like true mystics, they are creating, using their own intuition and divinity and proving each and every one of their detractors wrong. They are the community that we, as Americans, should look towards, to see what is possible when one finds their place, in themselves and in others, during a time when hopelessness may be felt by all.

Jason: Hi Gisele, I wanted to open this up by asking how art has influenced you and your life and what it is that you do.

Gisele Xtravagazna: Oh wow, well, art has been a part of my life since I was a child. Since I was a child, I've been painting, I've been sketching, I went to the Harlem School of the Arts. Art has always been an obsession and a very deep-rooted part of me.

Jason: When you were young, what were you inspired by?

Gisele Xtravaganza: When I was a child, I was obsessed with religion. I used to paint a lot of religious paintings. I was obsessed with spirituality. As I got older, my art shifted into a completely different dimension. I was very inspired, by believe it or not, politics. As a child, I would create, almost, like militaries, navy, or war. I played with more war action figures than Barbies (laughs).

Jason: What sounds cool about that is whether it's religion or military, it's an organization. And now, you know, now that you're a mother to others, it's almost the same thing. You're building your own army.

It was apparent to me that Gisele is a mother and like most mothers, they show care and balance. They're fighters, too. One must be balanced to be a mother. And to show balance, one sees all sides.

“I reside in the middle.”

Jason: So I was doing a bit of research on ballroom and I've seen Paris is Burning. I recently watched Love is in The Legend. And Love is in The Legend was about how Patricia Field and her crew came into the Harlem ballroom scene. What I noticed when watching these films is that the old school people had criticisms of the new school. And the new school had criticisms of the old school. Do you

identify with the old school or new school in terms of ballroom?

Gisele Xtravaganza: I always have resided in the middle because there was an old, iconic generation that already has passed before my time, and then there I come. And at that time I was new. You're always going to have generational differences because of the times, politics. And even through the older people raising us, they raised us differently than their parents, because everybody is always trying to be better than. Or worse (laughs).



My first introduction to voguing was in 1990. I was seven years old. I remember watching Madonna's Vogue, directed by David Fincher, co-choreographed by Jose and Luis Xtravaganza, a music video so heavily influenced by NYC Harlem ballroom and 1930s Hollywood. Whether it was seen as original, an homage, or an example of pop culture vulture, it put ballroom on a road to mainstream, for better or worse. Thirty years later and post Ryan Murphy's Pose, ball-

room is in your living room.

Jason: Do you still consider ballroom to be underground?

Gisele laughs.

Gisele Xtravaganza: (smiling) Mmmm, no. The underground is done. It's now above ground.

Jason: I agree, I think that it's now done. How could there be underground now that, because of technology, everyone is see-

ing everything? Was there a moment that you could say underground was done?

Gisele Xtravaganza: I would say after Pose. I would say, before Pose, let's be honest. Way beyond Pose. Pose was the cherry on top, the finito. It changed after Pose, it really did.

Jason: Did you have a difficult time watching Pose?

Gisele Xtravaganza: I felt almost like my soul was taken. Other people's souls were taken. Even though it gave us this light, people that were in charge, they didn't get it. Respect wasn't given to the true leaders of the ballroom.

We're at a time now when it's easy to learn about our pasts through media and technology. Tica Xtravaganza, one of Gisele's children, is a celebration and an intimidation in the ballroom community. Their category is face and their presentation could be described as flawless. How they got there, how they found Xtravaganza, feels very 21st century.

Jason: You mentioned the first time you were in drag was five years ago?

Tica Xtravaganza: I started as an actor, as a little kid doing commercials and stuff like that and modeling. But I always was portraying a male figure, and I always was very feminine. I'm gay and I always wanted to express that part of my femininity. And it wasn't until I moved to New York, when I met the House five years ago, that's when my life changed completely.

Jason: How did you meet Gisele?

Tica Xtravaganza: Well, the first person that I met was actually the father of the House. Right at the beginning we were filming Pose, Jose, was one of the actors. I actually met Mike Ganza, who is my gay father, he introduced me to Jose. And they invited me to come over for a ball, and then the pandemic happened. So we had to wait for a while until everything was opening a little bit again. And, that first ball, that's when I met Gisele.

Jason: I'm curious, when you met Jose Xtravaganza, were you nervous? I remember him from the Vogue video, from 1990. So, I feel like just his face has been a part of my music video consciousness since I was a child. Did you know a lot about his history or were you intimidated by him?

