

Beau McCall's beautiful collages celebrate the Black LGBTQ community's lost

dazeddigital.com/art-photography/article/53471/1/black-lgbtq-community-70s-and-80s-beau-mccall-rewind-memories-on-repeat

July 12, 2021



Rewind: Memories on Repeat sees McCall's kaleidoscopic collages of archive photography and his famous button work pay homage to those lost to AIDS, anti-trans violence, drugs, and time

“Philadelphia is a conservative, and I have never really been conservative because I’m a visual person,” says African American artist and Philly native Beau McCall. Known as “The Button Man” for his wearable art that transforms the universal fastener into sparkling gems that address issues of race, economics, social justice, and pop culture, McCall’s aesthetic sensibilities placed him in a league all his own from a young age.

Growing up, McCall’s sense of style evolved in tandem with his musical tastes – from hippie to punk to funk with effortless grace. Determined to forge his own identity, he used music and fashion to express himself, donning platforms, skinny pants, and midriff tops, with dreams of dressing like a rock star.

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“If I went out shopping and saw something I couldn’t afford, I would go home and try to make something similar like the pants that FloJo used to wear with one leg,” he recalls. “I did that in seventh grade. I walked through the neighbourhood a couple of times and they thought I was crazy. I was in an individual. I never wanted to play follow the leader. I just wanted to have my own identity.”

After coming out in his teens, McCall found what would become his chosen family, a group of likeminded folks who shared his penchant for glamour and artistry – Joey, Tony, Trey, Tracy, James, Sifuddin, Moi Renee, Charles, Bianca, and Antoine AKA Dee Dee Somemore. “We all lived in the same neighbourhood, bumped into each other casually, and gravitated to each other, knowing we were coming to terms with our sexuality,” he says. “When I started hanging with my gay friends, it was Diana Ross, Donna Summer, all the disco queens – so my visuals changed again and I started dabbling in drag. I was still expressing myself artistically.”

McCall teamed up with his closest friends Tracy and Antoine to start a singing group, the Strange Beauties. “We were heavily influenced by punk rock and used to listen to Wendy O. Williams, Debbie Harry, and the B-52s on WKDU, a college radio station. We started to frequent the Hot Club, a punk club, and I saw a poster for a Plasmatic concert so we went, dressed in our best punk gear to check out the band. Wendy had pasties on her breasts, one of the guys was dressed in a maid’s outfit, and they had a coffin on the stage. It was bizarre and we absolutely loved it,” McCall says.



Beau McCall and Tracy Monroe, Blondes

“From there we were inspired to create our own music. We would be in drag sometimes, androgynous other times, and sometimes very masculine but we would have our heels on. We would just go from one extreme to the next extreme.”

Invariably, Philadelphia’s conservatism became too limiting. “I decided to move to New York because I heard that you have a hard time getting people’s heads to turn here because there are so many different types of people,” McCall says. After moving to Harlem, McCall found

his groove, making his critically acclaimed debut of wearable art at the Black Fashion Museum show during Harlem Week. He quickly became a force on the scene, presenting at their shows consecutively for the next decade.

