

 **PROVOCATIVE PLAY** 
THE POWER OF CHICAGO BURLESQUE

CURATORIAL ESSAY

“Burlesque has transformed my life by allowing me to assert myself as the author of my sensuality. It has allowed me to express myself through something that would, in most other contexts, be weaponized against me, which in turn makes me feel more safe and protected in the world.”

— *Zahradka Tonic, Chicago Burlesque Performer*

OVERVIEW

Today's world of burlesque bends society's norms and celebrates personal empowerment while addressing feminism, performance of gender, and DIY culture in resoundingly vibrant ways. Community and collaboration are pillars in the Chicago burlesque scene, centered on inclusivity and acceptance. Women and non-binary people have reshaped burlesque, both in the creation of performances and as primary audiences, exuberantly cheering along to every peel and reveal.

Provocative Play: The Power of Chicago Burlesque celebrates contemporary Chicago burlesque, showcasing the skill and depth of five of the city's prominent performers. Ruby Spencer and Sally Marvel use their dazzling charms to celebrate the aesthetics and the spectacles of live performance, while Zahradka Tonic, Cruel Valentine, and Crocodile Lightning employ performance art to confront broader social issues.

These performers have changed the conversation around the art of burlesque, engaging us directly with commanding eye contact and communicating power over what they want their bodies to mean to us. Ultimately, they construct and control their projected self-image. There is a confident solidness about their statures, the gravity of bodies unafraid of inhabiting space on their own terms.

Featuring over 70 images from primarily Chicago photographers, *Provocative Play* captures the performative nature of the scene, from the documentation of live acts to the creation of artfully staged pin-up shots. As burlesque continues to blur the lines of gender and sexuality and to deconstruct boundaries, it is my hope that displaying these striking images in a gallery, rather than a club or theater, further erases the line between the public and private performance of the powerful and erotic.

Provocative Play highlights the role of burlesque in the Chicago entertainment landscape as both a performance art and a subculture.

Amid a global pandemic that closed local bar and theater venues, the show goes on for burlesque performers who are producing and performing in virtual shows, recording and documenting their performances, and finding paid subscription platforms to host their photo and video content permanently. Performers in Chicago are also reaching new audiences by collaborating with artists from other states and countries. Artists within the community have been working tirelessly to overcome the financial burdens set upon them by the realities of COVID-19, examining novel ways to keep their art relevant and exciting in virtual spaces.

In a time also defined by re-examining racial tension and struggle, burlesque in Chicago has undergone challenges — and the scene has shifted and changed in a brief time to address concerns of racism and inequality within the community.

Burlesque's exploration of identity, glamour, and performance is a recurring conversation in the art world, and burlesque is an art form that responds to the culture of its time throughout history. *Provocative Play* is an entry into that conversation on behalf of Chicago.

HISTORY OF BURLESQUE

American burlesque is often seen as a genre of variety show with five distinguishing characteristics: minimal costuming, sexually suggestive dance, plot lines and staging, quick-witted humor, and short routines or sketches. In every genre, burlesque has encompassed over 100 years of performances, often commenting about, or considering, the times — a light irreverence to the status quo and a parody of upper-class life. The word derives from the Italian “burla,” a joke, ridicule, or mockery. In the beginning a certain level of literacy was assumed by audience members, as burlesque often made various high-brow references.

The concept of this provocative performance started on the American stage in the 1800s as a populist blend of satire and adult entertainment featuring striptease and broad comedy acts. From 1880 to 1890, burlesque gained considerable popularity and developed into a definite form of entertainment. Most of the shows that were rated as burlesque shows between 1870 and 1880 were partly of the minstrel type, and many contained casts entirely composed of women.

The 1920s came as a time of national undress — and not just for showgirls. Out on the street, hemlines were rising. Across America, laws were passed making it illegal to wear skirts of certain lengths and similar regulations concerned the ever-naughty neckline. In a country and at a time when alcohol and revealing clothing were both deemed illegal, the art of the striptease came into the spotlight.