Tica Xtravaganza: It was more of a like, wow. Like I was just living a dream. I don't know. When I saw a bunch of icons from the ballroom community working on that set, I'm not gonna lie, it was a little awkward because we couldn't touch each other. I would say hi, and I wanted to hug him, and we couldn't do that at the time. But yeah, he was just so sweet. And I'm like, I wanna be part of this. I wanna be with them. And then I think that since then, my life has changed. I started having that support, that queer support.

Tica met their chosen family, the Xtravaganzas, during the filming of Pose, featuring real life Xtravaganza members as actors, sometimes playing fictional versions of themselves. There's





no rules in how one finds their tribe and Tica soon learned that their newfound family's support helped their own self-expression, breathing even more life into Tica than if they were on their own.

Tica Xtravaganza: I never had that back home in Costa Rica. Everybody was like, no you're a boy. You have to act like a boy. Since then, that's when I met the House and started bonding with them. That's my family. That's my chosen family.

Jason: What's one of your strongest memories with the House?

Tica Xtravaganza: Well, for me, it was so beautiful to go to Gisele's to practice runway. At the time she was living in Soho. She'd have a very small group of members there and seeing Gisele doing her thing, it's like you just have to sit down and take notes. It's something that you take in.

When I think of Gisele and Tica, or anyone I'm writing about, it's second nature to think of the subjects or personalities as characters. With Gisele, I see a mother and I see someone who is equally soft as they are tenacious: a protector. And Tica is the face, the ingénue, a combination of beauty and ambition, so readily recognized by their elders. They walk the runway as they do, because of what is already inside them, excelling from encouragement provided by Gisele and their Queer family.

When I spoke to Maximo, another mem-

ber of the Xtravaganza family, it was apparent that the three of them are a tripecta. Alongside the mother and the ingénue, Maximo Xtravaganza is the movement. Classically trained in dance, Maximo combines genres when creating their art. They use their full body, and to do so, one must tap into both logic and heart. The result is what I think of as wisdom, another quality of a modern mystic.

Jason: You're an amazing dancer. Tell me about your artistry and creativity and what it is that inspires you.

Maximo Xtravaganza: So I'm an artist. I feel like a multi-faceted artist. I grew up expressing myself first through song, grew up as a singer-songwriter, doing musical theater and then choir, but then also growing up, going back and forth to Brazil...I found Capoeira, which is a Brazilian martial arts and dance style. I trained for about ten years in that, and then went to University for musical theater. Originally, I started taking ballet and contemporary, and then I started

taking jazz, funk, and hip hop. And so I began to express myself more and found comfort in the expression of my body.

Jason: So myself, being a writer, I kind of live in my head. And a lot of times when that happens, it's like I ignore my body. I'm really interested, with you being a dancer, and using your body as a vehicle, what's the relationship like between mind and body for you?

Maximo Xtravaganza: Well, I feel like for me, I try to keep my mind and my body in







sync. And the way that I really started to fall in love with the movement and expression of my body paralleled my coming out as a Queer person.

“I felt like my whole life, I was censoring the desire to sit into my hip.”

Maximo Xtravaganza: I began to feel such safety in the vulnerability of blending masculine and feminine and in the body that is so clear because it’s so codified by hundreds of years of technique. I felt like my whole life, I was censoring the desire to sit into my hip. And I was so hyperconscious about the way I walked, and the way I positioned in different ways, that when I started to come out and when I started to express myself through my body and understand the fluidity of femininity and masculinity, I started to find synchronicity between the way that I think and the way that I feel with how I am moving and expressing. I no longer have anything that’s hidden.

Jason: When you became a part of Xtravaganza, was it even more permissible to use your body in all of these different ways?

Maximo Xtravaganza: Yes. I think I had already given myself permission. That’s so funny you say this. So I moved to New York. I did six months in New York, interning dancing. I discovered vogue, I discovered ballroom. I went back to Florida, finished University. And when I was in Florida, I choreographed a piece called Permission. And the idea of it is that you’re giving yourself permission to be who you want to be and in whatever space that you’re in. And I think it wasn’t Xtravaganza that gave me that permission, but it was being in New York. It was being around Queer people. It was being in ballroom that gave me this permission, this power to exist just as I am, and not needing to fit into any other kind

of box.

