

Book Review:

The Candy Book of Transversal Creativity: The Best of Candy Transversal Magazine, Allegedly

Edited by Luis Venegas, Foreword by Jefferson Hack

Rizzoli, 2020. 272 pages.

by Fenella Hitchcock

As the self-proclaimed first transversal style magazine in the world, *Candy* has established a cult status among industry and fashion fans alike since its inception in 2009. Serving as an alleged “who’s who” of LGBTQ+ cultural production across fashion, art, and nightlife, Luis Venegas’s bi-annual publication has sought to explore a spectrum of gender identities and expressions in a large-format, super glossy publication which, in his own words, seeks to rival his beloved *Vogue*.ⁱ But while Venegas has achieved his aim of creating an object of desire through high production value and limited distribution, this cultivation of exclusivity has arguably prevented *Candy* from reaching the very originators of such styles, and indeed those who might “need” the title the most. As such, the anthological *The Candy Book of Transversal Creativity*—published in 2020—offers a valuable opportunity for re-dissemination of the magazine’s achievements. Condensing twelve issues into 272 pages and 260 full-color images, Venegas’s edit takes a reverse chronological journey through (what he considers to be) some of *Candy*’s finest work from over a decade, accompanied by four new essays by Amos Mac, Geena Rocero, Valeria Vegas, and Jefferson Hack. As a work that sought to embrace gender non-conformity and trans representation prior to the so-called “tipping point” and recent discourses around “queer fashion,” this re-packaging can be understood as a canny move to assert *Candy* as a pioneering publication that celebrated the “transversal community” before it became the zeitgeist.

The notion of the transversal is arguably the most fascinating, and frustrating, aspect of *Candy*. A deliberately vague and expansive term, it is clarified in Hack’s contribution as “a hybridization of trans from which we can extrapolate ‘to transition’, ‘to transform’, ‘to transgress,’ and the ‘universal’ - a unity of difference, a commonality of otherness.” As is explored elsewhere in this issue, when deployed as a verb, trans holds significant potential as a critical optic and sensibility through which we might expand or even undo

dominant understandings of fashion more broadly. Within *Candy*, however, trans seems limited to a shorthand attempt at inclusion, an effort to unite “transgender and gender-nonconforming/nonbinary people, transvestism, cross-dressing, drag and androgyny.” While this approach may not be entirely without use (for instance, in drawing attention to the ways that these categories might overlap upon a single body or across the course of a lifetime), it is also not without significant limitations. As in most forms of fashion media, gender is articulated most immediately through the stylized lexicon of *Candy*'s editorials. While this can serve as a space of possibility, there is an emphasis on a relatively superficial level of assumed sameness which is largely grounded in practices of transformation and performance. Unity across difference can of course serve as a useful political tool, but this still requires consideration of what these differences may be and what they mean from an intersectional perspective.

The first two images we encounter in this showcase are Richard Avedon's 1969 portrait of the titular *Candy* (actress Candy Darling) nude but for a suspender belt and hold-ups, followed by actor Josh Lavery on all fours with a delicate strip of sugary pink lace and the glare of a setting sun to protect his modesty. Under the supposedly unifying nature of the transversal, a portrait of a trans woman aimed to titillate a curious cisgender audience is positioned as having some connection, however tenuous, to a cis actor in lingerie. What is presented as a supposedly benign act of inclusion reveals a fundamental misunderstanding of trans subjectivity and a work which remains underscored by cis male privilege. This opening also appears to reflect *Candy*'s past as a magazine named after a trans woman, yet whose earliest issues were dominated by the same cis white bodies that are historically prevalent within gay fashion media, Venegas's wider oeuvre included (see his previously edited titles such as *Fanzine 137* and *EY! Magateen*). The degree of care taken in the retrospective selection of these images is visually stressed at several points, usually through the inclusion of “behind the scenes” photographs, wider ephemera, and Venegas's own copies, which are often signed by contributors and include a heavy-handed application of neon Post-Its. The fact that the publication is heavily weighted in favor of more recent issues suggests an understanding of how the language and emphasis of earlier editions would be understood as regressive at best by a contemporary audience. Nevertheless, an edit does not equate to the explicit address which is also demanded by aspects of *Candy*'s history—such as the prominence of Terry Richardson's contributions to early issues in light of accusations of sexual misconduct, as well as the inclusion of blackface in a feature for issue 2.

Much of *Candy*'s beauty and value is located in its archival and interview pieces. It is unfortunate that the latter is absent from this collection and that these new essays predominantly work in service of Venegas's agenda to establish *Candy* as a pioneering first. In the context of the magazine itself, this

writing is often a space where the subject of an image is given a voice, intergenerational exchanges are fostered and documented, and we may begin to explore trans cultural production and histories in greater nuance. In this sense, a more text-focused anthology of *Candy* may have potentially addressed some of the issues outlined above while also working to preserve the sort of biographical detail which makes its subjects so remarkable. *Candy's* interviews not only illuminate its imagery but also function as a precious oral history of trans fashion and life, documentation of intimacies and kinships which offer a fullness which cannot be achieved by the fashion image alone. Nevertheless, the inclusion of material centered on April Ashley, Linda Simpson's *The Drag Explosion*, or Jackie Shane's archive presents an important opportunity for these narratives and histories to be shared with wider audiences for whom they are undeniably meaningful. Venegas's approach to assembling this edit appears to invite the reader to draw connections through pairing of images in a way that raises important questions about continuity, lineage, and inspiration. A selection of photographs from Casa Susanna from the collection of artist Cindy Sherman are paired with an editorial in which model Cole Mohr is styled in imitation of its guests, which we might understand generously as revealing its points of reference or more cynically as a ham-fisted attempt at paying "tribute." Elsewhere, photographer Michael Bailey-Gates's self-portrait and image of artist Greer Lankton's Candy Darling Doll begin to tease out more interesting commonalities grounded in more authentic relationships to New York's downtown scene and the worldmaking practices of its inhabitants during the 1970s and 80s (of which fashion, and magazines, were a huge part). Sadly, the inclusion of a hasty digital rendering of said self-portrait by Christian Lacroix cuts this short, one of many instances where a desperate desire for proximity to and recognition from the most powerful within fashion limits what *Candy* is able to achieve.

