

OutSmart

MAY '22

HOUSTON'S LGBTQ MAGAZINE

AAPI EXCELLENCE

Honoring
Local Community
Leaders

Pg.38

OBAMA PORTRAIT

Kehinde Wiley's
Historic Painting
Comes to MFAH

Pg.58

FASHION FORWARD!

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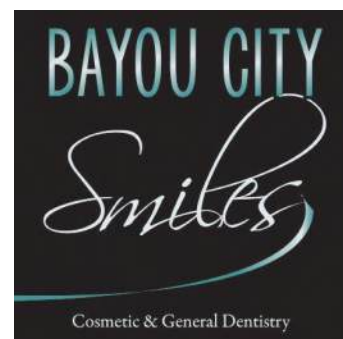
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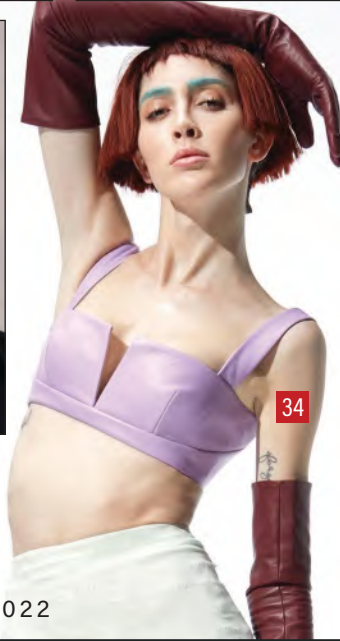
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ON the COVER

CUTTING-EDGE COUTURIER

Houston designer Bach Mai pioneers the future of women's wear (Pg.34)

Photography by Dimitri Hyacinthe

Model: Teddy Quinlivan

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LGBTQ Houstonians have always been at the forefront when it comes to innovation in business and the arts. As a native

Houstonian now based in New York, fashion designer Bach Mai is again putting Space City on the map with creations that prompted *Vogue* to call him "an American couturier in the making."

May is Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) Heritage Month, and OUTSMART is celebrating by honoring the local AAPI community. Writer Lillian Hoang talks to cover star Mai about his Houston upbringing, the fashion industry icons he has worked with, and the future of his international brand. Then writer Ryan

Leach introduces you to popular drag artist Mulan Alexander, and writer Jenny Block helps you get to know restaurant owner Charlie Huynh. Writer Connor Behrens chats with optometrists Paul Lovero and Nancy Lo about their LGBTQ-affirming eyecare practice, writer Neil Ellis Orts talks to Houston Ballet's costume shop manager Zach Paugh, and Lillian Hoang fills you in on Addie Tsai's new queer literary magazine.

Houston's fine-arts scene is busy this month, so let OUTSMART be your guide to a few of the events you won't want to miss. Writer Andrew Edmonson speaks with gay artist Kehinde Wiley about his historic portrait of President Barack Obama, which is now on display at MFAH through May

30. Edmonson also previews out choreographer Trey McIntyre's new Houston Ballet production. Writer Kim Hogstrom interviews artist Baseera Khan about their summer exhibit at Moody Center for the Arts, while writer Jenny Block chats with Justin Johnson about bringing his alter-ego Alyssa Edwards to Houston for a new one-woman show.

The May 24 runoff election features three local LGBTQ candidates who need your help in advancing to the November elections. Writer Marene Gustin chats with Steve Duble, Ben Chou, and Jolanda Jones about their campaigns. On the national scene, a record number of out candidates is running for office in 2022, and you can support their

groundbreaking campaigns by attending the LGBTQ Victory Fund's Champagne Brunch on May 15.

Finally, OUTSMART celebrates Pride Month with another expanded June issue, so email editor@outsmartmagazine.com to let us know about any special events, personalities, or merchandise you'd like to see highlighted.

See you next month!

Lourdes Zavaleta
Managing
Editor





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Three LGBTQ Candidates Head into Runoff Elections

Steve Duble, Ben Chou, and Jolanda Jones are on the local campaign trail until May 24.

By MARENE GUSTIN



The March 2022 midterm primary elections saw a rainbow wave of over 700 LGBTQ candidates nationwide. Locally, there are still

three out contenders who need your vote in this month's runoff elections.

Steve Duble, Ben Chou, and Jolanda Jones face runoff challengers on May 24 after receiving less than 50 percent of the vote in March. Early voting takes place May 16–20, and the last day to apply for an absentee ballot by mail is May 13.

Duble, who is running for Justice of the Peace Precinct 1 Place 2, won 26.5 percent of the vote and faces opponent Sonia Lopez, who won 41.1 percent of the vote. Chou, who is running for County Commissioner Precinct 4, received 24.6 percent against opponent Leslie Briones' 33.9 percent. State Representative District 147 contender Jolanda Jones garnered 41.3 percent of the vote against Danielle Keys Best's 19.9 percent. Jones and Best will also face off in the special general election on May 7 to fill the unexpired term of retiring Representative Garnet Coleman, who has endorsed Jones to replace him. The May 7 winner will serve in Austin until December 31 of this year.

"It's actually not as hard on the candidates as you might think, because my runoff opponent and I are the only candidates for the special election," Jones says. "It basically feels like one long, extended campaign. But it is terribly confusing for voters. They are the ones that have to sort through all the different voting dates and ballots.

"We're cutting through the confusion by asking voters to complete 'The Jolanda Two-Step' with us. Step 1: Vote in the Special Election on May 7 or vote early April 23–May 3. Step 2: Vote in the Runoff Election on May 24 or vote early May 16–May 20."

Chou gave his staff a breather after the primary, but they are now hard at work again. "To help our team avoid experiencing burnout over the course of the 12 weeks before the runoff election, we decreased the number of work hours per week and increased the gasoline reimbursement to account for higher gas prices,"



Steve Duble



Jolanda Jones



Ben Chou

he says. "This campaign is as much about our team's well-being as it is about winning votes. Our staff and volunteers are at their best when they are well rested and motivated to succeed. A positive work environment begets a successful campaign."

For Duble, the runoff is his final step in the Harris County race, since there are no Republican challengers in November. "We are excited to have achieved our goal of making it into the runoff in a very competitive five-person race," Duble says. "We have already laid out our plans to transform the JP court into a point of connection to a wide range of legal and supportive services. Having secured the endorsements of most of the major political endorsing organizations and two of our former opponents, we are now focused on talking to voters directly, which is rewarding and energizing. JP courts can do more than just process paperwork. They can serve our community, help people access the resources they need, and work toward equitable solutions to problems that harm everyone, such as evictions. For me, this position is not a stepping stone on the way to higher office—it is where I want to spend the rest of my career because the JP courts can and should work better, and I'm ready to put my experience to work making sure that it does."

Volunteers are also the key to Chou's runoff campaign. "Our strategy is ambitious: we plan to contact every likely voter multiple times, whether it be by knocking on their door or calling their phone," he says. "As the only candidate in this race who refuses to accept pay-to-play donations from County vendors, we are fully focused on recruiting volunteers to help us get the word out."

Jones is quick to sum up what is at stake in this election, especially for young queer voters: "On a personal level, I'd like to encourage young LGBTQ+ people to get involved in politics. Please come join me. Don't be scared. Demand to be a part of this political system. Be your authentic self unapologetically. America needs us—as does Texas, especially. We can compete with anyone, regardless of sexual orientation or identity. Non-LGBTQ people need to see us doing and being and existing just like them. We are not anomalies. We are them, and they are us. We must put ourselves in positions to make laws that protect the people in the cities, counties, states, and country that we live in. We need to be at the table creating policy and laws, rather than being the meal on that same table. I'd rather us eat than be eaten."

Important dates for the May runoff elections:

May 13 - Last day to apply for a ballot by mail (received, not just postmarked)

May 16 - First day of Early Voting by personal appearance

May 20 - Last day of Early Voting by personal appearance

May 24 - Election day, and last day for mail-in ballots to be received



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Celebrating Out Elected Officials

Victory Fund hosts its annual Champagne Brunch on May 15.

By MARENE GUSTIN



If sipping bubbles and helping LGBTQ leaders get elected is your idea of a great time, get your tickets now for the Victory Fund's May 15 Houston Champagne Brunch.

"The best way to fight this onslaught of anti-LGBTQ attacks is to elect more LGBTQ people to office, plain and simple," says former mayor Annise Parker, the president and CEO of the Victory Fund. She's referring to the nearly 240 anti-LGBTQ bills—mostly targeting trans people—that have been filed nationwide this

year. "During this critical time, we are excited to bring LGBTQ leaders and allies together to strategize, share resources, and get energized about the 2022 midterms. With a historic number of out LGBTQ people running for office, including here in Texas, we are well-positioned to shatter expectations this year."

According to the Victory Fund, a record 24 LGBTQ candidates won their Texas primary races in March—a 33 percent increase from 2020, when 18 candidates won. Ten of those candidates are running for the Texas State

Legislature, where just six out LGBTQ members are currently serving. Victory Fund-endorsed candidate Venton Jones advanced to a runoff election in his race for the Texas State House. Jones would be the first out Black man ever elected to the Texas House, and the country's first out Black state legislator who is openly HIV-positive. Jolanda Jones, who is running for the State House in District 147, advanced to a runoff election as well. She would be the first LGBTQ Black woman elected to the Texas House of Representatives.

Since 1991, the Victory Fund has helped thousands of openly queer candidates win local, state, and federal elections. The group works to increase the number of LGBTQ elected officials while also ensuring that candidates reflect the diversity of those they serve.

Besides Mayor Parker, featured speakers for the Victory Fund's Houston Champagne Brunch are Pasadena Council Member Jonathan Estrada, Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot, and Texas State Representatives Celia Israel and Ann Johnson. →

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BENEFITING



"I am honored to participate in this year's Victory Fund Champagne Brunch," says Johnson, who currently represents Harris County's District 134, a seat she won in 2020. A Houston native, she ran unopposed in March but faces both a Republican and a Libertarian in November.

"We are seeing extreme attacks and discriminatory legislation targeting our LGBTQ community, [and] the devastating effects are already being felt," she notes. "My commitment as a member of the Texas House of Representatives is to ensure all rights are protected for the LGBTQ community. Anti-equality bills would be more difficult to pass [if we had] more LGBTQ people in office. Being a member of the community has allowed me to speak from a personal level on legislation that impacts us. It is so important to increase LGBTQ representation so we can make change for our community."

To date, the Victory Fund has endorsed 237 candidates running nationwide in the 2022 midterms. "The rainbow wave continues to gain momentum, fueled by voters' resounding



Annise Parker (center) with local and national LGBTQ elected officials at Houston's 2019 Champagne Brunch

excitement to elect public officials that reflect the diversity and strength of our country," says Mayor Parker. "This is a testament to the hard work of our LGBTQ elected officials fighting for and enacting public policy that represents the interests of all people, especially traditionally marginalized communities. It is also a testament to the LGBTQ activists and grassroots organizers who are changing hearts and minds in every corner of our country. With so much

at stake, this is truly shaping up to be the year of the LGBTQ candidate."

What: Victory Fund Houston Champagne Brunch

When: May 15 at 11:00 a.m.

Where: Post Oak Hotel Uptown, 1600 West Loop South

Tickets: Starting at \$275, victoryfund.org/houston

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Exxon Bans Pride Flags

Houston-based employees are protesting.

By LOURDES ZAVALATA



ExxonMobil has banned LGBTQ flags from being flown outside of its office buildings during Pride Month, and its Houston-based

employees are protesting.

The energy company recently announced it is prohibiting “external position flags,” such as Pride flags and Black Lives Matter flags, from being displayed outside of company facilities, according to an email that Bloomberg acquired last month. In response, employees from Exxon’s PRIDE Houston chapter are refusing to represent the company at the city’s June 25 LGBTQ Pride parade.

“It is difficult to reconcile how ExxonMobil recognizes the value of promoting our corporation as supportive of the LGBTQ+ community externally (e.g. advertisements, Pride parades, social-media posts) but now believes it inappropriate to visibly show support for our LGBTQ+ employees in the workplace,” Exxon’s PRIDE group wrote in an April 21 email.

Despite rainbow flags being flown outside Exxon offices last year, PRIDE said the new decision was “centered on the need for the corporation to maintain ‘neutrality.’”

The dispute comes as America’s largest corporations are being pushed to take stances on social issues such as LGBTQ rights, racial equality, and abortion. Last month, the Walt Disney Company decided to publicly oppose Florida Governor Ron DeSantis’ “Don’t Say Gay” bill, prompting lawmakers to strip the entertainment giant of self-governance privileges and tax breaks.

“The updated flag protocol is intended to clarify the use of the ExxonMobil-branded company flag and not intended to diminish our commitment to diversity and support for employee resource groups,” Tracey Gunnlaugsson, vice president of human resources, said in a statement. “

While Pride flags are prohibited at the front entrances of its facilities, Exxon supports displaying banners and flags with logos of so-called employee resource groups. “The flags are directly related to our business and company support of our ERGs, including PRIDE for LGBTQ+ employees,” Gunnlaugsson said.



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QUEER THINGS to DO



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May 20

Housing Our Future Gala 2022

The Montrose Center presents its annual Housing Our Future Gala at The Ballroom at Bayou Place. Themed TV Land, this year's celebration pays homage to "the golden gays of television," so dress up as your favorite television character or come in your best cocktail attire and spend time with local LGBTQ community leaders and friends.

Sponsored by Chevron, proceeds from the event benefit the Montrose Center's Rapid Rehousing Program, a peer-to-peer fundraising campaign that

supports LGBTQ homeless youth. International and local talent will take the stage throughout the evening. Tickets are \$150, and tables start at \$1,500.

Looking for another way to support homeless LGBTQ youth? Join the Montrose Center's team of fundraisers and help spread the word about donating to the Rapid Rehousing Program. To learn more about the campaign: bit.ly/housingourfuture2022 or contact event chair Maleah Jones at mjones@montrosecenter.org. tinyurl.com/4j8j6ucf

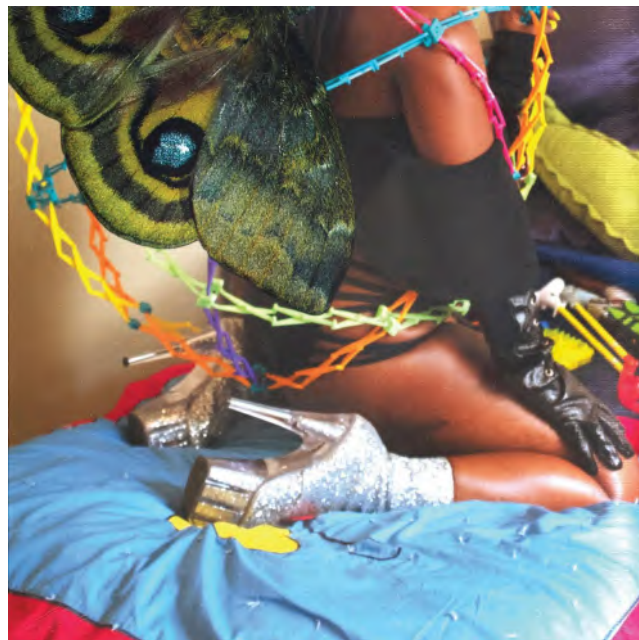


COMMUNITY

May 6

FRIDAY MEET & EAT

The Greater Houston LGBT Chamber of Commerce hosts its monthly lunch mixer at Urban Eats. The casual event is open to all who are interested in networking and learning more about the Chamber. tinyurl.com/yvx7w8bn



ART

May 5-8

WHAT DREAMS MAY COME

Rabit and Lane Stewart, co-founders of the electronic music label Halcyon Veil, are bringing their new pop-up event to Bill Arning Exhibitions. What Dreams May Come is a unique experience that blends visual art with music. tinyurl.com/3bb5bkwr



COMMUNITY

May 7

FREE COMIC BOOK DAY

The queer- and Black-owned Gulf Coast Cosmos Comic Book Co. is celebrating Free Comic Book Day at its shop in Third Ward with a full day of activities, raffles, giveaways, and a meet-and-greet with Houston comic Lane Fobbs.

tinyurl.com/2mx6j7wp



STAGE

May 10

ORVILLE PECK

Openly gay musician Orville Peck brings his Bronco tour to White Oak Music Hall. Don't miss the masked country-music singer performing new music.

tinyurl.com/yjuje56n

COMMUNITY

May 10

HOUSTON GAYMERS MOVIE NIGHT

Join the Houston Gaymers for Movie Night at the Regal Edwards Theater on the Katy Freeway. The LGBTQ gaming group will screen *Dr. Strange in the Multiverse of Madness* in a private theater with seating limited to 20.

tinyurl.com/mtvsza7p

STAGE

May 13-14

HOUSTON BALLET AT MILLER OUTDOOR THEATRE

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tinyurl.com/5ejbwt2h

COMMUNITY

May 15

LGBTQ VICTORY FUND BRUNCH

The Victory Fund's annual Houston Champagne Brunch at the Post Oak Hotel at Uptown Houston toasts LGBTQ political power and several out candidates running for office. Tickets are available on the Victory Fund's Facebook page.

tinyurl.com/2p8uj9v5



STAGE

May 20

OMAR APOLLO

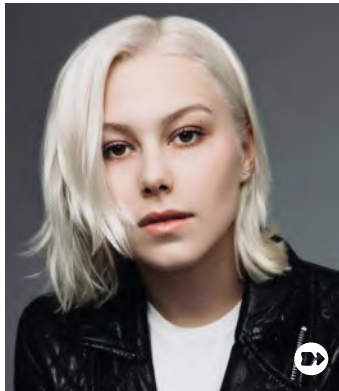
Gay singer-songwriter Omar Apollo brings new music to White Oak Music Hall. Apollo's debut album *Ivory* is out now.