Sally Rand popularized the fan dance (photo: AP)

Amidst the Great Depression, stock burlesque companies multiplied in major American cities, and in the 1930s and 40s, the art form drew viewers into clubs, music halls, and theaters with emboldened female performers outfitted with lush, colorful costumes, mood-appropriate music, and dramatic lighting. By this time, to fill theater seats (with mostly men) that were empty because of the advent of recent technologies, striptease became a regular component of the performances. The quality of striptease acts varied greatly. Some strippers, such as Gypsy Rose Lee and Sally Rand, imbued their performances with great artistry. But many others aimed only to titillate the sexual desires of the increasingly all-male audiences.



Sally Rand brought her fans to court in 1933 after being arrested four times for performing the controversial dance at a theater in the Loop (photo: Chicago Tribune)

While striptease acts helped many burlesque theater owners stay afloat well into the 1950s, they also destroyed the reputation of these theaters as community institutions. As burlesque performances became more salacious, local authorities increasingly challenged their right to exist. In Chicago and elsewhere, social reformers and child welfare advocates condemned the strip shows as bad moral influences and threats to the well-being of urban youth. Merchants often complained about burlesque theaters' tendency to drive away customers from nearby businesses. Police periodically raided burlesque theaters and arrested the performers, charging them with unlawful or immoral conduct.

Burlesque oscillated in popularity throughout the decades as society's attitudes toward sex relaxed during the 1960s and 1970s. Sex lost much of its earlier mystique and humor, and burlesque audiences dwindled as men availed themselves of more readily available and comparatively less expensive forms of sexual entertainment like adult magazines. Now, burlesque remains a relevant art form with many new performers entering each year, and since the 1990s, there has been an explosion in the interest of burlesque.

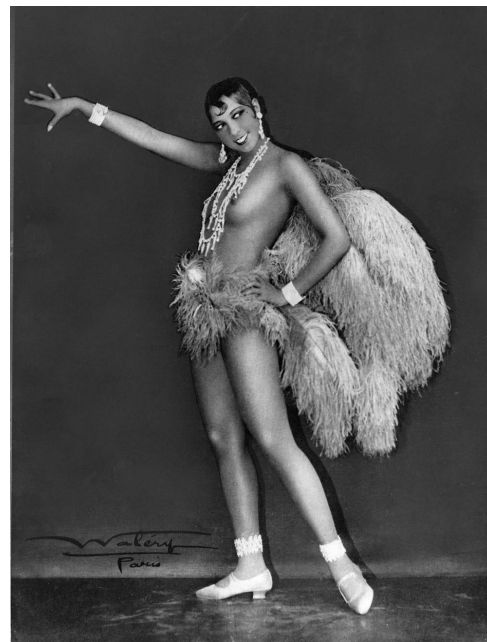
Modern day burlesque is composed of many different genres of entertainment but none as famous as the slow, sensual striptease. There are two distinct types of burlesque: traditional and Neo-Burlesque. Traditional burlesque integrates striptease with Vaudeville-style comedy sketches, acrobatics, juggling, live vintage music, and singing. During the mid-1990's Neo-Burlesque emerged — within it, several subcategories exist including Nerdlesque, Gorelesque/Grotesque, and Boylesque, to name a few. The Neo-Burlesque movement seeks to restore a sense of glamour, theatricality, and humor to striptease, toting a playful brand of pro-sex, often gender-bending feminism.



A group of finalists for the Queen of Burlesque title lined-up on stage; Eleanor Cirio won the contest in 1929, picked from over 100 performers in the Chicago area (photo: Getty Images)

Today, Neo-Burlesque has taken many forms, but all have the common trait of honoring burlesque's previous incarnations, with acts featuring expensive costumes, cabaret, and wry humor. Old-style burlesque has morphed into something more energetic, campier, and more interested in engaging the audience rather than simply displaying for it.

There are modern burlesque performers and shows all over the world, and annual conventions such as the Vancouver International Burlesque Festival, the New York Burlesque Festival, and the Miss Exotic World Pageant are held.