To open up the subject of the current administration is a sensitive one and is a necessity at this time. I felt inspired by Gisele, Tica, and Maximo, and I knew I needed to ask, to know, how they felt about this current administration and the everyday atrocities that are aimed at the Queer community.

Jason: I want to pivot onto a more serious subject. Everything that’s happening right now with the current administration and the attacks on the Queer community, specifically Trans people, the attempt of erasure, in my opinion, is happening right now. How has this affected your art? How are you feeling?

Gisele Xtravaganza: Politics has a huge effect on it. Because it is basically giving a green light to people to say, attack them. Hey, let’s look at the most marginalized community and let’s attack them. Because they don’t really fear us. But if we were someone that they feared, they would not say anything against us. I feel like sometimes it drives me into a great depression. I’m gonna be very honest. Sometimes I don’t wanna come out. Sometimes it makes me detest the world. It makes me feel like all the battles, all of the war that we go through is for nothing.

Are we the ones that are raising your rent? Are we the ones that are sending innocent people to jail? It’s as if we’re the ones that are committing all these white collar crimes, as if we’re the ones that are going out there murdering people, as if we’re the ones going out there abusing people, like we’re the ones that are the cause of the problem. And I think it’s just unfair. I think it’s unjust. I think they’re bullies. I think they’re cowards.

Tica Xtravaganza: To be honest with you, it did affect me a lot, emotionally, for all my Trans sisters and brothers. I was very depressed, to be honest, for a couple of weeks. But I was like, this is crazy, they’re trying to erase us and we’re not going anywhere.



So, for me, I haven't walked a ball for over a year. And this was an opportunity for me to come out in drag. That was something like, yeah, this is the moment where I have to get in drag again. And we're not being shut up. We're not being shut down or whatever, and let alone erased. So for me, it was very important. I'm also Brown. I'm not from here. I'm an immigrant.

And here I am. I'm gonna come out in drag and full drag. So, it's gonna be art, it's gonna be incredible.

“I'm gonna be looking cunt.”

Maximo Xtravaganza: I will say this time is tough. I've never felt like this in my life where I've just been paralyzed by the different executive orders and the different laws and bills that are trying to be passed. And this is the first time in my life where I'm scared.

I'm genuinely scared. I am unsure of what is going to happen. And I think that puts us in a mode of fight or flight. Or in a mode of just being frozen. And it took some time to be like, oh, no, wait, this is exactly what they want. They want us to be confused. They want us to be scared. They want us to be silent.

They want us to just sit back and gag at what they're doing so that we don't step up. And I think right now, more than ever, it's more important to express myself to the fullest, to be visible, to share my love, and to share my light with people, and to share the different sides of my identity that need to be recognized in this administration and are celebrated on the streets of the world. Rather than sitting down and just letting it happen, I think right now, more than ever, it's important to be so boldly yourself.

And Trans people exist. Trans people have existed for hundreds, thousands of years where people have existed since the beginning of fucking time. It's so clear to see that





“Transness was celebrated, Transness was seen as divine.”

Queer people and queerness is not taboo. And Transness was actually celebrated, Transness was seen as divine. Transness was someone who embodied three spirits, was seen as someone more knowledgeable and more in tune with themselves and the world than anyone else.

We are queer, we're here and we are not ready to disappear.

We are now in the midst of an administration and what I have seen has horrified me, as it has many others. The Queer community has been attacked, specifically the Trans and drag community. There is no time left to be siloed, to think of oneself as separate from. There is an enemy amongst us and it saddens me to

say that it is our own government. Books are being banned and histories are threatened to be erased. Access to healthcare for Trans youth has been attacked. The T in LGBT is removed from the Stonewall website. Trans people no longer have the right to list their preferred gender on their passport. Instead, they are forced to list their gender assigned at birth. Trans men and women are excluded from school sports and their gender and expression has been weaponized against them.

While interviewing and speaking with Gisele, along with Tica, and Maximo, her chosen children, I learned that to choose one's family is a source of power. Community is power. While it may feel that there is an army against them, what they have done and continue to do is to build their own family, their own protection. One must decide how they live, whether they are led by fear and inhibition or if they will travel down their own road towards truth and authenticity. There will always be a power waiting to tell you who you are. But that is for us to decide. In the words of Gisele Xtravaganza, “Everything I am is a belief of who I am.” That sentiment coupled with support and guidance will forever lead the Queer community toward a path of exploration and kindness. It has the power to lead to a destination of glory.