COMMUNITY

May 20-22

BEAR CAMP 2022

The Houston Bears present their annual Bear Camp at Grizzly Pines. Join the LGBTQ social organization for a weekend of parties, mixers, games, and more. Day passes are also available. tinyurl.com/4k7avp48



STAGE

May 21

PHOEBE BRIDGERS

Bisexual songstress Phoebe Bridgers visits White Oak Music Hall during her tour to promote her second studio album, *Punisher*. tinyurl.com/44yzeawc



STAGE

May 27

ADORE DELANO

Time to party with *RuPaul's Drag Race* star Adore Delano at ReBar Houston, hosted by Luna of the Lillies with performances by Blackberri, ONDI, and Delano. A meet-and-greet will be available after the show.

tinyurl.com/5j9k38sy

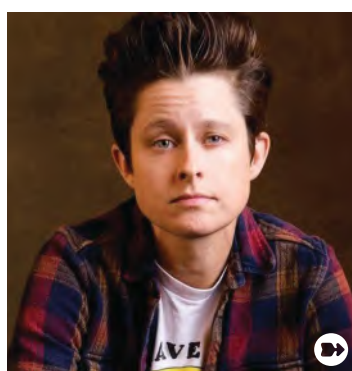


COMMUNITY

May 15

ERSICSS MEETING

The Empire of the Royal Sovereign and Imperial Court of the Single Star (ERSICSS), an LGBTQ social organization, hosts its monthly membership meeting at the Montrose Center. tinyurl.com/33bw7zv2



STAGE

May 19-22

COME & TAKE IT COMEDY FESTIVAL 2022

Trans comedian River Butcher headlines this weekend-long comedy festival at The Secret Group.

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STAGE

June 5

LIFE, LOVE & LASHES

RuPaul's Drag Race star Alyssa Edwards comes to the Wortham Theater Center with her Life, Love & Lashes tour.

(See story on page 64.)

tinyurl.com/3p36kwxh



SOCIAL

June 23-26

DNVRMX PRESENTS THE HTX PRIDE WEEKEND

Celebrate Pride with DNVRMX at multiple venues across Houston. The four-day-long event features an all-star lineup of DJs including Paulo Gois, Alex Acosta, Oscar Velasquez, and more. tinyurl.com/2p9xprwf



COMMUNITY

June 24

RAINBOW ON THE GREEN

Discovery Green's annual LGBTQ Pride celebration will honor the families who have spoken out against anti-trans legislation in Texas, and features a performance by America's Got Talent finalist Christina Wells.

tinyurl.com/yc3rszww



COMMUNITY

June 25

HOUSTON LGBTQ PRIDE CELEBRATION

The Pride Houston 365 celebration returns to downtown Houston with a festival and parade in front of City Hall. General-admission and VIP tickets are on sale now.

tinyurl.com/bddzc23s

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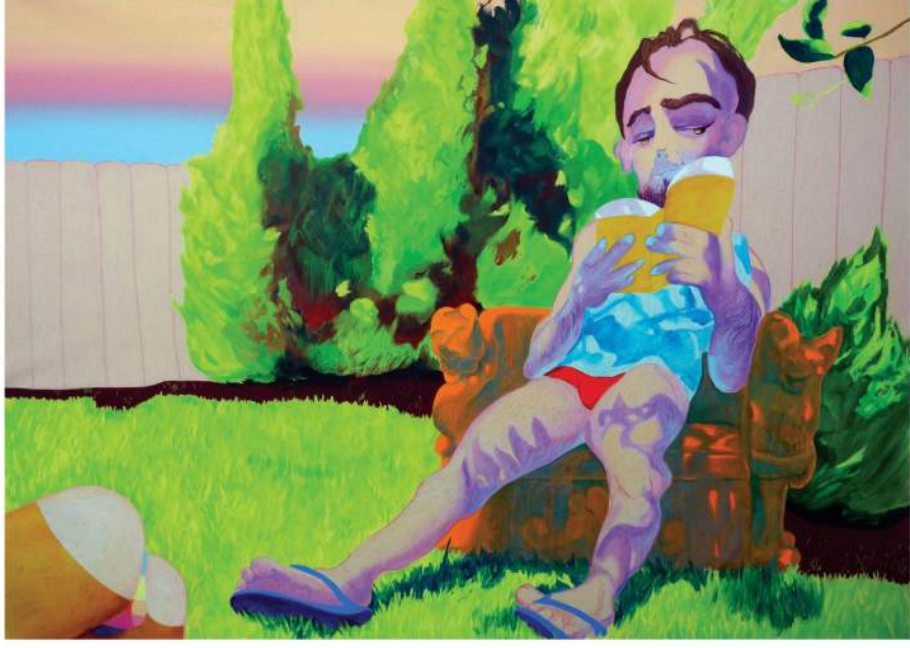


Preetika Rajgariah
Pleasure Tense



Preetika Rajgariah, the world needs your unique gifts, don't leave with them still inside you, 2021.
Mother's silk sarī, glitter, and paint on yoga mats, 63x47 inches.

Jean-Paul Mallozzi
SPF Thirsty



Jean Paul Mallozzi, Work On Your Base, 2022.
Acrylic and pastel on canvas, 60x84 inches.

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Queasy Cuisine



I was sashaying around the internet machine last month, looking for some fun things to cook this summer. Quite by accident, I came across a website entitled “A Roundup of 50 Famous Texas Foods.” Well, okay dokey.

I’m a fifth-generation Texan on my momma’s side and a certified New Orleans Creole Darlin’ on my daddy’s side, so I know a thing or three about cooking. I once started a rumor that I could put possum meat in my gumbo and nobody would notice the difference. Since then, far fewer people have wanted to try my gumbo, which leaves more for me. So that worked out just dandy!

The first thing I noticed on the Famous Texas Foods site was a photo of Frito Pie served in a pretty dish. Frito Pie is properly eaten in an individual Fritos bag slit sideways and covered with chili, cheddar cheese, and onions. Ideally, it’s served at high-school baseball games along with RC Cola. Or on the back porch with beer. Eating it inside just takes all the happy out of it. (Note to visitors from foreign states: Do not eat the Fritos bag.)

One of the Famous Texas recipes was actually from Oklahoma. We don’t eat stuff from Oklahoma. Ever. As we all know, the only thing that keeps Texas from sliding into the Gulf of Mexico is that Oklahoma sucks. Honey, we will eat anything from Mexico or Louisiana (and occasionally from New Mexico if we get stuck in El Paso and start drinking), but never Oklahoma.

Baked Chicken Chalupas: I just want to

know what that chalupa did to deserve such a fate. Either fry it or call a priest, but torturing chalupas in the oven is just unacceptable.

And their Chicken Fried Steak recipe comes from Fort Ann, New York. Honey, Fort Ann is not even in *southern* New York. When you look up Fort Ann, you discover their claim to fame is that they got beat by the British during the Revolutionary War. So I say if they couldn’t be trusted with the muskets, they should stay away from the cooking utensils. But here’s the weird part of that recipe: they cook it up in the usual manner, except they use low-fat milk. Geez, you’re frying red meat in cooking fat but then you try to be heart-healthy with the batter? Hey Fort Ann, that’s why the British beat you.

Famous Texas Food #42: Oven-Roasted Beef Brisket. Somebody is going to hell for that one.

Then there’s the Burrito Lasagna. It calls for canned enchilada sauce and ready-to-serve spinach rice. Look, instead of taking us to the trailer park, why not just show us a map to the nearest Taco Bell?

Then they throw in a bonus recipe they call Beef ‘N Bean Torta. It’s the same lasagna recipe, but this one has canned beans.

They even include a recipe for Sweet Tea! I could have sent them the official three-word Texas recipe: Tea. Sugar. Mix.

Maple Glazed Donuts. Did I mention that this website is supposed to showcase famous Texas food? Again, I’m a fifth-generation Texan, and have lived here so long that I bleed rodeo when I get a cut. I have never, ever seen a

maple donut, nor have I talked with anybody who has admitted to seeing one.

There’s also something called Velvety Chocolate Butter Pecan Pie. OK, so you’ve got: velvet, chocolate, butter, and pecans. What? You ran out of mango? You couldn’t fit your kitchen sink into the mixing bowl?

And get this: the Texas-Style BBQ Sauce includes a full cup of ketchup, brown sugar, and vinegar. It’s from South Carolina, where they do brisket and pork ribs in the oven. There are only two kinds of sauce in Texas—the hot one, and the other one. *Neither* contains vinegar or ketchup. There are parts of Texas where “BBQ sauce” is a cuss word.

In the website’s 50 recipes, I saw the word *cilantro* one time. It was part of a salsa recipe that included grapefruit. I grow cilantro in my kitchen window. All during COVID, I’d get up every morning, make my coffee, and pull off a piece of cilantro to smell it. If I could smell it, I pretty much figured I didn’t have the COVID.

Until next month, just keep in mind that Madison Cawthorn, that North Carolina Republican Congressvarmint, claimed that members of Congress were involved in orgies with lotsa cocaine. The very next day, Sarah Palin came out of retirement to announce that she’s running for Congress. Look it up. It happened.

Susan Bankston lives in Richmond, Texas, where she writes about her hairdresser at The World’s Most Dangerous Beauty Salon, Inc., at juanitajeane.com.

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This is only a brief summary of important information about BIKTARVY and does not replace talking to your healthcare provider about your condition and your treatment.

(bik-TAR-vee)

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BIKTARVY may cause serious side effects, including:

- ▶ **Worsening of hepatitis B (HBV) infection.** Your healthcare provider will test you for HBV. If you have both HIV-1 and HBV, your HBV may suddenly get worse if you stop taking BIKTARVY. Do not stop taking BIKTARVY without first talking to your healthcare provider, as they will need to check your health regularly for several months, and may give you HBV medicine.

ABOUT BIKTARVY

BIKTARVY is a complete, 1-pill, once-a-day prescription medicine used to treat HIV-1 in adults and children who weigh at least 55 pounds. It can either be used in people who have never taken HIV-1 medicines before, or people who are replacing their current HIV-1 medicines and whose healthcare provider determines they meet certain requirements.

BIKTARVY does not cure HIV-1 or AIDS. HIV-1 is the virus that causes AIDS.

Do NOT take BIKTARVY if you also take a medicine that contains:

- ▶ dofetilide
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- ▶ any other medicines to treat HIV-1

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- ▶ Have or have had any kidney or liver problems, including hepatitis infection.
- ▶ Have any other health problems.
- ▶ Are pregnant or plan to become pregnant. It is not known if BIKTARVY can harm your unborn baby. Tell your healthcare provider if you become pregnant while taking BIKTARVY.
- ▶ Are breastfeeding (nursing) or plan to breastfeed. Do not breastfeed. HIV-1 can be passed to the baby in breast milk.

Tell your healthcare provider about all the medicines you take:

- ▶ Keep a list that includes all prescription and over-the-counter medicines, antacids, laxatives, vitamins, and herbal supplements, and show it to your healthcare provider and pharmacist.
- ▶ BIKTARVY and other medicines may affect each other. Ask your healthcare provider and pharmacist about medicines that interact with BIKTARVY, and ask if it is safe to take BIKTARVY with all your other medicines.

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- ▶ Those in the “Most Important Information About BIKTARVY” section.
- ▶ **Changes in your immune system.** Your immune system may get stronger and begin to fight infections that may have been hidden in your body. Tell your healthcare provider if you have any new symptoms after you start taking BIKTARVY.
- ▶ **Kidney problems, including kidney failure.** Your healthcare provider should do blood and urine tests to check your kidneys. If you develop new or worse kidney problems, they may tell you to stop taking BIKTARVY.
- ▶ **Too much lactic acid in your blood (lactic acidosis),** which is a serious but rare medical emergency that can lead to death. Tell your healthcare provider right away if you get these symptoms: weakness or being more tired than usual, unusual muscle pain, being short of breath or fast breathing, stomach pain with nausea and vomiting, cold or blue hands and feet, feel dizzy or lightheaded, or a fast or abnormal heartbeat.
- ▶ **Severe liver problems,** which in rare cases can lead to death. Tell your healthcare provider right away if you get these symptoms: skin or the white part of your eyes turns yellow, dark “tea-colored” urine, light-colored stools, loss of appetite for several days or longer, nausea, or stomach-area pain.
- ▶ **The most common side effects of BIKTARVY** in clinical studies were diarrhea (6%), nausea (6%), and headache (5%).

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Scan to see their stories.

Reconsidering Self-Care

Tips for staying on top of our mental health during stressful times.

During the height of the pandemic, the concept of “self-care” became one of the most frequently searched terms on Google. Unsurprisingly, given the stress, desperation, and fear that many of us experienced, it makes sense that people needed answers

about how best to manage the complex storm of emotions stemming from COVID.

The perceived need for self-care has only grown over the last several months. We continue to mentally adjust to the ongoing pandemic, watching variant after variant wreak havoc across the globe. We see unrest all the way from the U.S. Capitol to the bombed-out cities in Ukraine. All of this contributes to an overwhelming feeling of a lack of safety and security in the world.

Simultaneously, we are witnessing senseless attacks on LGBTQ folks in classrooms and courtrooms throughout the country. With political tensions looming large over the upcoming elections, continued progress in the LGBTQ social-justice movement feels tenuous.

In this climate, self-care remains an important concept adjacent to mental health and wellness. Self-care has come to represent an array of thoughts, beliefs, and practices aimed at reducing stress, promoting connection with self and others, and encouraging healthy behaviors.

Basic Self-Care 101

While the worldwide forces of discrimination, injustice, and oppression feel ubiquitous in the background, interpersonal relationships and challenges are a more immediate source of emotional unease. These feelings create the impetus for the practice of self-care.

For busy people who struggle to take regular breaks from work or social activities, thinking about self-care can serve as a helpful reminder to simply stop and rest. For others who have a tendency to prioritize others' needs over their own, remembering to practice self-care could mean that instead of doing for others, one should first do for one's self. When we are feeling overwhelmed by a task, taking



a break to catch up on laundry or Netflix provides an opportunity to reset and recharge.

Self-care isn't just about cutting off the people who upset you. It takes practice to learn how to ask for what you want in relationships and establish boundaries with others so that you can show up authentically and genuinely. Self-care is the deeper work of catching yourself in the moment and choosing to behave in a way that supports your own values and core beliefs. But first, you have to know what those beliefs are. Perhaps your journey to a truer form of self-care can begin there.

“I’m good enough...”

While there is nothing wrong with the concept of self-care, it's important to distinguish between effective self-care and the shallow platitudes and affirmations that bombard us daily. “Prioritize your peace,” “Choose what chooses you,” or “The best revenge is to heal” are typical of the platitudes that clog our social-media feeds and get repeated in pep talks from friends

or colleagues. Frankly, if all it took to heal was the repetition of a simple phrase or idea, then everyone would be cured by now.

While repeating positive self-talk can be an important part of breaking old thought patterns and rewiring brain pathways, the endless repetition of certain phrases is not a substitute for the development of coping skills or actual mental-health treatment. Many self-care phrases and sayings provide a destination without clear directions for getting there. Expecting someone with a pattern of complicated or traumatic relationships to simply “set boundaries” or “be happy” is both unrealistic and unfair. Providing guidance on *how* to practice setting boundaries is more effective than simply encouraging people to seek an unattainable perpetual state of happiness.

Treatment beyond Self-Care

Self-care needs to be seen as just one of many pathways by which we can address

life's challenges. A comprehensive approach to self-care might also involve engaging in psychotherapy or adhering to a psychiatric medication regimen.

Ultimately, it's important to use language and self-talk that is kind and extends grace and self-compassion. However, if self-care routines are not working (or their positive effects are not as sustained as they once were), it may be time to consider referral to a mental-health treatment provider.

From Words to Deeds

If we aren't careful, self-care strategies can oversimplify the needed response to emotional, occupational, or social challenges that oftentimes have complex causes and solutions. When one feels stressed out from work, for example, a common way to respond is to take time off with a "mental-health day." While this can be helpful in reducing immediate stress, over the long term the answer may require more than simply taking time off—particularly since much of the stress will still be waiting for you as soon as you get back to work. Even though it may feel good in the moment, simply taking a day off here or there may not be sufficient to deal with a workplace challenge or an overly busy schedule.

Self-care should involve using appropriate support systems. Perhaps asking for assistance from team members or supervisors, speaking with the human-resources staff about assigned job duties, or considering ways of working more efficiently can help reduce work-related stress. Next time you are feeling overly stressed from work, try looking at your list of responsibilities. Where can you make changes to your assigned workflow?

Another tactic may be to foster feelings of deeper commitment and satisfaction with work. Is there any way to increase the amount of time you spend doing things that give you joy? While no job can promise satisfaction 100 percent of the time, perhaps there is a way to reconfigure your duties to maximize those activities that fuel you.

The same energy and strategies you use to solve workplace challenges can also be used to improve social relationships. Using self-care techniques to spur action—and seeking professional help when needed—are both critical steps in promoting mental well-being.

Daryl Shorter, MD, is a Diplomate of the American Board of Psychiatry and Neurology and is board certified in both general and addiction psychiatry. His clinical practice focuses on veteran care, and he lectures widely on LGBTQ mental health. Dr. Shorter can be reached at dr.darylshorter@gmail.com.

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By GRACE YUNG, CFP

Saving for a Rainy Day

Why does it matter, and how can I get started?



We have all likely heard our parents and grandparents tell us to “save for a rainy day.” But what exactly does that mean?

Build up a “cushion” for emergencies? Retire early? Or plan ahead for the next recession?

In terms of national economic downturns, the Great Recession of 2008 negatively impacted savings and investments for many people who had to rebuild a lifetime of savings.

While we don’t know when the next recession will come, we do know that it is possible at any time, so it’s a good idea to always be prepared ahead of time. Being taken by surprise could mean you’ll need to make quick—and likely unpleasant—changes to your lifestyle.

How Inflation Affects Your Lifestyle

After a long period when interest rates were at historic lows, it makes sense that as the price of goods and services continues to rise, so will the cost of borrowing money to pay for many of these items.

Lately, inflation has been at the forefront of the news, so naturally people are worried about a possible recession around the corner. What happens during a recession? We would likely experience job losses and unemployment, a drop in real-estate values, and declining investment values.

These inflationary trends can have a negative impact on your personal finances and your purchasing power—meaning that it can take more money to buy the same amount of goods and services that you need and want.

With that in mind, it would be a good idea to plan for the need to live within your means during periods of rising prices. The good news is there are ideas that can help.

How You Can Plan

There are several ways that you can plan for continued rising prices, as well as for reduced work hours or even a complete job loss, should a recession occur. Some of the key strategies include cutting unnecessary expenses, saving one partner’s income while living on the other’s, diversifying your



income sources, expanding your skills, and diversifying your investments.

Cutting Unnecessary Expenses

One of the best financial strategies that you can implement in preparation for a recession (or even if you simply want to save more money every month) is to cut unnecessary expenses. Putting together a spending plan and a list of your essential and non-essential costs can make a world of difference in terms of keeping tabs on where your money is going, as well as showing you where you may be able to trim some expenses.

For instance, do you really need the deluxe cable TV package, or could you cut back on some of those costly movie channels?