Particularly during the earliest years of the publication, Venegas repeatedly stressed that *Candy* was never intended as a "niche" publication concerned with politics as "there are few groups of people for whom fashion, makeup and hair is more relevant." To speak of fashion as somehow innately divorced from politics, or to suggest that these practices don't hold political potential, is deeply ill-informed and smacks of the bourgeois sensibility and cis white privilege that has plagued the fashion system since its very inception. At this point in time, the fact that many of those featured within *Candy* are not afforded the luxury of an apolitical stance outside of the atelier or glare of the studio lights seems an obvious point to make. In its relentless insistence on "positivity" in the name of celebration and reluctance to engage with the inherent politics of the transversal, *Candy* mirrors a wider complacency in fashion with regards to trans representation and participation. While fashion has now reached a point where it is more able to acknowledge that it is

intertwined with trans cultural production, largely through the casting of trans models, this is usually dealt with quite superficially and in a way which is divorced from trans experience of fashion work. While visibility is important, further attention needs to be given to the way that this is often used as a stand-in for legibility, which is tied to violent colonial histories. Fashion will never achieve a truly radical and transfeminist vision until it can reject the comfort and comprehension of cisgender audiences and practitioners alike.

That said, there are glimmers of hope within the collection, as well as in the issues of *Candy* produced since the book's publication. Perhaps the most notable is that which is drawn from issue 10 in 2017, guest edited by model and actress Hari Nef, who in her role manages to strike an elegant balance between meeting the expectations set out by this publication and articulating some of the ambivalence and danger bound up with the politics of visibility. In her editor's letter, yet another casualty of the book's ruthless edit, she names to a love of fashion "not what for it is but what it could be."ⁱⁱ This captures a sort of futurity which can be understood as present not just in queer and trans sensibilities or life, but within the fabric of fashion itself and its potential as a means of world-building. The rumblings of an evolution of Venegas's own awareness can also be felt in issue 8: its gatefold cover and 62-page portfolio focused predominantly on trans women of color sits at the heart of this volume, and is the subject of Rocero's essay, which recounts her experience on set. Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of this image, which otherwise conforms to hegemonic conventions of glamour and good taste, is that it is a rare occasion in which a significant number of subjects are depicted together. An expansion of *Candy*'s form, which tends to focus on individual subjects in its representations, could potentially open further avenues for exploration of kinship and togetherness. Generally speaking, the selection of the more recent work does seem to betray a growing understanding that to be visible is not always to be heard, considered, and valued, which is unsurprisingly driven by an increasing involvement of trans cultural producers across the board.

While *Candy* was founded on a very narrow set of tastes, there is no reason that this should remain so. If so, what would such departures look like? The political project of decentering, which is as much the responsibility of independent publishers as anyone else, asks that Venegas's attention continues to shift beyond North America, New York, and its metronormative narratives of liberation. The incorporation of cultural production beyond the West as a regular and significant component of future issues is one way in which this is easily addressed, and which presents further important questions around transnational affinities and fashion cultures. Further emphasis on the politics of visibility and respectability as they pertain to race is essential. A rejection of a blinkered view of how the transversal creates space for the flourishing and proliferation of image-making practices that go beyond

conventional fashion photography and embrace themes and techniques from trans visual culture more broadly. Any work produced under the eye of a cisgender editor who claims to represent trans histories and life in any capacity requires a thorough consideration of positionality. If, as is claimed in Vegas's essay, *Candy* is driven by Venegas's fascinations, then it is fair to ask where they stem from and ask for an acknowledgement of the differences which are glossed over through the all-encompassing embrace. As cisgender cultural producers and scholars, we have a responsibility to assert the position and contribution of trans folk and practices in fashion, but it is important that we remain cognisant of the limitations of our ability to orchestrate and represent this work. *Candy* can be, as its namesake was, a fashion and style reference but also so much more.

References

Hack, J. "The True Love of Magazine Making" in Venegas, L. (ed) *The Candy Book of Transversal Creativity: The Best of Candy Transversal Magazine*, New York, NY: Rizzoli International Publications, 2020.

Nef, H. "Letter From the Guest Editor", *Candy Transversal*, Issue 10, p.37.

Rizzoli New York (no date) *A celebration of the transversal community from the iconic magazine*. Available at:
<https://www.rizzoliusa.com/book/9780847865833/> (Accessed 13 July 2022).

Van Meter, W. "Bold crossings of the gender line" in *New York Times*, 8 December, 2010. Available at:
https://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/09/fashion/09TRANS.html?_r=3&ref=style (Accessed 13 July 2022).

ⁱ Ernesto Macias, "How Candy Magazine Shaped the 'Transversal' World We Find Ourselves in Today" in *Interview Magazine*, January 30, 2019. Accessed via <https://www.interviewmagazine.com/culture/ten-years-of-candy-magazine-interview-with-luis-venegas-lady-gaga>

ⁱⁱ Hari Nef, "Letter From the Guest Editor," *Candy Transversal*, Issue 10, p. 37.