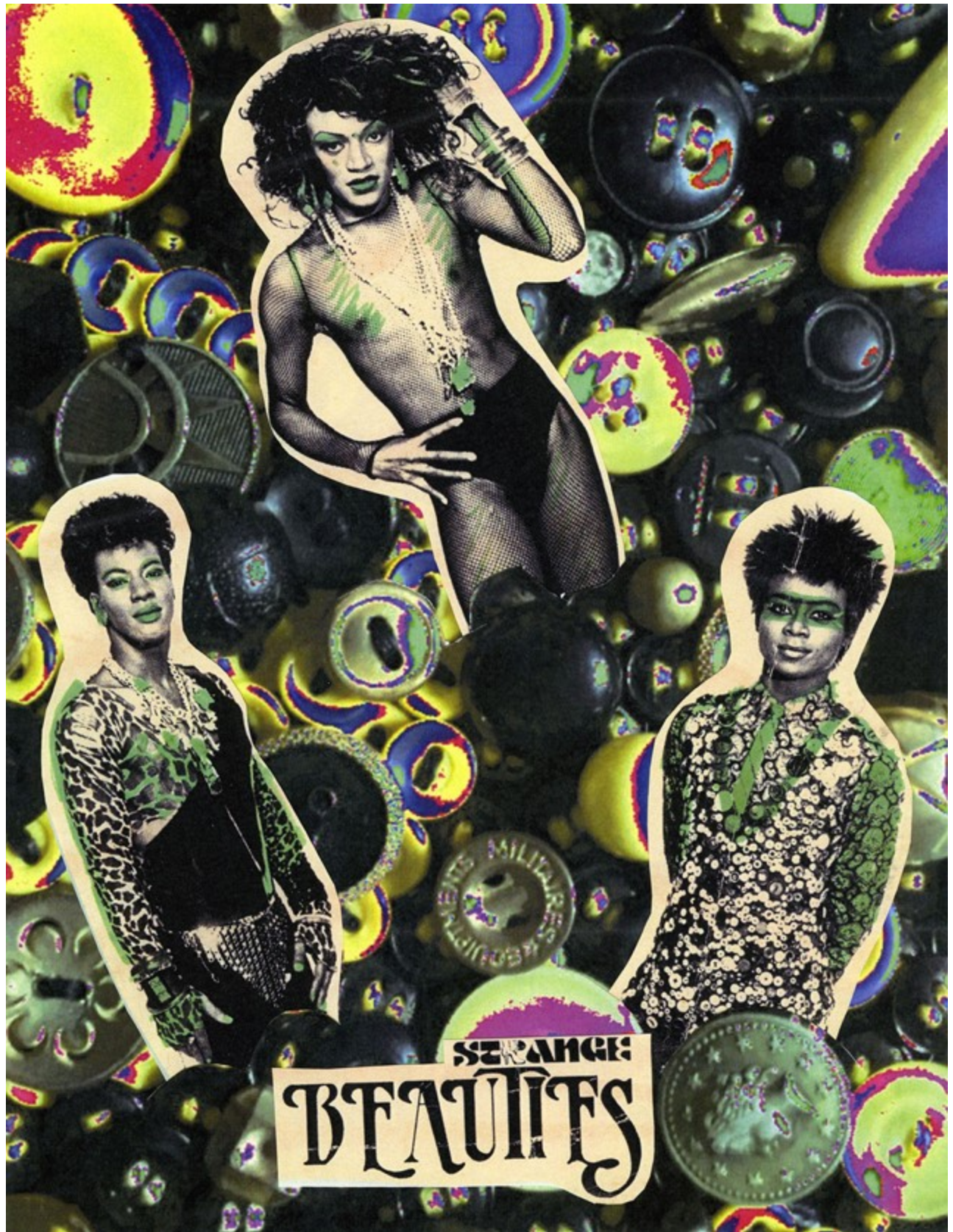
Now McCall brings his distinctive style to something deeply close to his heart in the new book, *Rewind: Memories on Repeat* (SHINE Portrait Studio Press). Here McCall presents a series of collages that bring together archival images with his button work to pay homage to friends and loved ones who have since passed on. “The day before we started working on the book, Tracy died,” McCall says, the pain of loss resurfacing in his voice. “I don’t know how many breakdowns I’ve had already and I don’t know how many more I’m going to have but they mean so much to me. They are a part of me still here breathing and carrying on their legacy.”

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THE STRANGE BEAUTIES

“Our circle was very small and it was very tight. The Strange Beauties were our form of a house, presented as a punk group. Antoine is on the left, I am on the right, and Tracy is in the middle. We went to do a photo shoot and had our outfits planned in advance. Then Tracy came out of the dressing room in this cat suit. Antoine and I looked at each other like, ‘Where did this come from?!’ The bitch wanted to upstage us. We were furious. It made us look like we were the background singers!

“Tracy was the one who really wanted to sing She didn’t have the best voice. Antoine had the best voice. I need a direction so I could follow whoever was doing the lead. We wrote all our songs about fashion, empowerment, and the nightlife – everything that was going on at the time. We wrote a few songs together but I wrote the bulk of it, and we had a good time doing it.

“My cousin and some of his friends they were musicians so we got them to be our backing band. We rented a studio space and rehearsed like two or three times a week. We were just more or less trying to get these songs as tight as possible. We got a chance to perform one time. We did this song calling out our lovers’ names in the lyrics and pointed out to the audience. The guys were moving out the way because it was a straight audience. It was so funny.”