Other strategies for cutting unnecessary expenses include making (and sticking to) shopping lists, bringing lunch to work rather than going out, turning off lights when you leave a room so as not to waste electricity (because even the seemingly “little things” all add up), and inquiring about spousal or domestic-partner discounts on insurance. (Many insurers are now allowing same-sex couples to pay less on coverage if both individuals purchase a policy.)

The money that you don’t spend can then be used to beef up your savings, which can also help you to prepare for a rainy day and corresponding inflation. This is particularly true if you run into unexpected costs like a roof leak or fender-bender. Rather than putting these repairs on a high-interest credit card, you can instead pull the money from your emergency fund.

Saving One Partner’s Income While Living on the Other’s

If you are married or live with your partner and you both work, you could make a goal of paying your living expenses with one of your incomes and putting the other’s income into your savings or investments.

For those who are in a solid relationship where each partner maintains a separate household, it may make sense to take the next step and move in together. This alone could save you a significant amount of money every month, as you can eliminate many duplicate expenses like rent or mortgage and utilities.

Depending on the situation, you may even be able to keep both homes and rent one of them out. This can create a passive income source, as well as some additional income-tax deductions on the rental property.

Even if you aren’t able to save all of one spouse or partner’s income, you can start small with whatever amount you can swing and then work toward a larger amount down the road.

Diversifying Your Income Sources

Diversifying your income sources can be another viable method of preparing for a slowdown in the economy. In this case, you may be able to take a hobby—such as graphic design or fiction writing—and turn it into an income-producing business.

Today, there are myriad ways to generate income both online and off—oftentimes on your schedule—such as driving for Uber. You could also get creative with income generators such as renting out unused space in your garage to someone who needs extra storage. →



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MONEY SMART | CONTINUED FROM PREVIOUS PAGE

Another reason it is important to put some additional income-generating strategies in place is in case you or your spouse or partner were to pass away unexpectedly and the survivor's household income is significantly reduced. This is particularly true if you are not married and the survivor would not automatically receive the deceased's retirement savings, employer-sponsored life insurance proceeds, Social Security income, and/or pension continuation.

Expanding Your Skills

Another way to help fight inflation is to expand your skills so that if you lose your current job, you'll be able to move to another industry or area where what you bring to the table is still needed by others.

When deciding what other skills you want to learn, it may be wise to consider those that are more recession-proof, such as healthcare, education, social work, veterinary medicine, accounting, law enforcement, firefighting, or auto mechanics. That way, your skills are more likely to be in demand so you can keep generating incoming cash flow.

Diversifying Your Investments

Diversifying your investments can provide you with a couple of significant advantages. For instance, diversification is a risk-management strategy that promotes having a variety of financial vehicles in your portfolio so that the risk of loss is reduced and you can ideally increase the opportunity for higher long-term returns.

Keeping Your Financial Life on Track

A financial-planning professional can help you put together a plan tailored to your specific goals that can weather our long-term economic cycles. It is also a good idea to review those plans on a regular basis. To get started, or to get a second opinion on a plan that you already have in place, it can be beneficial to work with a financial planner who is well-versed in the financial issues of the LGBTQ community.

Grace S. Yung, CFP®, is a CERTIFIED FINANCIAL PLANNER practitioner with experience in helping LGBTQ individuals, domestic partners, and families plan and manage their finances since 1994. She is the managing director at Midtown Financial Group, LLC, in Houston. Yung can be reached at grace.yung@lpl.com. Visit letsmakeaplan.org or midtownfg.com/lgbtqplus.10.htm.



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Groundbreaking GLAMOUR

Bach Mai's cutting-edge designs
transform traditional notions of femininity.

By LILLIAN HOANG
Photo by DIMITRI HYACINTHE

Houston designer Bach Mai has been designing for more than half his life, and at 33, he is only getting started. He discovered his love of fashion as a child, and started making dresses when he was 15.

"Fashion has this amazing power where when someone puts on something, regardless of aesthetic, it makes them feel incredible—[like they] can take on the world. That's a very beautiful power that fashion has," Mai says.

A gay Vietnamese man, Mai has an extensive background in fashion design, having studied at Parsons School of Design in New York City and Institut Français de la Mode in Paris. He has worked with industry giants like John Galliano, Calvin Klein, Oscar de la Renta, and Maison Margiela. Mai was also touted by *Vogue* as "an American couturier in the making" and "fashion's next big thing" by *PaperCity*, a statewide lifestyle publication that covers fashion, lifestyle news, and more.

Mai's designs were recently featured at several major red-carpet events. Singer-songwriter Abigail Barlow wore one of his dresses to the Grammy Awards, and actress Josie Totah wore two of his designs to the GLAAD Media Awards.

Mai's clothes celebrate femininity, sexuality, and sensuality. While he doesn't currently produce haute couture, he has a deep respect and love for that custom high-end craft. He is partnering with Hurel, one of the oldest and most prestigious fabric houses in France, to create clothes inspired by the haute couture tradition.

In addition to admiring the craftsmanship that goes into haute couture, Mai especially

loves the collaborative process it requires. "I think one of the most important parts about haute couture is the relationship between the client and designer, where I can make anything happen."

Learn more about Bach Mai in our OUTSMART interview below.

What is "haute couture," in your own words?

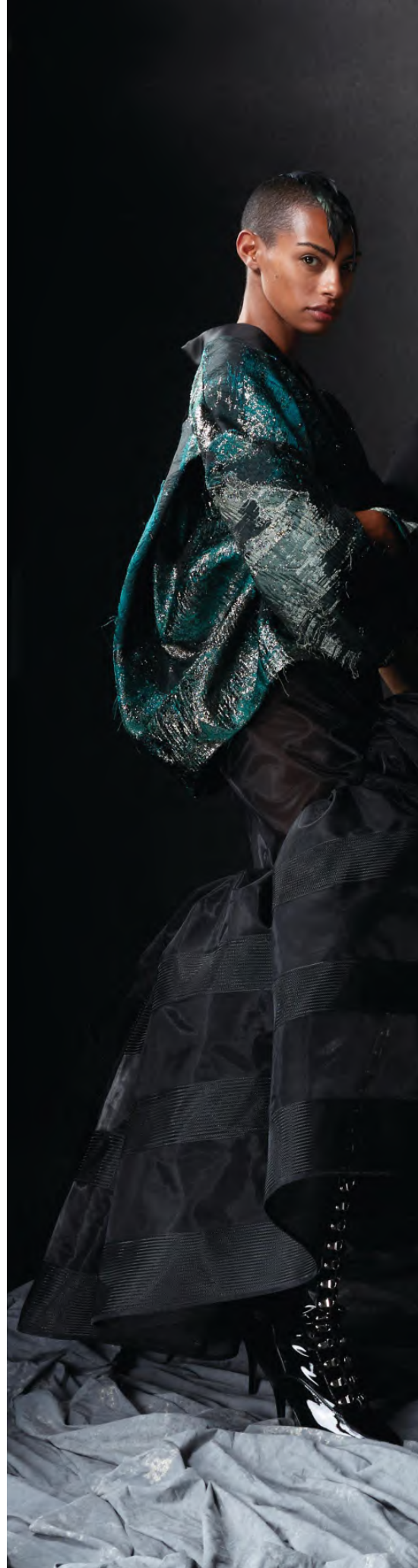
Haute couture is everything. It is the highest level of design, the highest level of sewing, the highest level of craftsmanship, but it's also a creative laboratory of design where anything is possible. It is this intimate relationship between the client and designer. It is making these really special custom clothes for someone to help them take on the world.

People always ring the death bell for haute couture, but it never goes away because it continues to evolve to meet the needs of whatever the times are.

Tell us what it was like growing up gay and Vietnamese in Houston?

I grew up in very supportive familial and academic communities. I think a lot of people think, "Oh my gosh, you must have had such a traumatic experience." But I really didn't. I think what it allowed me to do was to leave Texas at 18, so confident in who I was.

I ended up going to the very liberal Saint John's High School. Looking back on that experience, it was such a supportive community, at least relative to what you hear about other people's experiences in high school. I remember being a freshman and there would always be upperclassmen who were out and proud and accepted. Overall, I'm very thankful for my experience growing up in Houston. →





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THE WORLD."

—Bach Mai

Bach Mai with models
wearing his Collection 0



Teddy Quinlivan wears Bach Mai's "Strawberry Lemonade" raw-edged silk chiffon mille-feuille embroidery deep-v strapless dress with scriptural volant skirt and "Aubergine" lamb opera gloves

When did you develop an interest in fashion?

I developed an interest in fashion quite early on. I always credit John Galliano's Christian Dior Spring 2004 Couture collection for my love of haute couture. It really opened my eyes to what fashion and couture could be. I was very young, and remember sitting at the little dial-up computer and watching the runway videos online. That show will forever be one of my favorite shows of all time. He really showed what was possible with fashion. It was not just clothes; it is the power to make you dream, to stir emotion. It is also the power to make women beautiful. It is the power to tell a story. That's why he has such a special place in the history of fashion.

What was the first piece of clothing you made, and how was it important to you?

I made this red bias-cut slip dress for my cousin. I didn't design it. It was me learning how to sew using a pattern.

The bias cut, it's like magic. The fabric, when cut on the bias, changes and moves and grows and starts to have a life of its own. As you wear it, it conforms more because of your body heat. Its ability to conform to a body and become alive with the wearer is very magical. When I see a bias dress with a dart in it, I almost have a heart attack every time.

How did you find your voice while working alongside so many fashion-designer icons?

[By developing] a strong and defined personal creative universe. No matter where you go, you bring your creative universe, and you incorporate it into theirs. That's how you maintain yourself, and that's what you provide.

Creative universes are the things that make you tick. It's the references that you love, the works that inspire you and continue to inspire you, collection after collection. I have so many—my obsession with the courtesan 18th-century dress, haute couture from the '50s and '60s, Cy Twombly, ballet, opera. I mean, I can go on and on.

What else inspires your work?

Femininity. I really reject this idea that women have to adopt masculine codes of dress to appear strong. I think that's such a

fallacy. Feminine [styles] can be powerful, strong, and they can be used as armor.

I think this whole '80s idea of the power suit—needing to wear this strong-shouldered pinstripe suit to be seen as powerful in the board room—is like, whatever. You can also wear a beautiful bias cut for work.

My brand really revolves around this idea of "unabashed femininity" and "irreverent glamour." Unabashed femininity is embracing feminine codes and using them in powerful ways. Irreverent glamour comes from a very Texas idea of glamor. [I saw it while growing] up, and saw not only how my friends dressed and approached glamorous dressing, but also how their mothers [approached it].

Describe your ability to provide high-profile clients with designs that look amazing and make them feel amazing.

Abigail wore something from our first collection to the Grammy Awards. We did a custom dress for Josie for the GLAAD Awards. I was watching *Bridgerton* at that moment, so it was a very *Bridgerton*-inspired dress. The collaboration with her and her stylist was the most beautiful part of couture—the relationship between the client and designer. Being able to have that conversation with them, make something custom, and send fabric swatches to check them on her skin to make sure we found the absolute perfect shade of chartreuse was so fun and inspiring to me. And she looked incredible! We sent an extra, and she loved it so much, she wore two looks. It's nice when people respond to your work in that way. It's an amazing feeling to be able to empower someone with your clothes.

Tell us about the inspiration for your latest collection, *A Flower Walk*.

My collection O, which is the first collection I showed last year, was really inspired by my creative universe and my mentors. I started before the pandemic, and then we were on pause for two years. I've been looking at this collection for years, waiting to launch. It ended up being very dark, and after another long, dark COVID winter, we just needed color, color, color, color. So I started again with the cornerstone of my creative universe, Cy Twombly—specifically the exhibition he did in Southern France called *Blooming, A Scattering of Blossoms and Other Things*. Unlike his usual penchant for looking at classical poetry, Twombly was looking at Japanese haiku.



Collection 1 "Watermelon"
ombré dyed silk satin
draped bias gown with
halter strap and "Wisteria"
lamb opera gloves

One haiku that struck me was by Takarai Kikaku, in which Kusunoki took off his armor for peonies, and it really brought me to the idea of the disarming power of femininity. I was also looking at Ukiyo-e (particularly Bijin-ga, which is a genre of Japanese art focused on feminine beauty) and the courtesan of the season, the Oiran—one of the highest levels of Japanese courtesans. What I really loved was the idea of the Oiran Dochu, which is kind of the precession they do after this long courtship ritual where she goes to meet a patron. All the finery, all the attendants, and the special way of walking was just mesmerizing. So, I translated Oiran Dochu to kind of mean "flower walk," which is where my collection's name comes from.

At the end of the day, it was about color, color, color, color, and each look was ombré.

"MY BRAND REALLY REVOLVES AROUND THIS IDEA OF "UNABASHED FEMININITY" AND "IRREVERENT GLAMOUR." UNABASHED FEMININITY IS EMBRACING FEMININE CODES AND USING THEM IN POWERFUL WAYS. IRREVERENT GLAMOUR COMES FROM A VERY TEXAS IDEA OF GLAMOUR."

—Bach Mai

Walk us through your creative process. How do you go about producing a design, from start to finish?

I get this question a lot, and maybe I work a little differently, but what I find is that there's not just one pathway. Every collection has its own life, its own needs, and you just have to go on the journey it needs to go on. So sometimes that means sketching, and sometimes that may be painting and draping. It may be more fabric-based, more shape-based, or more image-based. I just start wherever it needs to start, and it goes where it needs to go. There's always a textile component with me, but there's never just one way.

What are some of the most important lessons you've learned as a designer?

Focus on the craft. There's a lot now about image and social-media marketing, but at the end of the day, it's about the clothes.

What's next for you and your brand?

To continue building this vision, this brand, and refining and establishing my identity and my voice in fashion.

We'll be in retail stores for the first time ever. There's nothing more special than seeing people wear your clothes. We will be in Neiman Marcus and Nordstrom. I'm excited to not only see the clothes there, but also to do an event or trunk show and get to see more of the clients.



For more info, visit bachmai.com.

Dancing Diva

Mulan Alexander
brings her artistry
to the Bayou City.

By RYAN M. LEACH
Photo by VICTOR CONTRERAS
Hair by FABIAN ESPINOZA



New-ish Houstonian Mulan Alexander, 28, has already made a big splash on the Texas drag and burlesque scenes. Her Vietnamese heritage and her call to activism inspires her artistry, her drag, and her mastery of “the art of the tease.”

“As far as I can remember, as a kid I always loved dancing when I was growing up,” she recalls. “In my culture, we have a thing called ‘Lion and Dragon’ dancing. Every Lunar New Year we’d celebrate it, and I always loved watching it. When I was in my teens, as a boy, my parents put me in a local Buddhist youth group where I’d go every Sunday. They had a Lion dance team and we put on dance productions every Lunar New Year and every Mother’s Day.”

Alexander, a transgender woman, was born in San Jose, California, but raised in Arlington, Texas. Her interest in dancing eventually evolved into an interest in gymnastics and tumbling. She was able to develop her athletic skills after a chance encounter at a cheer gym when she was in high school. This would lead to competitive gymnastics training for the next six years.

“[During] my junior year in high school, my best friend and a couple of her other friends started a dance group, so I just tagged along. It just so happened that rehearsals were at a cheer gym. I started bouncing around the gym like I was in my favorite movie, *Bring It On*. The coach noticed me and asked if I wanted to be a part of their competition team. Being first-generation here in America, I knew my family didn’t have enough money to do a lot of extracurriculars, so I told him I didn’t have the expenses. We found a way for me to compete—I coached at the gym at the same time that I trained. I cheered and danced competitively in high school my junior and senior year, and then for Viper Athletics for about four years,” Alexander explains.

After the gym that she was at closed down in 2015, Alexander found herself at a crossroads. Since she is a licensed cosmetologist and nail technician (a love she cultivated from her mother), Alexander was pouring herself into doing nails in Augusta, Georgia. That’s when an opportunity to return to the stage presented itself in Texas.

“I remember being really depressed that I wasn’t dancing anymore,” she admits. “Then I saw one of my friends I used to

dance with compete in an amateur talent competition called ‘Rising Star’ at the Rose Room at Station 4 in Dallas. So I decided to move back, do nails, and start competing. From then on, the queens of the community started molding me into what I am now.”

Becoming a drag artist came first for Alexander. She recalls her first drag performance five years ago in Dallas, during that same Rising Star competition at the Rose Room.

“I had no clue what I was doing. I had little to no makeup on—just Maybelline foundation with no powder. The song I performed was ‘Body Party’ by Ciara. I got second place!” she laughs.

Since those early Rose Room drag shows, Alexander has added burlesque to her repertoire. In her opinion, the main difference between drag and burlesque is “the art of the tease.” But even as an experienced drag entertainer, her first burlesque performance was stressful.

**“I WANT TO BE THAT
POSITIVE ROLE MODEL
FOR MY COMMUNITY,
THE AAPI COMMUNITY,
AND FOR THE WORLD.
I KNOW THIS IS WHY I WAS
PUT ON THIS EARTH—TO
SHARE MY LIGHT, WISDOM,
KNOWLEDGE, AND
COMPASSION. MY ART. ME.”**

—Mulan Alexander

“My very first burlesque show was at Red Goose Lounge in Fort Worth about a year ago. I was definitely a nervous wreck. By that time, I was used to performing in front of high-energy LGBTQ-friendly crowds. I didn’t know how this ‘straight’ crowd would take a trans showgirl [who does] drag and burlesque]. I was so worried that I’d get clocked and people would be ugly, but I powered through. The crowd was definitely confused, but I took that as them being conflicted with their own sexual preferences,” she says.

“I have evolved in so many aspects [as an artist]. My makeup skills have gone through the roof. My costuming has gotten so much better. My attention to details; my professionalism backstage and onstage; learning to host shows and also how to catch and throw shade. I’ve learned to take what inspires me and put it into my shows—which makes me love doing what I do even more,” Alexander says.

Inspiration for her drag artistry and burlesque comes from many different places.

“My biggest drag inspirations would have to be literally all the queens of Texas, Florida, Chicago, California, and New York drag,” she says. “So, so, so many great local drag queens that I look up to. And what really inspires my burlesque would have to be the greatest—Dita Von Tease. Now that I’m starting to get to know more burlesque performers in the community, they all definitely [inspire me as well]. I’d be nothing without my community.”

Alexander also takes a great deal of inspiration from her Vietnamese heritage. “I take a lot from my culture and put it into my performances. I love our beautiful traditional wear, and how we danced for royalty. Whenever I’m performing, I feel like I’m the highest of concubines: smart, poised, beautiful, and chosen from all over the world just to perform for and seduce the king.”

Nowadays, Alexander is a widely sought-after nail artist and performer, especially in Texas. If you follow her on Twitter or Instagram @mulanalexander, you’ll see she is constantly on the move with regular gigs every Tuesday at JR’s Bar & Grill in Montrose. She also pops up in Dallas, Galveston and, most recently, Chicago.

Another thing you will discover about Alexander via social media is her community activism. Her Twitter bio describes her as “a trans warrior,” and pinned at the very top is a performance video of her from June 7, 2020, during a peaceful protest in support of Black Lives Matter.

“I just want to spread love, light, positivity, and good vibes,” Alexander says. “Share my art with the world and take care of my family. There is already so much darkness and hate going on. I want to be that positive role model for my community, the AAPI community, and for the world. I know this is why I was put on this earth—to share my light, wisdom, knowledge, and compassion. My art. Me—Mulan Alexander.”



Keep up with Mulan Alexander on Instagram @mulanalexander.

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Reliable Restaurateur

Charlie Huynh's Vietnamese restaurant chain gives back to the community.

By JENNY BLOCK

After a brief stint studying business administration at San Jacinto College, Pho 518 Vietnamese Noodle House founder and owner Charlie Huynh decided to pivot his career focus to the restaurant industry. "As a college dropout, I had to create my own opportunity. I had to do something with my life," he says. "So when the opportunity of owning my own restaurant presented itself, I took it."

Finding a foothold in the business was a natural for Huynh, whose passion for Vietnamese cuisine is a way to proudly embrace his roots. "Food is about culture. It is part of my identity. I want to show the world that our cuisine is as addictive and tasty as our people."

Reflecting on his career path, the 34-year-old says, "It's been challenging, yet also very rewarding. I started out as a waiter. I started working when I was very young. I always wanted to be independent. It makes me feel accomplished when I can spoil myself with the money I make on my own." →



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Huynh admits that he didn't really understand the restaurant industry at first, so he made mistakes that he wishes he hadn't made. But those mistakes ended up helping him grow. "The first restaurant pretty much consumed my social life. I was only 24, and I had to come up with a system so the kitchen could run smoothly without me."

But over time, he learned to balance his work life and his social life, which helped to keep him both sane and productive. The next thing he knew, he was on his third location.

Today, Huynh owns multiple restaurants in Pearland and Alvin, and he will be expanding his business to Puerto Vallarta this year. "It will be a new chapter of my life. I am both excited and nervous about this decision. No worries—all my restaurants will still be here!"

Huynh credits his partner, who works at the Montrose Center, with helping him learn a lot about Houston's LGBTQ community and the many impressive programs that the Center has to offer. "Realizing how blessed I am compared to many members of the LGBTQ+ community in Houston, I decided to [start sharing] my blessings by

donating time and money," he says. "I want people who are scared to be themselves to have a support system like the Montrose Center, where they can go when their family is not there for them. I want to see LGBTQ youth growing up seeing that there's nothing wrong with them, [and that there's] a whole future full of opportunities and support ahead of them."

Despite the pandemic taking a toll on Huynh's businesses, he continues to give back. Following the three-month pandemic shutdown, Huynh had to cut back the hours that several of his employees worked. "It was the hardest decision I had ever made in my restaurant career. My spirit was crushed. I told myself that if I couldn't provide the paycheck, I could at least make sure their family won't go to bed hungry at night. So I opened up my kitchen and let my employees come in to feed themselves."

Pho 518 provided free meals for frontline workers and medical staff, as well. "We understand that this isn't their battle alone. [Even though] we weren't trained to fight like they do, we should at least provide support. My mom is a seamstress, so I encouraged her to make masks and give them away to those who didn't have them."

The longer the pandemic dragged on, the more Huynh realized just how many people were being affected financially. "So we decided to occasionally provide free meals for our neighbors. I also bought about 50 or 60 Christmas gifts out of my own pocket in 2020 for families in need. Children should still have their magic."

Earlier this year, Huynh's status as an outstanding business owner landed him a \$10,000 grant from the National LGBT Chamber of Commerce, the Greater Houston Chamber of Commerce, and Grubhub. He feels immensely grateful that his business has survived through these challenging times. "If it had not been for my customers' support over the years, we wouldn't be here today. From the bottom of my heart, I want to thank the National LGBT Chamber of Commerce, Greater Houston LGBT Chamber of Commerce, and of course Grubhub for selecting us for this grant. We would also like to extend our thanks to the community for their continuing support. Your love and support makes everything we do worthwhile."

For more info, visit tinyurl.com/596wjwhp



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Outstanding Optometrists

Optometrists **Paul Lovero** and **Nancy Lo** create an affirming space for their patients.

By CONNOR BEHRENS

While many people get anxious about going to see a doctor, optometrist Paul Lovero hopes his business is different from the rest—one that offers a relaxed, safe space for those in the LGBTQ community.

“It all stems from wanting to help people in a safe space where they can feel like they belong,” Dr. Lovero says. “I think all health professionals should strive to create an inclusive environment. I want my patients to feel relaxed at the end of the day.”

Lovero, who graduated from the University of Houston College of Optometry in 2013, has always had a desire to help those in need. After deciding to get into the eye-care field, the Filipino man quickly realized the best way to help people would be to open his own practice.

“When I was practicing in other places around Texas, it was more conservative,” he says. “I don’t conceal who I am and I am always out and proud, no matter what. I’m an open book, and talk about my husband in general. Unfortunately, it wasn’t received the same way in some places. That was the catalyst for wanting to open a business of my own.”

Lovero did just that, and opened his own practice in 2017 in downtown Houston. But it became apparent early on that the practice, now titled Montrose Eye Care, would work best by being located in the heart of Houston’s gayborhood.

“My husband and I talked about it, and we

knew that Montrose is where we wanted to be because we both identify [as part of] the LGBTQ community,” he says. “I just had a passion to help patients living in this area.”

From the start, Lovero put protocols in place to make sure his business accommodated different types of people. For example, when patients fill out their intake forms, there’s a space where they can write their pronouns.

“You would be surprised how many patients thank me for that,” he says. “As a doctor, you attract patients that reflect who you are. I knew I was going to be seeing LGBTQ patients, but I just didn’t know I would see as many as I do. There are so many options in Houston for

eye doctors, so I love that I’ve been able to get the demographic that I was looking to serve.”

Dr. Nancy Lo, an LGBTQ Chinese woman and one of Montrose Eye Care’s other optometrists, also believes the business has a strong connection to the city’s diverse communities due to its welcoming nature and staff.

“I have worked in different places before, and it is sadly not like this everywhere,” she observes. “Even within Houston, when you go to the suburbs, it’s not all inclusive. I had a patient tell me that they didn’t feel comfortable going to [other parts



of town] because they weren't as inclusive. It's absolutely pertinent that we are able to provide a safe and comfortable place for everybody."

To further promote his practice's welcoming atmosphere, Lovero decided to create a special line of glasses that would benefit the Montrose Center.

"Whenever you go into an optometrist's office, you see the regular brands such as Ray-Ban, Coach, or Versace," he says. "I wanted to have different collections that were more independent. I wanted more unique designs for glasses. I also wanted to create a collection that was more affordable. That's where 'The Montrose Collection' came in."

By choosing a manufacturer that was able to control costs, Lovero and his staff can offer the special Montrose-themed glasses to patients at affordable prices. The eyeglass line is also a way to spread Montrose pride, with certain frames named after local streets in the gayborhood.

"I wanted to create something that would benefit the local area and also provide a means for people to be proud of where they live," he says. "I reached out to the Montrose Center [to offer them] a portion of the proceeds. I was ecstatic when they agreed to partner with me. As of March 2021, we have been able to donate a thousand dollars to the center."

Going forward, Lovero has plans to become more involved with local gay-friendly professionals in Houston. "I am toying with the idea of starting my own network geared toward LGBTQ doctors in the area. I ultimately think it's important to get together and make sure other practices are being inclusive for patients, and educating on how to be inclusive."

At the end of the day, Lo hopes she and Lovero can continue to foster a safe space where people feel welcomed.

"We take pride in actually listening to our patients," she says. "We really listen to what our patients' issues are. I do want to have patients leave here with a sense that they got all their questions answered and all their problems resolved. We want them to leave feeling better than when they walked in."

At a time when many have felt isolated and alone during the pandemic, Lovero wants people to feel like they have a friend.

"I truly feel like my patients are a part of my family," he says. "I want to get to know my patients on a deeper level. That's what I truly hope to achieve as a practice owner."



To learn more about Lovero's practice, go to montroseeyecarehtx.com.

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Zach Paugh in the Houston Ballet costume studio

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALEX ROSA FOR OUTSMART

Artist Apparel

Zach Paugh helps bring clothing to life onstage.

By NEIL ELLIS ORTS

Zach Paugh, costume shop manager at the Houston Ballet, is a relative newcomer to Houston, initially brought here by love and pandemic.

Paugh met his boyfriend on an Atlantis Gay Cruise, just a few months before the COVID-19 shut everything down. At the time, Paugh had been working for Cirque du Soleil in Las Vegas, but the pandemic effectively put an end to his job.

“Not knowing what was going to happen, I decided, ‘Hey, let me shack up with the guy I’m dating,’” Paugh recalls about his decision to make the two-day drive to Houston. The two have been together ever since.

Paugh, who is of Polish and Filipino descent, is the son of two members of the Air Force. He was born in California City, California, near Edwards Air Force Base, and spent most of his childhood in Goodyear, Arizona. In high school, he became involved in theater—primarily as a performer. He had made exactly one costume at one point before enrolling in Otterbein University in Westerville, Ohio, where he received encouragement to try his hand at costuming.

When Paugh graduated with his bachelor's degree in costume design and construction, he landed an internship with Cirque du Soleil in Las Vegas. After half a year working on their *Zarkana* production, he moved to the *KÀ* Cirque show that was also in Vegas. He worked there for four years until the pandemic shut it down.

He continues his association with the Cirque family through an annual fund-raising event called Circus Couture, with proceeds going to the Cure 4 the Kids Foundation. A wide range of designers and performers, many from Cirque, volunteer their talents each year for that foundation. "Fashion, art, circus—those are the hashtags for the event," Paugh says.

"I've been very fortunate in my career path," he admits. "I'm 29, and to hit Cirque right out of college was a huge deal."

Paugh started at Houston Ballet in June of 2021, so he was in Houston for about a year before landing full-time work in his chosen field. He describes becoming a costume-shop manager as the next step up in his career. "I took this position to get an understanding of the management side of costumes and backstage," he explains. "At *KÀ*, it was more alterations—someone

running down in the middle of the show with a busted zipper. Okay, how much time do you have? Five minutes? Let me pull out the zipper and add a new one. Here you go, you're ready to go back on." That sort of controlled chaos may not be his daily life anymore, but it isn't any less busy.

For example, for their upcoming revival of *La Sylphide*, a production from the 1980s, Paugh is having to pull costumes from storage to decide what repairs need to be made, and compare them to old design drawings or production photos in order to keep them true to the original designer's intent. Once he's assessed the costumes, he develops the work timeline and assignments in the shop to get it all done. Within that schedule are fittings with the dancers and meetings with other production staff.

Something not everyone may know is that when a Houston Ballet production has multiple casts, the same costume has to be worn by everyone dancing the same character. "It's very exciting when you get a show with four casts and we have one costume to fit onto six different people, and they're all different sizes," Paugh says. "We don't have the budget or time to give everyone their own costume, so there's a lot of sharing. Sometimes it's just one

or two costumes, and you just make it work."

Paugh also has experience as a drag performer—something he hasn't done yet in Houston. "I have looked into it, but right now, with starting this position with the ballet and then having the majority of my drag outfits still in Las Vegas, I'm waiting until I'm more settled and can eventually make an appearance!"

While he's enjoying his work at the ballet and contemplating his first Houston drag performance, he has another big goal to think about. "Ultimately, I'd really like to work on spacesuits," he says. Yes, spacesuits—as in NASA, Space X, and Axiom Space astronauts. "I was thinking, how can I merge my love for *Star Wars* and what I do now?" He answers his own question as if a lightbulb is appearing above his head. "Wait, someone has to make the spacesuits!" One of his pandemic activities has been taking a course in aerospace structures and materials through edX, an online education hub.

From the circus to the ballet to the drag stage and ultimately to outer space, Paugh is not letting anything stand in his way as he literally reaches for the stars.



For more info, visit houstonballet.org.



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Queering Fashion

just femme & dandy is an arts magazine by and for the queer community.

By LILLIAN HOANG

Photo by CHRISTOPHER SONNY

When Addie Tsai couldn't find an uplifting magazine about fashion for and by the LGBTQIA+ community, the 42-year-old nonbinary queer writer decided to make their own.

Realizing that there are already countless stories about queer tragedy, trauma, and oppression, Tsai launched *just femme & dandy* in December 2020 to publish fashion-themed stories about queer joy and reclamation.

"Even though our contributors do talk about struggle, we really do want this magazine to be uplifting and capture how exciting and wonderous queer fashion can be for queer people," Tsai says.

just femme & dandy, a biannual literary and

arts publication that has released two issues so far, explores the interdisciplinary nature of fashion through writing, art, photography, illustration, video, dance, drag, and more. The magazine privileges underrepresented, marginalized writers, including LGBTQIA+ writers of color.

"We're looking for an authentic, powerful voice that is saying something we haven't seen, or something that hasn't been discussed to the extent I feel it should be," Tsai says.

Looking ahead to Tsai's Volume 3, which comes out in June during Pride Month, *just femme & dandy* will feature new columns such as "(get your) thread in the game," which covers fitness, sports, dance, and

other physical activities. Future issues will also feature a column called "not what it seams" to spotlight cosplay and costumes, from theatrical productions to drag.

"Fashion is important because queer people express themselves through their clothing and use clothing to speak to one another without saying a word," Tsai says.

The magazine highlights different aspects of fashion. For example, its "glow up" section focuses on skin care and cosmetics. Meanwhile, "mane attraction" covers hair and includes a column called "afrodisiac," which centers Black hair. "no scrubs" explores street fashion, "solemates" features art about shoes, and "sew what" addresses DIY, vintage, and thrifting, paying homage to queer fashion's roots in collage and pastiche work. "triple thread(s)" feature work on high fashion and custom-made clothes. "cancel and gretel" addresses ethics and inclusion in fashion and features a "fat + furious" column on fat fashion.

Tsai's former graduate advisee Brooke Ashley, who became a working artist, writer, and musician with Tsai's guidance, says the magazine is incredibly inviting for artists and writers. "It is very much creator-centered. They are looking to be a platform for overlooked voices and communities,"

Ashley explains. “Queer fashion and its many offshoots hardly ever get featured in the mainstream literary world, and *just femme & dandy* is actively changing that.”

Piper J. Daniels, Tsai’s friend and collaborator, says *just femme & dandy* is Tsai’s creative brainchild. “The first two issues have been exciting, exquisite, and inclusive—unlike any fashion magazine or queer lit journal in existence.”

just femme & dandy’s Co-Editor in Chief Sarah Sheppeck agrees, adding that Tsai has mastered the art of recognizing and filling gaps in written media. “*just femme & dandy* was born to give queer people across the LGBTQIA+ spectrum a place to read and write about both how our queerness impacts our fashion and how fashion impacts our queerness.”

In addition to addressing the need for a queer fashion-themed literary and arts magazine, Tsai tells OUTSMART that they wanted to create *just femme & dandy* for personal reasons. An artist of color from Houston who uses any and all pronouns, Tsai grew up with a twin sister in the 1990s—a time when pop culture portrayed

twins as carbon-copies of each other who spoke in unison while wearing identical outfits.

Tsai’s father also dressed the two of them identically throughout their childhood, and Tsai felt they weren’t seen as individuals or allowed to explore their own identities. This experience led to an interest in fashion, which gave Tsai the chance to reclaim their individuality.

“I think being a twin and not being allowed to dress myself or explore any sort of style was incredibly influential in wanting to create a space like *just femme & dandy*,” Tsai says.

Tsai hopes *just femme & dandy* becomes a space of learning where more people can discover and try new things, think about their bodies, reclaim how they dress, and better understand their relationship to fashion.

Because Tsai was previously too scared to experiment, this ambitious publisher only recently started to explore their queerness, the power of reclamation through fashion, and how to present. But there has always been a part of them that was drawn to queer presentations, Tsai admits. Growing up, they were mesmerized by their father’s leather briefcase, a traditional symbol of masculinity. Additionally, when they were a teenager, their mother taught

them how to tie feminine silk scarves into neckties, merging the two gendered symbols.

Now they wear bowties, bright eye makeup and lipstick, and break the rules of fashion by intentionally mixing patterns or wearing more than one color at a time.

“I think a lot of fashion rules come out of classicist, cishet-normative structures. I like to try to bend those rules,” Tsai says with a laugh.

In the future, *just femme & dandy* plans to sell print issues as well as works by other designers on the website. The magazine also wants to organize more in-person events featuring drag shows and runways. Tsai and their team hope to one day open a storefront that sells their magazines and works by queer designers. Such a storefront could even serve as an event space for queer artists.

“I think Addie’s impact will continue to spread further than any of us has the capacity to gauge,” Sheppeck notes. “My heart sings for the young adults who are now able to come of age with Addie’s work.”



For more info, visit
justfemmeanddandy.com

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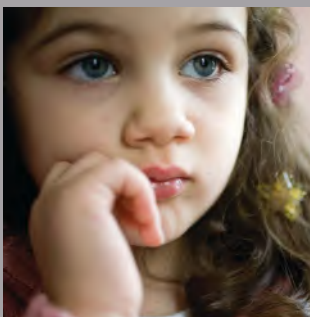
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GAY GETAWAYS

Enjoy Texas' queer-friendly cabin life

By MARENE GUSTIN

Looking for a summer vacation, but tired of the beach? Concerned about pandemic-era travel on expensive planes and cruise ships, but really need to recharge away from the crowds and the big-city stress? Why not book a quaint cabin in the woods?

Imagine quiet contemplation, channeling your inner artist, and just breathing in

the beauty of nature, all while enjoying the luxuries that modern cabin life has to offer.

The three LGBTQ-friendly Texas options featured below are not the cabins of summer camps you may remember—they are luxe lodgings. This could be your modern-day “Summer of Thoreau,” so pack your bags (and maybe the kids and the dogs) and hit the road for the most relaxing vacation you’ve had in years.



GETAWAY HOUSE

Several Texas locations

getaway.house



Jon Staff founded Getaway House in 2015, and he now has almost two dozen wooded sites around the country featuring tiny cabins with their own bathrooms and kitchens, as well as outdoor fireplaces and picnic tables. His newest Texas location is Getaway Brazos Valley, which opened in June 2020 in Navasota. That property boasts 46 cabins across 142 acres.

“My favorite features are the lack of Wi-Fi, followed by the big window along the bed,” Staff notes. “Waking up with the view really allows our guests to feel immersed in nature and surrounded by the beauty of the outdoors. To emphasize the joy of being offline, as soon as you check in, guests will find a cellphone lockbox to gently nudge people to put away their phones. That allows them to truly unplug and appreciate their surroundings, and to fully embrace the experience.”

“Nothing compares to the deep exhale you experience when you truly take a break from the city and get into nature. There’s something truly restorative about getting out of the concrete jungle and into the quiet woods. I would recommend that our first-time Getaway guests truly embrace the experience. Put your phone in the lockbox, start a fire, and enjoy the serenity within nature. Our cabins are equipped to make sure your stay is as comfortable as possible so our guests can reap the benefits of the outdoors without the noise of day-to-day responsibilities.”

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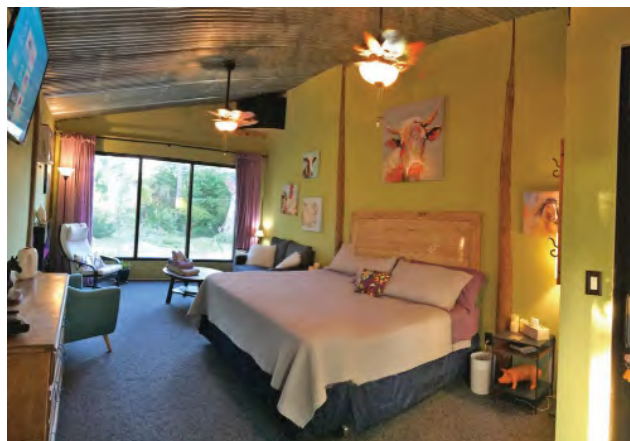


The Circle J opened in spring of 2005 when four men purchased the original 100 acres in the piney woods of beautiful East Texas. In the early years it was open exclusively to gay men, with clothing optional. Although no longer clothing-optional, it is still an adults-only ranch and they do host private groups or special events that are clothing-optional. One regular clothing-optional event is the monthly Men's Club weekends.

"We like to say that we are proudly gay owned and operated, but hetero-friendly," say the owners, who are in the final stages of completing a new 5-acre RV park for long-term and residential use, adjacent to the east side of the original 100-acre property. The projected grand-opening is the upcoming Memorial Day weekend.

"We now have a restaurant on the property, we offer horseback riding, hiking trails, and a 2-acre spring-fed pond for swimming, fishing, kayaking, and canoeing. But the most unique aspect of the property may be the natural formation of huge boulders on the hilltop above the pond. The largest one is 8 or 9 feet tall, near a community firepit where guests gather after dusk to enjoy a warm fire and chill out with one another, often late into the night."

For those not pitching a tent or staying in their RV, the Garden View Suite is a private room with a magnificent view from the floor-to-ceiling window across from the king-size bed and with custom lighting and an electric fireplace. Truly "glamping" at its best.



COURTESY



HAT HILL HIDEAWAY

Uvalde County

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This charming artist's cabin, hidden atop a breathtaking hill in the Texas Hill Country, is owned by Houston gallery owner Megen Pastor and her wife, Laura Goodson. Situated near a bubbling creek, it's sure to help you channel your own artistic endeavors. You can also buy some of the couple's lovely artwork, jackets, and curated vintage. There are RV hookups and a trampoline, and while the creek isn't deep enough to swim in, there is a swimming hole nearby.

The couple's website describes this lovely little getaway: "Your home away from home is a one-bedroom cabin with a detached two-bed bunkhouse that is usually where we send the kids off to if they are old enough. Wi-Fi capable, but we hope you don't end up using it that much. Our motto—Keep the kids off the streets and in the creeks. Master bedroom closet is shop-able and so is the art, meaning take whatever you want and be charged at the end of your stay, or go online and buy it."



COURTESY

An Eye for History

Baseera Khan's art exhibition at the Moody Center explores how cultures interact.

By KIM HOGSTROM
Photo by BENNY KROWN

Houston has become a welcoming destination for diverse immigrant populations that contribute to the city's inclusive and thriving arts scene.

Since the Moody Center for the Arts opened on the campus of Rice University in 2017, the many diverse art exhibits hosted there have reinforced the city's commitment

to illuminating the human experience through the arts.

On June 3, the venue will open a solo exhibition of works by Texas-born, New York-based multidisciplinary artist Baseera Khan. Entitled *Baseera Khan: Weight on History*, the exhibit will feature pieces that offer a challenging critique of existing power structures and a

vision for alternatives.

Khan, 42, was born in Denton, Texas, to an Indian-Afghani-East African family. The artist identifies as a femme Muslim American and uses they/them pronouns.

Today, they live and work in Brooklyn but still call Texas home. "The state, and in particular Houston, has had an impact on my art," Khan explains. "The entire arts scene there—including the music—helped me find my voice to develop and grow."

The list of galleries showing Khan's work is long. A short selection includes galleries in New York City as well as Fort Worth, Los Angeles, Aspen, Tucson, and Munich, Germany. Khan's work can also be found in many permanent museum collections including Columbus, Paris, San Francisco, New Orleans, and the Guggenheim Museum in New York City.

Visitors to the Khan exhibition on the Rice campus are in for a treat. It includes a "constellation" of unexpected media such as textile rugs and garments, sculptures that rotate, light up, and can be walked through, and even the sound of Khan's own music—all of which brings the artist's unique point of view to life.

"I make work in many ways; that's why I think of it as a 'constellation of works.' A constellation helps create a 'universe,'" they state with a smile.

Khan fearlessly explores complex issues such as commodification, politics, and the human body through pop culture and architecture. Shifting seamlessly, they spotlight the ways in which marginalized populations are ignored or misrepresented.

Visitors will see a work called *Acoustic Sound Blankets*, a sculptural garment made of thick, sound-absorbing material and featuring circular apertures that call to mind both the politicization and protective nature of clothing. *Second Skin* is a large sculpture resembling a classical column partially lined with Kashmiri rugs. Combining Western and Eastern design



elements, the work conveys a feeling of opulence while also referencing historical tensions.

The Moody commissioned Khan to create a new work specifically for this show. *Painful Arc* expands on Khan's interest in architecture by using commonplace materials to render a traditional Islamic arch decorated with images of the artist's body climbing the structure. The juxtaposition of references prompts questions about equity, access, and how architecture is used to wield power.

"I hope visitors can feel the weight of *Painful Arc* while also understanding its weightlessness," Khan says. "In some ways, we need to know our history. But at the same time, we can't let it define us."

Khan has produced art for many years, but was never certain they could use it to voice their views on culture, society, and power.

"For a while, I drove a waffle food truck so I could keep producing art. I was not sure I could speak through [my early artwork], but I knew I had to keep going. That is important to me. At a very young age, I needed to speak up for myself. It's always been a struggle, but I have learned that my art can



DARIO LASAGNI

Baseera Khan's *Mosque Lamp and Prayer Carpet Green*, from *Law of Antiquities*, 2021

certainly [speak for me]," Khans states.

The stunning design of the Moody Center's new building offers all sorts of opportunities for exhibitions, they note. "The [gallery space] is beautiful. I chose works for the exhibit that would honor the space, the walls, the light,

and not compete with it or cover it. The entire venue is remarkable."

Alison Weaver, the Suzanne Deal Booth Executive Director of the Moody Center for the Arts, notes that the building, designed by Michael Maltzan Architecture, is very well suited to hosting innovative exhibitions by artists such as Khan.

"Our mission to foster interdisciplinary conversation through the arts is enabled by the flexible gallery and performance spaces inside. We can't wait to share how Baseera's work has transformed the [building's] architecture in unique and memorable ways," Weaver says.

All exhibitions and programming at the Moody Center for the Arts are free and open to the public. The Center's mission is to encourage creative thinking and original expression, enrich innovation, and promote cross-campus and community collaboration through encounters with the arts. It is designed to connect the arts at Rice to the greater Houston community and beyond.

What: Baseera Khan: Weight on History

When: June 3–August 27

Where: Moody Center for the Arts,

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Info: moody.rice.edu

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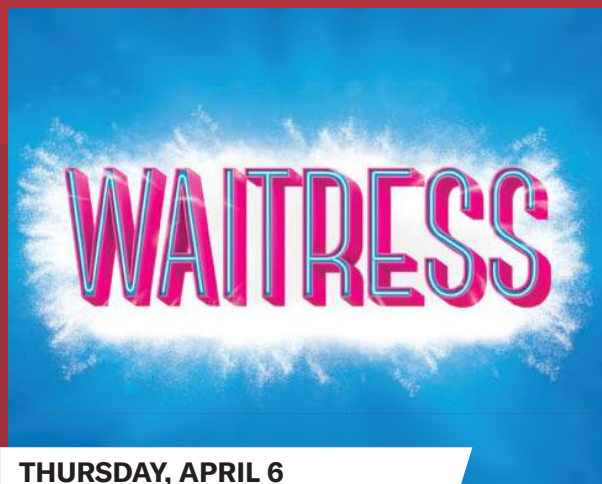
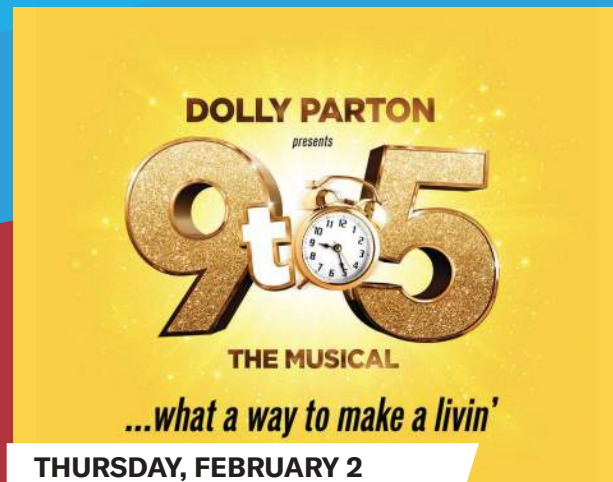
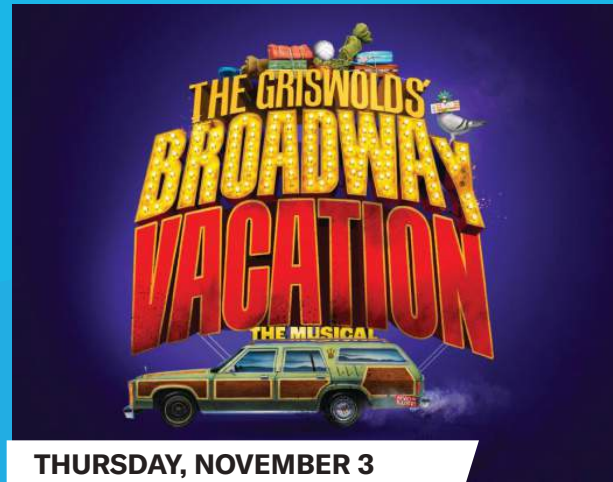
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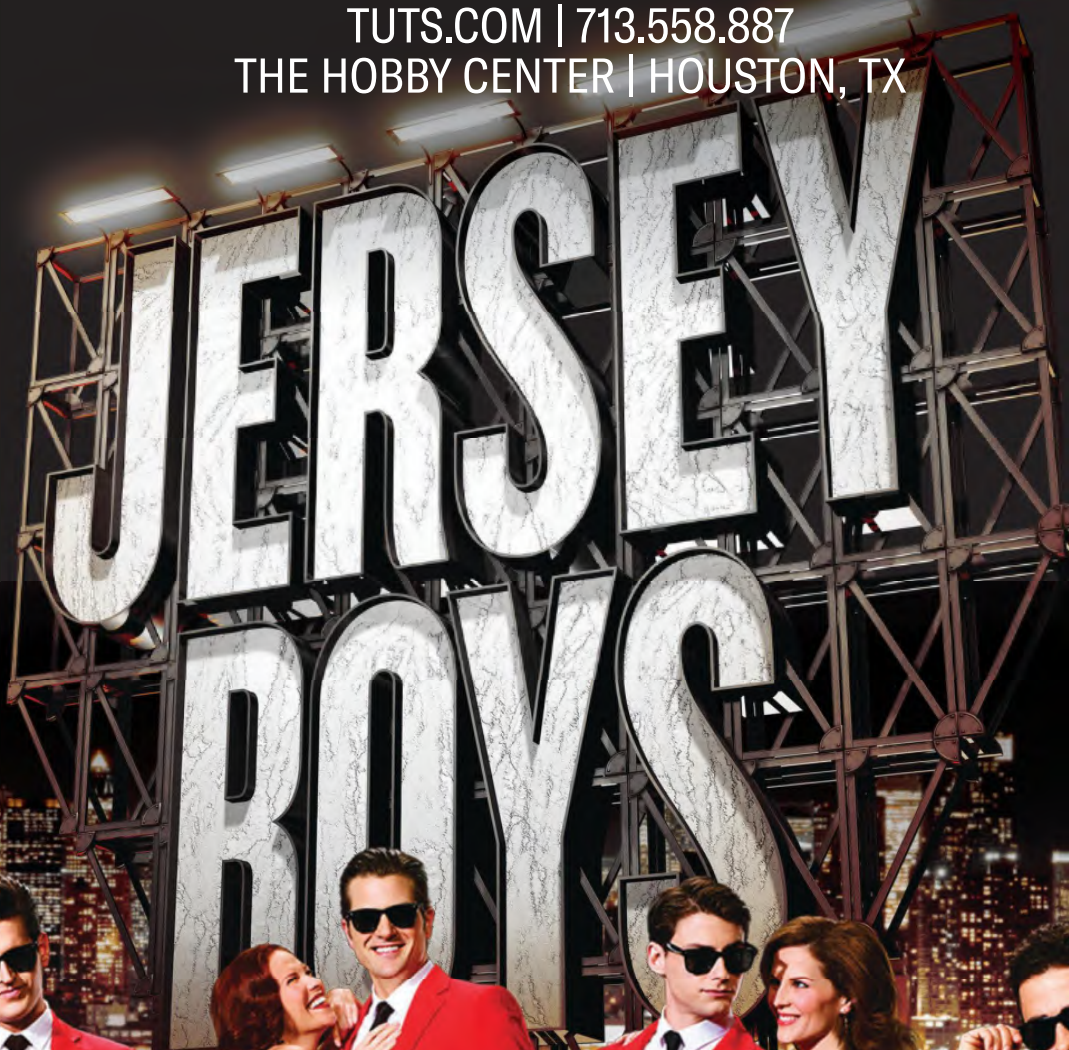
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A portrait of Kehinde Wiley, a Black man with a short beard and mustache, wearing a dark blue button-down shirt. He is looking slightly to the right with a serious expression. His arms are crossed over his chest. The background is a light, textured wall.

PRESIDENTIAL PORTRAIT

Gay artist **Kehinde Wiley**'s most iconic
art piece comes to Houston.

By ANDREW EDMONSON
Photo by BRAD OGBONNA

"PAINTING HAS TO PUNCH YOU IN THE GUT."

—Kehinde Wiley

When Kehinde Wiley and Amy Sherald unveiled their stunning portraits of Barack Obama and Michelle Obama on February 12, 2018, they caused a sensation, and the extraordinary popular response led to calls for a national tour of the two tableaux. The duo also made history as the first African American artists to create official portraits of an American president and first lady. Wiley's portrait of the former president and Sherald's portrait of Mrs. Obama are currently on view at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, through May 30.

1980s Los Angeles Roots

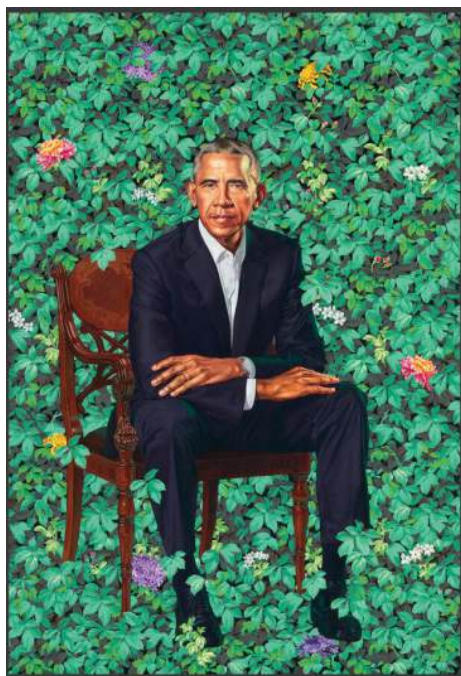
Wiley, who is openly gay, has led a unique American life. Born in Los Angeles in 1977, he was the fifth of six children, raised by a single mother on welfare who eventually became a teacher.

"I first went to art school when I was about 11, and I also went to big museums in Southern California," Wiley remembers. "I grew up in South Central Los Angeles in the late '80s and was very much a part of the environment that was driven by some of the defining elements of hip hop—violence, anti-social behavior, streets on fire.

"I was fortunate because my mother was very much focused on getting me, my twin brother, and other siblings out of the 'hood. On weekends I would go to art classes at a conservatory. After school, we were on lockdown. It was something I hated, obviously, but in the end it was a lifesaver."

Wiley completed his undergraduate studies at the Art Institute of San Francisco in 1999. His talent and drive propelled him to attend graduate school at Yale University, where he graduated with an art degree in 2001. "At Yale, my artistic focus became much more about arguments surrounding identity, gender and sexuality, painting as a political act, questions of post-modernity, etc.," Wiley notes.

He is now one of the world's most acclaimed and successful visual artists, with studios in New York and China. His portrait of the former president is his most famous work.



Wiley's paintings render people of color in the grand settings of Old Masters paintings. He recently authored an exhibition called *The Prelude* at the National Gallery in London, which described his unique style thusly:

His work makes reference to the canon of European portraiture by positioning contemporary Black sitters, from a range of ethnic and social backgrounds, in the poses of the original historical, religious or mythological figures. His images—as part quotation, part intervention—raise questions about power, privilege, identity, and above all highlight the absence or relegation of Black figures within European art.

Recognizing the Invisible People

Wiley's work impressed one lover of contemporary art in particular: former president Barack Obama. "I was always struck by...the degree to which [Wiley's portraits] challenged our conventional views of power and privilege, and the way that he would take extraordinary care and precision and vision in recognizing the beauty and the grace and the dignity of people who are so often invisible in our lives and put them on a grand stage, on a grand scale, and force us to look and see them in ways that so often they were not," observed Mr. Obama.

For Wiley, the two-year process of creating

a presidential likeness on canvas was an inversion of his usual artistic practice.

"Prior to the election of Barack Obama, my work was so much about painting the powerless," Wiley notes. "Painting those people who come from many of the Black and brown underserved communities throughout the world. What I did was ask complete strangers (who were often on their way to work or minding their own business) to sit for me, to be in these portraits. And oftentimes, these moments of chance would turn into epic-scale paintings that you would see in some of the great museums throughout the world.

"I think that the transformation act that happens is completely different from what happens in a presidential portrait," Wiley states. "Here you're dealing with arguably the most powerful person in the world. And you're dealing with actual power. Not metaphorical, but its depiction. And you're talking about the contours of and the historical realization of grace, of power, in its most visceral and raw form."

Breaking the Mold

Wiley's painting presents a striking contrast to the formality of earlier presidential portraits.

"It really broke the mold," observes Dorothy Moss, curator of painting and sculpture at the National Portrait Gallery, which commissioned the paintings of Mr. and Mrs. Obama and has organized their national tour.

"If you're the first Black artist, you do it differently because it's your personal take, and you need to make a statement," comments Taina Caragol, curator of painting and sculpture and Latino art and history at the National Portrait Gallery.

"Both artists are also art historians. They've studied the history of art," says Caragol. "They are very interested in the power of representation, and how to redirect and rethink the narrative that is in the textbook. They were very aware of the statements these works could make."

"The ability to paint the first African American president of the United States—it doesn't get any better than that," observes Wiley.

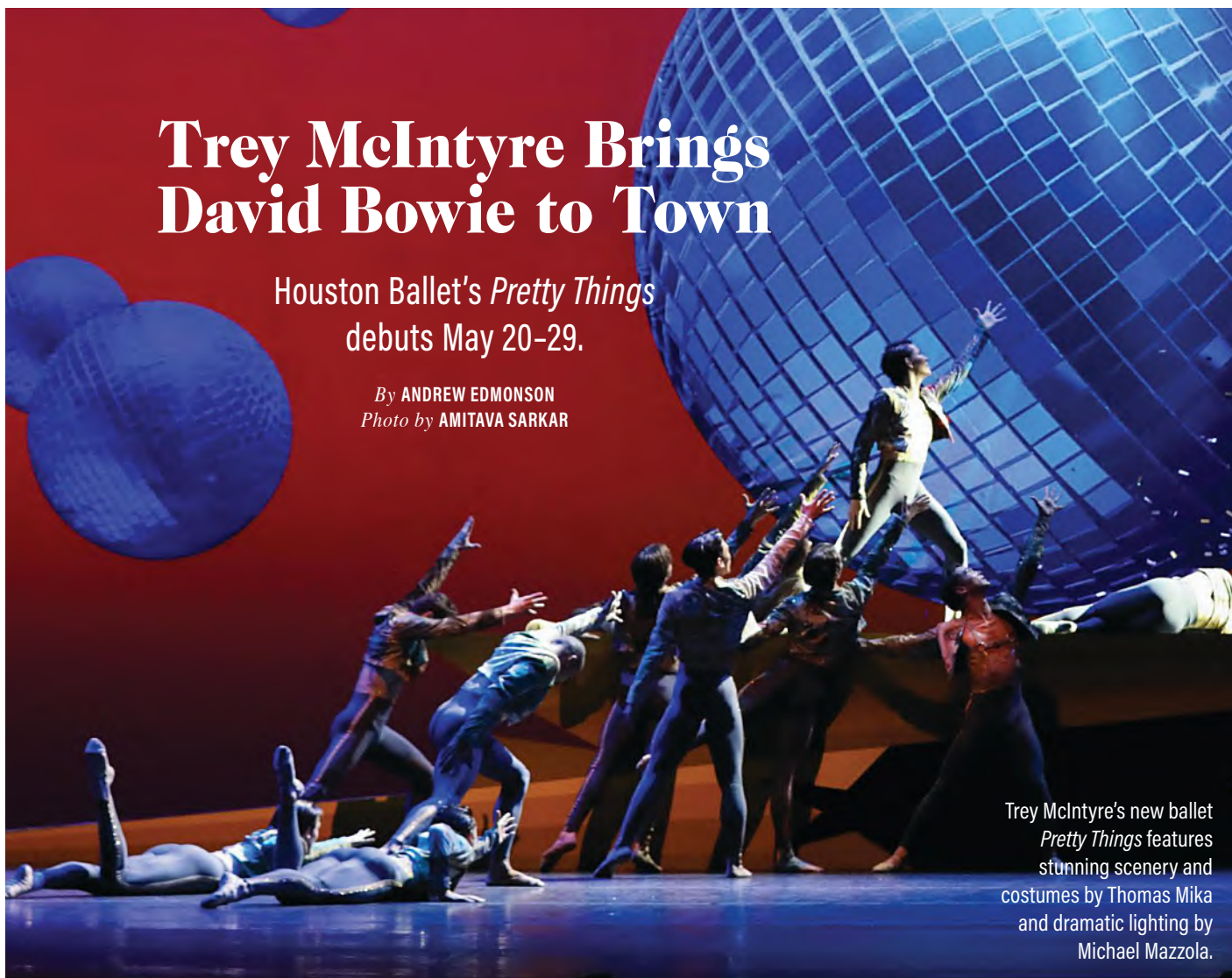


The Obama Portraits Tour is on view at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, through May 30. Thursdays are the MFAH's free days, and the portraits can also be seen for free on Thursdays. More info: mfah.org

Trey McIntyre Brings David Bowie to Town

Houston Ballet's *Pretty Things* debuts May 20–29.

By ANDREW EDMONSON
Photo by AMITAVA SARKAR



Trey McIntyre's new ballet *Pretty Things* features stunning scenery and costumes by Thomas Mika and dramatic lighting by Michael Mazzola.

Bayou City audiences have had to wait 19 years for a new work custom-made for Houston Ballet by acclaimed gay dance maker Trey McIntyre. But on May 20, the curtain will rise at the Wortham Theater Center for the world premiere of *Pretty Things*, a new rock ballet set to eight classic tracks by David Bowie including “Changes,” “Life on Mars?” “Ashes to Ashes,” and “Young Americans.”

Pretty Things is the eighth work that McIntyre, 52, has created for Houston Ballet. It's an appropriate homecoming for the most gifted dance maker that the company has produced in its venerable five-decade history, and one of America's most talented living choreographers. Delayed for two years by the pandemic, the production features wildly theatrical designs by Thomas Mika that would

make Ziggy Pop green with envy.

“David Bowie's music is grand; it's operatic and huge in scale,” says McIntyre. “He sings like a peacock walks. There's great depth and humanity, as well. In many ways, his voice embodies the conflict I'm looking to work out in this dance.”

“I'm making this work to explore and reconcile my complicated relationship with the narcissism inherent in being a performer,” he continues. “Culturally, narcissism is a term regarded mainly as a mental illness, and yet it seems to be an important quality for those who pursue a life of being ‘seen.’ How do we reconcile valuing the performer, but not the qualities it takes to be one? How do we value art but not the artist?”

Pretty Things, which showcases a cast of 11 men, is the first all-male work that McIntyre has made for a professional company. “The men in Houston Ballet are incredibly strong,” he observes. “It's the perfect place to make a piece like this.”

A Passion for Dance

In 1987, 17-year-old McIntyre first arrived in Houston to attend Houston Ballet Academy's summer intensive program. He had grown disenchanted with dance and was contemplating abandoning the study of ballet altogether, but then the Academy's summer workshop program reignited his passion for ballet.

Ben Stevenson, then the company's artistic director, immediately recognized a significant choreographic talent in the teenager from Kansas, and would provide him with numerous opportunities to grow as a dance maker over the next 16 years. In 1990, when McIntyre joined Houston Ballet's professional company, Stevenson created the special position of “choreographic apprentice” and commissioned McIntyre to create his first ballet for the company—*Skeleton Clock*, set to music by John Adams. Having the opportunity to work with such contemporary European masters as

Christopher Bruce, Jiri Kylian, and Sir Kenneth MacMillan at Houston Ballet greatly expanded McIntyre's horizons as a dance maker.

People Magazine's 25 Hottest Bachelors

McIntyre performed with the company from 1990 to 1995. Although he stood out at 6' 6" with matinee-idol good looks, he never ascended to dancing the leading classical male roles. From 1990 to 2003, he created seven works for Houston Ballet, growing in technical mastery and displaying a wonderful sense of wit and humor in the pieces he created.

By the time he left Houston Ballet as a dancer in 1995, he had begun to receive major commissions from such renowned companies as American Ballet Theatre, New York City Ballet, Stuttgart Ballet, Hubbard Street Dance Chicago and the San Francisco Ballet. He retained the position of choreographic associate with Houston Ballet until 2007.

In 2001, McIntyre was named one of *Dance Magazine's* 25 to Watch. In 2003, he was singled out as one of *People Magazine's* 25 Hottest Bachelors. In 2004, he co-founded his own dance company, the Trey McIntyre Project (TMP), with Anne Mueller and his then partner John Michael Schert, a dancer who also performed with the company and served as its executive director.

A New Contemporary Dance Model

In 2008, McIntyre relocated TMP to Boise, Idaho, far from Manhattan, the center of the dance universe. The decision initially raised eyebrows, but over time, the move began to be viewed as a gesture of genius. The cost of living in Idaho was much lower, Boise passionately embraced the dancers, and they enjoyed 30 weeks of employment each year with full health insurance. The company embarked on a busy national and international touring schedule, and began to thrive. TMP came to be viewed as a new model for American contemporary-dance companies to emulate.

McIntyre's renown as a choreographer grew. Reviewing a performance by TMP at the Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival in 2008, Alastair Macaulay, chief dance critic of the *New York Times*, compared him to the legendary choreographer Antony Tudor, praising "the way he can time movements to music for dramatic eloquence so that the music tells a story different from, but related to, the dance. But there's a fertility

of invention and a modernity of spirit here that are all Mr. McIntyre's own."

McIntyre's decision to close the company in 2014 was greeted with shock and dismay. But the grinding pressures of running a dance company had taken their toll. "A dance company is its own kind of rat race," he told the *New York Times* in 2014. "The gifts are too numerous to list. But in the end, you have to really be an adult, and there is a creative sacrifice."



GUZMÁN ROSADO

Trey McIntyre, one of America's most gifted choreographers, will revive his magical staging of *Peter Pan* for Houston Ballet in September as the opening production of the company's 2022-23 season.

A London "COVID Adventure"

The past two years have freed McIntyre from the daily stresses of being a freelance choreographer—a liberation that he could never have imagined. The COVID-19 pandemic forced the postponement of *Pretty Things*. McIntyre stayed in Houston for about six months, not wishing to return to New York City, which was then the epicenter of the pandemic.

"A friend in London had a flat to lend me, and I've never lived abroad so it was a great experience," McIntyre recalls. "I went there as a COVID adventure. I've been living in London

for the past year and a half.

"The first year of the pandemic was the happiest time of my life," he notes. "It gave me the time to slow down and not be a driven person. I've always had a freight train inside me, driving me as a person. Somehow I needed the whole world to slow down for me to be able to do that myself.

"[The pandemic] helped me to connect with what's truly important to me as an artist—remembering what it's like to be a kid and do a project because you have a creative desire. I'm a happier, healthier person because of it."

The pandemic also gave McIntyre the time to focus on his work as a photographer, resulting in a series of breathtakingly sensual male nude portraits.

"The time in the studio choreographing a new work is so proscribed; it goes so fast, and there's a big group of people," he observes. "I love the one-on-one exploration with another person in photography. Dance is about showing, exploring the human body. To have that space in photography where a person can stand in their own body, be safe, and be seen, that can be a very powerful experience. It's very spiritually fulfilling."

A Return to Neverland

McIntyre's work will also be center stage in September when Houston Ballet revives his magical three-act production of *Peter Pan* to launch its 2022-23 season. The work, created for Houston Ballet in 2002, is his magnum opus. He researched, planned, and worked with the design team for three years before stepping into the studio to choreograph the work.

Set to music by Sir Edward Elgar in an arrangement by Niel Deponte, the production features spectacular scenery by Thomas Boyd and punk-inspired costumes by Tony Award-winning costume designer Jeanne Button. When it premiered, critic Robert Greskovic wrote in *Dance View*, "To call Trey McIntyre's *Peter Pan* the most impressive, original, multi-act ballet created by an American choreographer in recent memory doesn't quite do the three-act production justice. *Peter Pan* is a story ballet that really flies."

"Coming back to Houston always feels like home," McIntyre notes. "It's been incredible to see how much growth and resilience the city has had. It makes me proud every time I get to touch back in."

What: Trey McIntyre's *Pretty Things*

When: May 20-29

Where: Wortham Theater Center,
501 Texas Ave.

Tickets: houstonballet.org

Renowned Lesbian Composer to Premiere Two New Works in Houston

Pulitzer Prize-winner **Jennifer Higdon** reveals her musical inspirations and approach.

By RICH ARENSCHILDT

Jennifer Higdon is the most-performed contemporary composer in the world today. Two Houston musical institutions—the Apollo Chamber Players and the Houston Symphony—will premiere two of her works during May.

Apollo, which commissioned Higdon's string quartet, presents *Shadow of the Mountain* on May 1 at the Hobby Center. The Houston Symphony presents the world premiere of Higdon's *Duo Duel for Two Percussionists and Orchestra*, a Houston Symphony commission, at Jones Hall on May 6–8.

Higdon's journey through music (and life) has mimicked that of several avant-garde composers, many of whom had lives and relationships outside of conventional norms. Her predecessors at Philadelphia's famed Curtis Institute of Music included gay composers such as Samuel Barber and Gian Carlo Menotti.

Somewhat surprisingly, Higdon's upbringing in eastern Tennessee has played a big part in her personal and professional career. She and her wife, Cheryl, love Appalachia, and that region was the inspiration for much of Higdon's work. "Thematically, the string quartet that Apollo is premiering is based on my first [Civil War-themed] opera, *Cold Mountain*. Cheryl and I are both very connected to that part of the world. Our shared experiences enable me to delve deeply into this music and subject matter."

"Cheryl and I met in high school," Higdon recalls. "We were both flute players, and our school's band often traveled to competitions. As a result, we spent a lot of time together. Cheryl was two years behind me in high school, but we became close. Our subsequent relationship grew from a very deep understanding of each other. We were good friends for a long time before we became romantically involved."

The boldness of these women's decisions



was remarkable for that period, and especially since Eastern Tennessee in the late '70s was not a mecca for LGBTQ individuals, Higdon notes. "We were not out at that time. Neither of us felt safe doing so while in high school. I went off to Bowling Green State University [to study flute] while Cheryl stayed to finish high school. She then came to Bowling Green in 1983. From that point, we were 'out.' I'm not sure what prompted us to do it that way, but I never remember having a specific discussion about it—it was just how it had to be." The couple was finally married by famed conductor Marin Alsop in 2014.

Higdon's family was very supportive. "My parents were totally fine about it—it wasn't even a blip on their radar. It was such a 'non-issue' in our household that it never occurred to me that anyone else would have a problem."

Her wife's experience, however, was a more typical coming-out story. "Cheryl's family was not happy. They feared for her future and were afraid that she would have to stay hidden. Her entire family lived in the area, and they didn't really want her to go away to college." This was difficult for the couple, and especially worrisome for Cheryl. "She was brave in so many ways," Higdon recalls. "As the first person in her family to attend college, she wanted to live in a way that was true to herself."

Musicians often speak of their personal and artistic process and the importance of "authenticity." Similarly, Higdon shares a beautifully candid sentiment about her wife's profound creative influence: "I'm so fortunate, in that I feel incredibly 'safe' within my marriage. As a result, I can be completely vulnerable within the context of my music. This helps me immensely as a composer. I know Cheryl's love and support is *always* there. That assurance enables me to [creatively] 'wear my heart on my sleeve.' I attribute that to her, entirely—it wouldn't be possible without her."

The couple has created a wonderfully efficient division of labor, having established their own publishing company. Consequently, they jointly oversee the making and managing of their musical projects. "It didn't start out that way," Higdon remembers, "but the business grew, and [15 years ago] Cheryl left her career to help me. Previously, our jobs required both of us to travel extensively; it often felt as if we were passing each other in the airport! Now we travel together."

"Cheryl is amazingly organized, which is helpful given how much paperwork, planning, and logistics is involved in the composing, presenting, and publishing of music. My brain would much rather be creating things than securing rental cars and hotel rooms!"

During the 28 months it took Higdon to compose her opera *Cold Mountain*, the stability of her marriage underpinned the entire musical process. “So much of your brain is consumed by composing,” Higdon states. “I would write all day, every day. To maintain the depth of feeling required for such a work, you must draw on your life experience and your relationship. The opera contains several difficult scenes, and at its conclusion one of the main characters is killed. I had spent essentially two years [during the composition process] keeping him ‘alive.’ Upon reaching the point in the libretto where he dies, I spent a solid week simultaneously weeping and composing. I struggled simply because I knew this character [I had created] so well.”

In fact, Higdon had difficulty facing the opera on a daily basis. “It would affect my mood profoundly—often I wasn’t mentally ‘present.’ This meant that Cheryl had to take care of lots of things.”

Higdon’s various commissions are booked through 2025, and her output seems boundless. “I’m continually working. As I complete one piece, my brain is moving on to the next. It’s almost like a spring of water—I don’t stop the flow at any point. Fortunately, I have very specific commissions; I always know who I’m composing for and what they require. I try to learn as much as I can about the performer and the group I’m collaborating with. Using that information, I craft something that I think will be successful.”

The Houston Symphony and Apollo commissions happened concurrently, although their premieres were delayed by the pandemic. *Duo Duel* is her second major work for percussion and orchestra, while the *Shadow* quartet is an intensely lyrical retrospective of melodic themes. Since this stylistic musical juxtaposition required Higdon to create two dissimilar works simultaneously, she is fortunate to be able to transition easily between genres. “It’s kind of like shifting gears while driving a car,” she says. “Even though the pieces couldn’t have been more different, each one worked well.”

Listeners who are unsure about contemporary music need not fear. Although many of today’s composers focus solely on their specific musical language, irrespective of audience or environment, Higdon’s approach takes a “360-degree view” that encompasses performer, audience, and composer. “I consider music to be a shared experience. I began my musical career as a flute performance major, so I’ve been on both sides of the music stand. Composers *have* to provide performers with convincing musical ideas; only then can they convey



[those ideas] to an audience. Having inhabited each role, I understand the importance of every component. As a composer, you *must* present a story you believe in.”

When creating new works, Higdon does extensive research on specific instruments, players, and existing music that is similar. “Since soloists spend all their time with their instruments, they tend to feel music very intensely. I ask myself: What can I contribute to the repertoire for this instrument or this performer?”

Though steeped in musical scholarship, having studied and taught at Curtis, Higdon has liberated herself from such academic confines. “Art is art, whether you have a degree or not,” she says. “The world’s most famous composers didn’t go to school. A degree is helpful, but it is definitely not the only key to successfully making music.”

Higdon won a Pulitzer Prize in 2010 for a violin concerto she composed, as well as a Grammy for her first percussion concerto. However, many consider her most profound effort to be the orchestral work *Blue Cathedral*, composed in memory of her brother. Commissioned by Curtis and first performed in 2000, it is one of her most evocative creations.

“Loss is such a huge part of life, especially recently during the pandemic,” Higdon muses. “I composed *Blue Cathedral* about a year after my brother passed away from cancer. It

was very therapeutic, and [it revealed] how this art form comes together to heal and help us. This remains music’s most magical but entirely inexplicable component. I don’t know what or when or how it happens, but audience members often approach me with profound emotional responses. However, none of us are able to pinpoint the exact source or reason for those feelings.”

Indeed, the process by which music is created is an enigma, even among those who excel at the craft. “When you hear your work for the first time, you have no idea what’s going to happen,” Higdon says. “You hold your breath.”

“Years ago, I attended the first rehearsal of *Blue Cathedral* [with the Curtis Orchestra]. I thought it wouldn’t work. Midway through, Cheryl walked up to me and whispered in my ear, ‘This is the best thing you have ever written.’ It was a truly memorable moment because, in spite of the fact that life is incredibly busy for both of us, Cheryl is part of each piece that I create—*every* single one.”

What: *Shadow of the Mountain*, May 1 premiere by the Apollo Chamber Players (tickets at apollochamberplayers.org or call the Hobby Center box office at 713-315-2525).

What: *Duo Duel for Two Percussionists and Orchestra*, May 6–8 premiere by the Houston Symphony (tickets at houstonsymphony.org or by calling 713-224-7575).



Life, Love, and Lashes

Justin Johnson brings
Alyssa Edwards
to Houston from
London's West End.

By JENNY BLOCK
Photo by ERAN LEVI

were a lot of what-ifs that were running through my mind," he remembers. "I was so afraid of being judged by all of the people that I worked with. My dance company truly means the world to me, and I just thought, 'When these parents find out about this, what are they going to think?'"

But Johnson, a native of Mesquite, Texas, was very fortunate. "When I returned and they announced the cast, everybody in Mesquite was like, 'Okay...'" The wig was revealed. This is the real person under it all. And they were so receptive. They were not only receptive, but they were just appreciative of everything that I am, and they celebrated my talent."

Johnson's career suddenly took off. Before he knew it, London was calling. "They said, 'We have to do a live show built around his life.' And I remember going, 'I don't want to live there. There's no way I can just pack up and go. How are we going to do this?'" And I agreed to do a three-week run of this show."

As complicated as the process was, it ended up being one of the most magical



You likely know Justin Dwayne Lee Johnson by his stage name, Alyssa Edwards. You've also likely seen him on *RuPaul's Drag Race Season 5*, *RuPaul's Drag Race All-Stars 2*,

America's Got Talent, and his Netflix docu-series, *Dancing Queen*.

What you might not know is that in addition to being an entertainer, choreographer,

television personality, and the owner and director of the award-winning dance company Beyond Belief, he is also the star of his own solo show that he launched in London's West End—*The Life, the Love & the Lashes of Alyssa Edwards*. He is now taking that show on a cross-country tour that includes a stop in Houston on June 5.

When Johnson appeared as Alyssa Edwards on *RuPaul's Drag Race*, he says it felt like he was living a Hannah Montana life. "There

experiences of Johnson's life. "I challenged myself. I pushed myself to greater heights that I didn't know I had the energy to get to. And not only did I have the energy to get there, but when I arrived [in London] I remember feeling this sense of accomplishment, and I knew this was just the beginning of another chapter."

After the show closed and he returned home, Johnson happened to see the Liberace documentary *Behind the Candelabra*, and suddenly his vision fell into place. "The flamboyant costumes and the shows—I was like, 'This is what I see for me. This is where I see Alyssa Edwards, my character. Somewhere along the lines between Cher and Liberace.'"

That's when he realized it was time to take his show on the road. "I've got to do this my way, the way I see it and the way I want to deliver it. And it's going to require a lot, but I know that it's within reach. I got in my office, had a glass of Moscato, and just started writing. I wanted something that was funny, something that was high energy, something that was authentic, something that was vulnerable."

"THE SHOW COVERS EVERYTHING FROM MY CHILDHOOD TO UNDERSTANDING WHAT MY MAGIC POWER WAS, AND COMING OUT. I'M SHARING THE LIFE STORY OF JUSTIN JOHNSON BECOMING ALYSSA EDWARDS."

—Justin Johnson

"The show [covers everything] from my childhood to understanding what my magic power was, and coming out. I'm sharing the life story of Justin Johnson becoming Alyssa Edwards. I took the London show and added more costumes, more dance sequences, more wig changes. I remember saying, 'This is it. It's not just the memoirs. It's the life, the love, and the lashes of Alyssa Edwards.'"

So, what exactly can audiences expect? "It's all things Alyssa Edwards. Everything that you could possibly think of—an 'Alyssa's Secret

Life." I was asked to describe the show, and I was like, 'Here's the thing, there's one queen for one night on one stage.' I think this is not just a shindig, this is a spectacle that people are going to absolutely love."

Even as a kid, dance teachers told Johnson that the world had something big in store for him. And those words, he says, gave him the strength to push through even when things weren't so rosy. "Dance just gave me a world to believe in, [and a way for me to] tell all my stories. I was really good with hand gestures—hence the drag and all that."

"So it all makes sense now. Everything happens in life for a reason. Trust this process. Enjoy this journey. Throw your hands up like you're in a roller coaster, throw your head back and giggle, because it all makes sense. I am so full. I'm so happy. Love is alive in my life."

What: Alyssa Edwards' Life,

Love & Lashes Tour

When: June 5 at 8 p.m.

Where: Wortham Theater Center,

501 Texas Ave.

Tickets: dragfans.com/tour/
alyssa-edwards-tour/

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April 17, 2022

Hundreds gathered at Sesquicentennial Park for the 43rd annual **Bunnies on the Bayou**. The annual Easter event, which featured tunes by award-winning DJ Dan Slater, raised and distributed funds to over a dozen Houston LGBTQ organizations. In the last 10 years, Bunnies has raised more than \$1.5 million to assist local queer nonprofits that provide critical healthcare services, support life-changing educational opportunities, and engage in community outreach programs.





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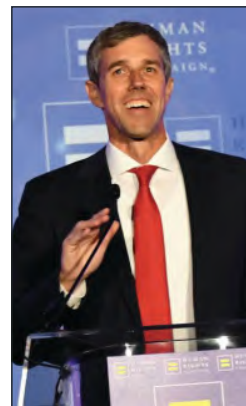
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HRC HOUSTON DINNER AT MARRIOTT MARQUIS April 9, 2022

The Human Rights Campaign (HRC) presented its annual Houston Dinner at Marriott Marquis Houston. Themed "There's No Stopping Us Now," the event featured speeches by local and national LGBTQ activists, including Texas gubernatorial candidate Beto O'Rourke and actress Alexandra Billings.

O'Rourke, who was endorsed by HRC last month, outlined a positive, unifying vision for the future of Texas while condemning Governor Greg Abbott's treatment of transgender youth. Alexandra Billings, a trans actress, shared her experience to push activists to continue fighting hard for the rights of trans children.



WEDDING GUIDE



Roxanne(l) and Kristina Werner

FIGHTING FOR LOVE AND DEMOCRACY

Roxanne and Kristina Werner fell for each other while working together at the Harris County Clerk's Office.

By **ZACH MCKENZIE** | Photos by **THE TRINH STUDIOS**



In between their work to save democracy by making Harris County elections run smoothly, Roxanne and Kristina Werner found love. The colleagues-

turned-spouses are savoring every moment of wedded bliss and proving that love can blossom in the least-expected places, and on a timeline all its own. With a drag queen, a mayoral candidate, and a top-notch taco truck featured at their wedding, the Werners truly showed their guests that “love is love.”

The pair met in 2019 while working at the Harris County Clerk's Office, with Kristina in elections and Roxanne under County Clerk Chris Hollins, who is now running for Houston mayor. “Kristina ran—and still runs—a high-

school clerk program,” Roxanne notes. “I did communications and community outreach. We always got along really well and started talking and hanging out more, and it just blossomed.”

Their dynamic at work foreshadowed how well the two would mesh romantically. “We were good [at collaborating] when we would cross work paths,” Kristina says. The married duo continues their work for Harris County with Kristina in the Elections Administrator's Office, and Roxanne in the County Clerk's Office.

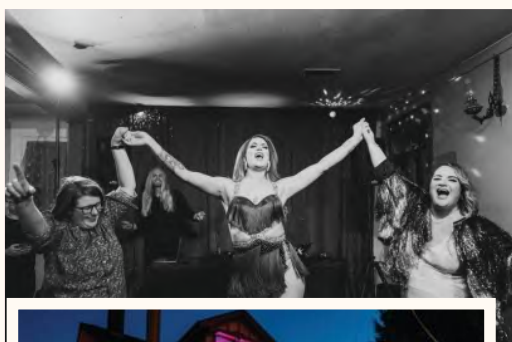
“We started dating in 2019,” Roxanne recalls. “Kristina definitely asked me on a date first. She was really open about wanting to date! We were ‘official’ in July of 2019, but by that time we had been going on dates and

spending all of our time together.”

With their high-intensity jobs, Roxanne explains that it was helpful to have someone at home to decompress with. “If you had told me before I met Kristina that I could spend this much time with a person and not want to kill them, I wouldn't have believed you. Working in elections is stressful, and we were each able to understand what the other was going through.” Swooping in with comic relief, Kristina adds, “It's a testament to how great I am!”

For this duo, the question wasn't *Will they get engaged?* but *When?* “We'd looked at rings so I knew something was coming, but I didn't know when,” Roxanne recalls. “I went to our jeweler and ordered a ring for Kristina and carried it around in my purse for almost three months. I thought if she was going to propose with a big romantic gesture, I'd propose immediately after her.”

When Kristina made reservations at Harold's restaurant in the Heights, Roxanne knew it was go-time. “She planned a big date and I could tell by the way she was acting that she was going to propose,” Roxanne recalls. “She was freaking out because she was running late from work, so I decided to go to Harold's early and meet her there. I asked the staff if they would bring out the ring with dessert, and they were more than happy to help out.”



"I definitely wasn't expecting that," Kristina admits. When the couple got home, it was Kristina's turn to pop the question. "We went home and she had this customized old-school viewfinder," Roxanne describes. "Each slide was a photo of us, and the last one said, 'Will you marry me?' When I took the viewer down from my face, she was on her knee with a ring."

Wedding planning soon began, and the couple set their sights on a stress-free party. "It felt so good to have something to celebrate," Roxanne says. "A huge advantage of being a queer couple is that you don't really have to fit into the stereotypical roles." The two agreed that tradition wasn't their vibe if it meant added stress. "There are things people will remember, but most people won't remember all of it," Roxanne theorized. "If anything became stressful, we just wouldn't do it."

Kristina was ultra-protective of their big day. "People always say that weddings are for everyone else. I was not going to go along with that. We did a really good job of doing it *our* way, for *us*."

Roxanne and Kristina were married on March 26, 2022. On the day of their nuptials, the brides celebrated with family and friends by creating their own traditions. "It was genuinely the best time. We had the wedding at Avant Garden in Montrose. It was officiated by Chris Hollins, and he was wonderful," Roxanne says. "Kristina wore a custom suit and Nikes. I hand-dyed the bottom of my dress to have a pop of color, and I wore Chuck Taylors under my dress. I walked halfway down the aisle with my son, and then Kristina came out and walked the rest of the way [with us]. We had a cocktail hour, a Polaroid-photo guest book, and the venue had an incredible taco truck!" Kristina summarizes their big day saying, "It was excellent."

"We booked a drag queen named Cyn City

who was absolutely amazing!" Roxanne says excitedly as she describes the dinner entertainment. Kristina adds, "She had on giant feathered wings that made a big heart. It was so sick!"

Donning a rainbow-fringe jacket, Roxanne strolled hand-in-hand with her new bride to the rainbow crosswalk on Westheimer for a photo-op before the two danced the night away.

After returning from their honeymoon, the couple settled into their new home and life together. "I am obsessed with saying 'my wife,'" Kristina exclaims. "At the gym today I said 'This is my wife's shirt' because I can!"

"I love her more every day!" Roxanne adds, "It sounds like she's joking when she says that, but she says stuff like that every day." Roxanne reflects on the impact of her marriage by saying, "I came out later in life; I didn't realize I was gay for a long time, but it was like turning on a light in a dark room. Being this most authentic version of myself and calling someone my wife means a lot to me. I feel very grateful to be able to be the most 'me' version of me, and to have a partner that's so supportive."

The self-described "gay as hell" couple is also quick to offer wedding-planning advice to fellow queer couples: "It's okay that not everything fits the way you've been told it's supposed to," Roxanne says. "Do whatever you want to do! And don't overbook yourself on the days leading up to the wedding. We had time to relax and spend time together. If anything popped up, we had time to handle it." Kristina adds her own advice for the perfect celebration: "Book a drag queen for your wedding, obviously!"

And as for their secret to a successful marriage, Kristina points to the importance of good communication. "Communicate until you're nauseated," she jokes. Roxanne adds, "We're such lesbians—we talk about everything!"

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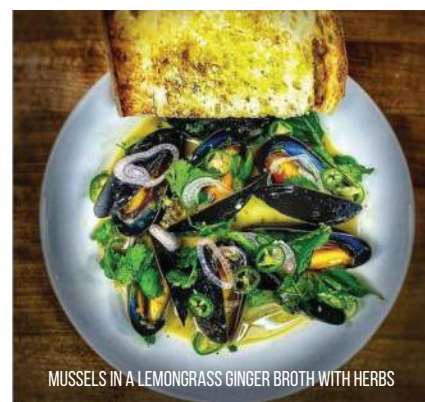
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HOUSTON

2.0

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Barcode

With the longest daily Happy Hours in Montrose from 8 a.m. to 10 p.m., this neighborhood watering hole is a popular spot. Drag shows occur Wednesday through Sunday, and the bar hosts karaoke on Mondays and Wednesdays.

817 Fairview, Houston TX 77006

Blur Bar

This multi-level dance club features an upstairs lounge and balconies, with weekly events including Travesura Thursdays and Latin Saturdays.

710 Pacific St, Houston TX 77006

BUDDY'S

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2409 Grant St STE A, Houston TX 77006

Club Crystal

With roots going back to the iconic club Inergy, Club Crystal is Houston's original LGBTQ Latino nightclub. Find some of Inergy's décor (and former staff members) at this two-room Latin/hip-hop club.

6680 Southwest Freeway, Houston TX 77036

Crocker Bar

This comfortably remodeled Montrose nightspot offers karaoke on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and extended Happy Hour prices throughout the week.

2312 Crocker, Houston TX 77006

Houston Eagle

As part of the worldwide Eagle family, Eagle Houston is the definitive home of the man's man. Leather, bear, or jock, you'll find them all here. This neighborhood bar has multiple levels

and outdoor decks, and regularly features DJs and male dancers.

611 Hyde Blvd., Houston TX 77006

George Country Sports Bar

Regulars rule at this comfortable neighborhood sports bar with dart boards and pool tables. Sports fans can watch games on televisions (inside as well as outside on the newly renovated patio), and Steak Night with chef Michele Free is on Thursday nights.

617 Fairview St, Houston TX 77006

Hamburger Mary's Houston

This drag-queen themed restaurant serves up the best in entertainment, delicious food, and gloriously yummy drinks.

1008 Prairie St., Houston TX 77006

JR's Bar & Grill

Proudly serving Montrose for 40 years, JR's Bar & Grill offers drag Sunday through Thursday, karaoke Wednesday through Sunday, and daily Happy Hour specials on a spacious New Orleans-style courtyard patio.

808 Pacific St, Houston TX 77006

KIKI

Coming soon.

La Granja Disco y Cantina

One of Houston's favorite Latin LGBTQ bars, La Granja Disco y Cantina is open Wednesday through Sunday and features daily Happy Hour prices, DJs, drag shows, and karaoke nights.

5505 Pinemont Dr, Houston TX 77092

Michael's Outpost

The only piano bar in Montrose offers great drinks, award-winning drag shows, and a roundup of talented musicians taking turns on the keys seven nights a week.

1419 Richmond Ave, Houston TX 77006

Neon Boots Dancehall & Saloon

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11410 Hempstead Hwy, Houston TX 77092



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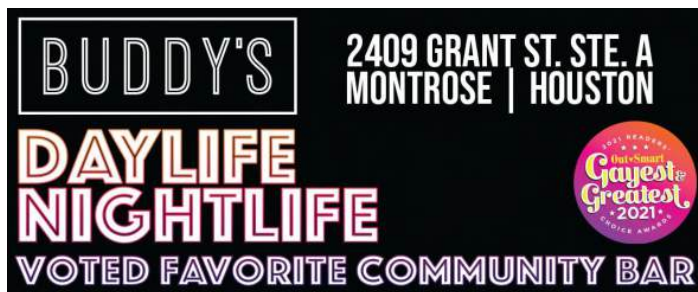
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Papi's

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[570 Waugh Dr, Houston TX 77019](#)

Pearl Bar

Houston's only lesbian bar—one of just 21 left in the nation—is home to a wide variety of events including weekly drag-king shows, nationally known LGBTQ DJs, and a queer farmers market on the patio.
[4216 Washington, Houston TX 77007](#)

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[202 Tuam St, Houston TX 77006](#)

RIPCORD

Since 1982, this leather bar has been a fixture in Houston's LGBTQ community. It's where the wild, the weird, and the kinky gather on a nightly basis and everyone is embraced for who they are—no pretense, no gatekeeping, just pure camaraderie and debauchery.
[715 Fairview, Houston TX 77006](#)

Tony's Corner Pocket

If you love a friendly bar staff, sexy male dancers, and entertaining showgirls, Tony's Corner Pocket is the perfect spot. The bar is open seven days a week and hosts shows like Tornado Tuesdays, Wepa Wednesdays, and Sassy Saturdays.
[817 W. Dallas, Houston TX 77019](#)

Viviana's Nite Club

This weekend-only LGBTQ Latin dance club is home to a variety of DJs, singers, talent shows, and Sunday strippers.
[4624 Dacoma St, Houston TX 77092](#)

GALVESTON

23rd St. Station Piano Bar

The piano bar features daily drink specials and weekends are filled with pulsing music, hot dancers, drag shows, and piano tunes.
[1706 23rd St, Galveston TX 77550](#)

Robert's Lafitte

Texas' oldest bar has been open for over half a century, and is home to Galveston's original drag show.
[2501 Avenue Q, Galveston TX 77550](#)

Rumors Beach Bar

Located at the historic Seawall Boulevard on 31st Street, this Galveston spot offers dancing, food, drinks, drag, and a wide variety of themed nights.
[3102 Seawall Blvd, Galveston TX 77550](#)

HUNTSVILLE

Ranch Hill Saloon

The first (and only) LGBTQ bar in Montgomery County offers DJs, dancing, drink specials, and drag shows.
[1000 12th St, Huntsville TX 77340](#)

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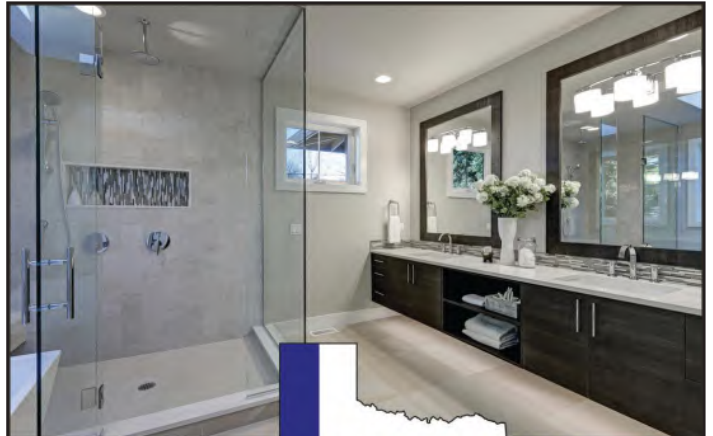


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SCENE OUT

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On April 13, 2022, The Caucus held its *We Are One* honors event presented by Chris Hollins and produced by Harrison Homer-Guy at The Ballroom at Bayou Place. Pictured are **Allison Leland, Linda Morales, Jovon Tyler, Terri Richardson, Chris Hollins, Kofi, Sakura King, and Shampu Sibley.**



A Transgender Day of Visibility Rally was held at the Montrose Center on April 1, 2022. Pictured are **Nova Jones, Jevon Martin, Kai Jones, Eden Rose Torres, Dylan Forbis, Alexis Melvin, Autumn Lauener, George Zemenak, Nexus Arrant, and Elia Chino.**



On April 2, 2022, Krewe of Olympus Texas presented Olympus Rolls Again at BUDDY'S. Pictured are **John Broussard, Walter Broussard, Queen L - Debbie Helweg, Ball Captain Andy Eversole, King L - Michael Parks, Ben Jones-Walters, and Bill Jones-Walters.**



The Diana Foundation presented its annual Diana Awards at The Parador on April 4, 2022. Pictured are **Ann Robison and Howard Huffstutler.**



Lone Star Volleyball Association (LSVA) presented its annual Miss LSVa Volleyball Pageant at Neon Boots on April 2, 2022. Pictured are **Valerie Lucci, Erika Lucci, Jacuzzi Heata (Miss LSVa 2022), LadyByrd, Jacklyn Dior, and Ruby Rox.**



On April 7, 2022, The Greater Houston LGBT Chamber of Commerce, Grubhub, and the National LGBT Chamber of Commerce announced their grant recipients at Harold's in the Heights. Pictured are **Alicia Greene, Chance Mitchell, Alli Jarrett, Charlie Huynh, Kevin Floyd, Daniel Wolfe, Tammi Wallace, Christopher Barry, Kathleen Williamson, Justin Nelson, and Adria Magoti.**



Space City Rugby faced the Crescent City Roughrook Team at Aveva Stadium Houston on April 9, 2022. Pictured are members of the two teams.



On April 9, 2022, the National Leather Association-Houston presented its 10th annual Spirit of Leather Awards at the Montrose Center. Pictured are members of the National Leather Association Houston.



The Human Rights Campaign presented its There's No Stopping Us Now Houston Dinner on April 9, 2022. Pictured are **Lisa Madry, Jenny Block Brown, Alexandra Billings, Heather J. Taylor, Rey Ocañas, and Joe Mendoza.**



On March 31, 2022, Theatre Under The Stars (TUTS) presented OUT@TUTS featuring *Come from Away* sponsored by OutSmart Magazine. Pictured are **Anthony Polk, Brinton Miller, and Sharon Steuart with Regina Thorne-DuBois.**



Patrick Palmer held an open house to show his New Work 2020-2022 Paintings and Sculptures on April 23, 2022. Pictured are **Joseph Longoria, Patrick Palmer, Alcy Neidlinger, and John de La Cruz.**

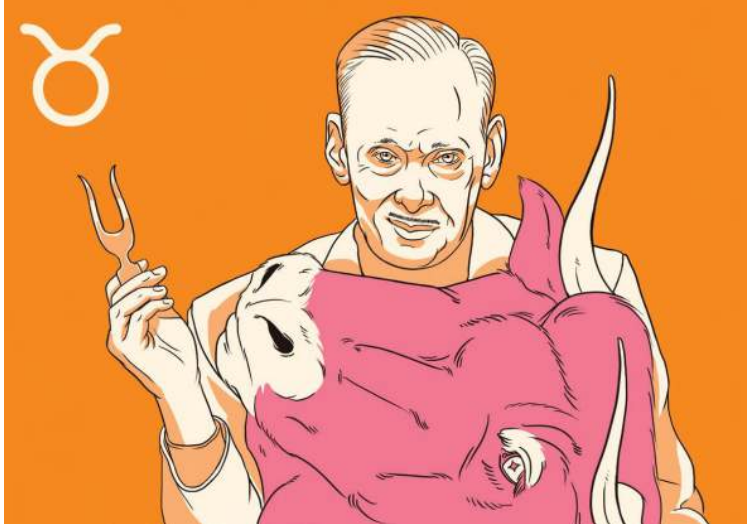


The Houston Gaymers presented their annual Charity Drag Show at Social Beer Garden HTX on April 23, 2022. Pictured are members of the Houston Gaymers, including host **Lynn Adonis.**

By LILLY RODDY

Start Your Projects Now

Taurus season brings in a new wave of motivation.



Taurus, inspired by filmmaker John Waters

SEBASTIAN GOMEZ DE LA TORRE



There is a lot happening this month with Mercury going retrograde from May 3 until June 11 in Gemini and Taurus. Start any projects you need to start now! Mars and Jupiter both enter Aries, with Mars on the 24th and Jupiter on the 10th. This should give the cardinal signs of Aries, Libra, Cancer, and Capricorn a big boost of energy.

We also have the second part of the lunar eclipse on the 16th in Scorpio, affecting the fixed signs of Taurus, Leo, Scorpio, and Aquarius. This will be a big motivation for those signs to reconsider their options and previous choices this month, and to go back and correct the choices that aren't working. Good days this month are May 4, 5, 6, 7, 19, 22, 23, 24, 25, and 29. Difficult days are May 9, 10, 15, 16, 18, and the 27th. This month the sun starts in Taurus but enters Gemini on the 20th. Mercury is retrograding back through Gemini and Taurus. Venus starts the month in Pisces before entering Aries on the 2nd and Taurus on the 28th. Mars starts in Pisces but enters Aries on the 24th. Jupiter begins in Pisces but also enters Aries on the 10th. Saturn remains in Aquarius, Uranus in Taurus, Neptune in Pisces, and Pluto in Capricorn.

ARIES (Mar. 21–Apr. 19)

It might feel like a "hurry up and wait" month, since it begins with you being in a place of rest and retreat. Your psychic receptors are being activated, so you are more affected by others. Your work on finances and investments is especially strong with Mercury retrograding through this area. After May 3, you are ready to act on what you have been discovering. You may have new plans, but wait until after June 11 to act. Jupiter (our planet of growth, good fortune, travel, and expansion) moves into Aries and stays there until the end of October, so it's a time with more opportunities in all areas of your life. Your patience gets much shorter after the 10th. Give yourself more space and options through early July. Gather your forces and be ready to act after June 11.

TAURUS (Apr. 20–May 20)

Happy Birthday to the Taureans this month. This is your personal yearly cycle to review the past year and to determine what to focus on this year. With Mercury retrograde, you will have more time to review. This introspection will be extra-strong in the last week of May. Early May is a good time for business, connecting with friends, expanding your outreach, and reexamining your relationship needs. You are outgrowing your previous views about partnerships as current expectations reflect the boundary work you are doing. This can affect both romantic and business relationships. You are more sensitive toward the end of the month—a good time to be more careful about the company you keep. Your psychic energies are turned up, and you may not be able to tolerate your environment as well as you have in the past.

GEMINI (May 21–June 21)

Career activity continues to be very busy, even with your ruling planet, Mercury, retrograde from the 3rd through June 11. You may want to delay your plans until after that date. This time of the year is usually when you ease off on your routines and expectations. That desire is very strong in the latter half of the month—a very good time to reconnect with old friends, former employers, and extended family. If you are looking for work, checking with past employers could be very beneficial for you. Toward the end of the month, you are more motivated and energetic. Friends can be very supportive by offering ideas, financial advice, and ways to give your career a facelift.

CANCER (June 22–July 22)

This month is a busy and socially active time for you. This is a good month for you to be either the teacher or the student. You are very open to new ideas, so it's an excellent time (particularly with Mercury retrograde) to review your social-media presence. You will be more psychically sensitive to others, and may even be able to read their thoughts and motives before they act. Associating with community-service or business groups is favored throughout May. Career activities open up toward the end of the month, but it would be best to do your research and make any decisions before June 11. You are still working on getting your finances in order and freeing yourself from those chains.

LEO (July 23–Aug. 22)

Career activity is very strong this month, particularly with Mercury retrograding in your career area! This can be a time

to review your work history, decide how happy you are, and see what other options are available. You have been wanting something that stirs your passion and isn't just about filling time and space. This is a very good time to promote your services on social media, or to improve your overall presence there. You are in a creative place that is good for both taking and teaching a class. This is also a good month to work with your finances, especially if you're looking to refinance your home. Be careful, as it is very easy to spend too much this month! Relationships are better, but you are still looking to improve your partnership by clarifying personal responsibilities and commitments. If you are not happy, your tolerance is very low in this area.

VIRGO (Aug. 23–Sept. 22)

Two especially active areas this month are your partnerships and your social-media communications. And with Mercury retrograding in your career sector, being clearer with your messaging is very important. If you are unhappy, career issues will come right to the surface. If you are looking to improve things, this Mercury retrograde should help clarify where you need to make progress. This is an excellent time to get away and enjoy some personal time with your partner. Even in business relationships, people are more open to your views and ideas. Continue to keep an eye on your spending, as you may have unexpected expenses later in the month.

LIBRA (Sept. 23–Oct. 23)

Finances, debt, and creating a more positive income stream is being stimulated this month. You may feel

trapped by your debt, or unable to move in a direction that makes you feel complete. Exercise and eating better are all a part of this month, as well. The Mercury retrograde is a great time to use that gym membership, or just connect with your friends and restart a walking group. Co-workers and working conditions are very demanding, and you may feel that you are being ignored. Near the end of the month, you are talking louder so people start to hear you. Relationships could use some renewal time so you don't feel like you're doing this all on your own. Stay focused on getting rid of your debt!

SCORPIO (Oct. 24-Nov. 21)

Relationships are a big focus for you this month. If you are in a partnership, this is a good time for renewal, therapy, and resolving any issues—in both romance and business. Relationships that have real problems will either be resolved or ended. It continues to be a creative time for writing, painting, and improving your kids' learning environment. As we get to mid-May, you will want to step up your health care, exercise, and diet regimens. You will get a big boost to get you started with that later in the month. Your family still needs your support, but not as much as in the past. Your life is stabilizing in that area.

SAGITTARIUS (Nov.22-Dec.21)

The main focus this month is improving things at work, revamping communication, and eliminating redundancy.

You may be looking at new office equipment as well, but wait until June 11 to go shopping! Home and family are taking up a lot of your time this month. For some, this is a time to move or relocate, while others are looking at home makeovers or remodeling. Your family may need your support more than ever. You seem to offer them emotional support that they can't get anywhere else. You are ready to take a break from all the intensity as we get toward the end of May—a much better time to get away and take some time for yourself.

CAPRICORN (Dec. 22-Jan. 19)

This is a creative and playful month for you, so you should have more interaction with the children in your life. This is a perfect month to search for your passion and find what makes you want to get out of bed in the morning. You have lots and lots of ideas swarming through your head this month, and you have been trying to get them organized. This should be an excellent month to do that. Your home office may need some reorganizing if you are working at home now. As we get closer to the end of the month, you may be looking at moving or remodeling your home. Family tensions can be substantial, as everyone wants to have their own way. Your patience can be very short, so set those boundaries!

AQUARIUS (Jan. 20-Feb. 18)

Home and family are the important areas this month. You may be doing some remodeling, or just reorganizing the

kitchen. You are looking to free yourself from some of the domestic obligations you have always done. You will be looking for innovative ways to feed yourself and your family. For some, this can be a huge time of downsizing and moving to a place that better suits your needs. Family demands are strong, but you are looking to express your point of view and not just come in and fix things like you've always done. The eclipses are occurring in your home and career areas, so there can be new opportunities for doing something different or possibly retiring. It's best to wait until June 11 to put any new plans into play!

PISCES (Feb. 19-Mar. 20)

This month continues to be busy, demanding, and not giving you a lot of personal time. This is a great time to get back into your health and exercise routines, and continue to remove people from your surroundings that add only misery to your life. You get right to the point more often, and have a lot less patience with people. Communication, writing, publishing, teaching, and furthering your education are also very active areas this month. You don't mince words with people, and you have no time for their excuses. This can be a good time to get your office organized, streamline your daily chores, and make better use of your time and energy. At the end of the month, home and family are in the spotlight.



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By SAM BYRD

Houston's Lizard King

Damien proves it is easy being green.



First, it was Kermit the Frog. Then it was Elphaba. Now Damien is the per-

former to rock the color of envy. With his bright-green hair and scribble-styled mustache, he is definitely impossible to miss. And his gender-twisting alternative style sets him apart from most other performers. Get to know more about this zany highlighter-fluid-colored performer.

Pronouns?

He/him/his, both in and out of drag.

Inner avatar?

A lizard. In eastern countries, they're seen as symbols of luck—similar to dragons. They're also a symbol of rebirth and regeneration.

Drag birthday?

November 2015

Hometown?

Born and raised right here in Houston.

What attracted you to drag?

I got heavily interested in drag because of the idea of getting to play “dress up.” I’ve always loved makeup, hair, and intricate outfits. I also fell in love with drag when I made the connection that it is an art form. I have a deep love for all things artistic, and I love getting to see people (myself included) express themselves through so many different creative aspects at once, resulting in each of our individual drag personas.

What makes your drag different from other drag performers?

While my drag does have a heavy emphasis on alternative styles, I don't like to put myself into a box. I strive to challenge gender norms, especially as a transmasculine drag king. I'm a drag king that loves to wear gowns, heels, and huge wigs. I specifically love to perform extremely emotional numbers. Art should inspire emo-

tion, and I love when my performances have a chance to make that a reality.

What's on your bucket list?

I'd love to be able to perform out of state some day! Traveling with my art and making new friends through it is one of my dreams.

What have you learned from your drag life that you carry into your daily life?

The concept of being true to myself is something that I learned through drag specifically. I learned how to love myself through this artform and through my art, and that's something I'll be able to carry with me for the rest of my life.

Any difference between your drag persona and your everyday persona?

In drag, I'm the party guy. I love to walk around and talk to everyone. Out of drag, I'm the biggest introvert you could imagine.

Any incredible moments from performing?

This past winter, I had the opportunity to perform in a theater setting and had access to a few things that drag performers don't typically have in a bar setting—a lot of different lighting options, and not having to walk around to collect tips.

I performed “Cellophane” by FKA Twigs and got to deliver an extremely emotional and personal performance. The performance opened up a lot of discussion between me and the audience members. It was a beautiful experience as a performer.

What would people be surprised to know about you?

Most people are extremely surprised to find out that I come from an incredibly athletic background. I've played just about every sport, and I also used to be a competitive figure skater!

Anything else to add?

I am a trans Asian-American performer, so it truly means a lot to be able to be featured during Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month, especially as one of the few Asian American drag performers in the city.

Where can fans see you perform?

Catch me on Wednesdays at Pearl Bar for the H-Town Kings show. ▼

Follow Damien on Twitter and Instagram @moistlizard and on Facebook at facebook.com/aiden.stevens.1466



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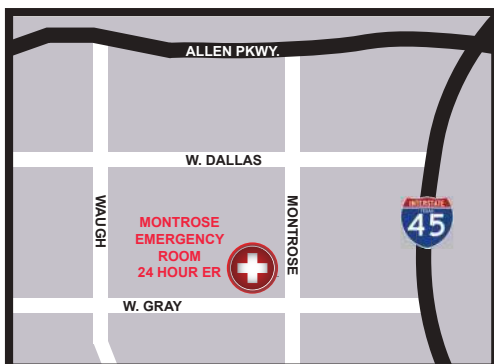
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