Josephine Baker circa 1925-1926; Baker was born Freda Josephine McDonald in 1906, in St. Louis, Missouri and was rejected often in her early attempts to perform for being "too dark and too skinny" (photo: Bridgeman Images)

BURLESQUE IN CHICAGO

Chicago has a long history of prominent performers, theaters, and venues. Fahreda Mazar Spyropoulos, aka "Fatima" and later "Little Egypt," born in Syria in 1871, performed at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. Though not of Egyptian or Algerian descent, Spyropoulos appeared in the Exposition at the "Egyptian Temple" attraction in a show called "The Algerian Dancers of Morocco." In complete defiance of standard women's dress of the period (full skirts, corsets, and hair-covering hats), Spyropoulos appeared on stage in a gauze shirt, vest, and an ankle-length skirt. She then proceeded to perform a dance labeled the "hoochie-coochie" by critics of the day, better known today as the "belly dance." Soon after, erotic dancing became a popular form of entertainment in select clubs and theaters.

In the early 1900s, most of Chicago's burlesque theaters were located around the periphery of the central business district, where the combination of lower land prices and proximity to large populations of bachelors, businessmen, and out-of-town visitors created ideal investment opportunities. One cluster of theaters lined South State Street between Van Buren and Polk Streets. Another developed along West Madison Street near Halsted. A third could be found in the Levee nightclub district near 22nd and South State Streets.



Rialto Theater at 546 South State Street in Chicago in 1971; the theater went through bouts of closings in its history (1906-1975) and was most notably closed in 1974 after being victim of a series of coordinated bombings of Chicago porn houses (photo: Art Shay)

Burlesque is now seen in a variety of bars, theaters, and clubs in Pilsen, Lakeview, River North, Wicker Park, Hyde Park, and all around the Chicagoland area. The community itself encompasses creatives beyond performers: producers (who are often also performers), photographers, videographers, choreographers, models, and costume designers, among others. There is an electric sense of collaboration in Chicago burlesque, as many of the performers commission each other for areas of support — one performer can rarely do it all, though some do. Community and collaboration are crucial elements in making the performance scene come together. The Do-It-Yourself nature of the art form brings together creators from all levels of society and artistic backgrounds.

The unconscious aura of titillation that arises from the visual representation of burlesque is liberating in the intimate environments in which it is performed. The performers control their image through careful selections of costumes, choreography, music, and props, building every component from scratch along the way; witnessing such an authentic and individualized display of expression has inspired countless individuals around the city to take private lessons or group classes and workshops to employ the art of burlesque into their own lives.

Before COVID-19, rarely a week went by when there were not multiple burlesque shows staged throughout Chicago. With variants surging throughout the pandemic, performances have been up and down since March of 2020. Despite restrictions on live entertainment, local performers have demonstrated innovation and resiliency in their craft.

THE PERFORMERS

The images in the exhibit are of local current working performers who one can view performing in-person or virtually. The video performances help shape our understanding of these individuals' inspirations as well as their potent personalities and personal narratives. Through viewing the photographs and performances, one can see how each contributes to the meaningful landscape of local art through the powerful medium of burlesque. In images of the performers, their bodies suggest that performing without a net/performing without much in the way of clothes is exhilarating and transformative for both audience and performer. The excitement may also be because stripping is more inclusive of different shapes and sizes than it used to be and is not simply an excuse to ogle.

Living in a time in which gender and sexuality have been redefined as fluid social constructs and civil rights are being fought for, burlesque and its history may be more pertinent than ever. In creating *Provocative Play*, I chose to focus on five performers in historic Chicago whose distinct styles and voices convey the level of individuality, tenacity, and creativity required to make burlesque come alive. These performers represent a cultural moment in which artistry and brazen sensuality coincide.

Ruby Spencer radiates glamour that harkens back to the days of early pin-ups and classic showgirls. Inspired by vintage and musicals, Ruby grew up watching shiny stars perform elaborate musical numbers and fashion montages, shaping her feelings from an early age around performing and introducing her to required skill sets. In burlesque, Ruby found an art form that allows her to live out her dream of evoking the persona of a by-gone Hollywood starlet. Her performances, much like her meticulously crafted costumes, sparkle and enchant audiences around the city.

Sally Marvel is a sideshow and burlesque performer who is also a member of an elite group of dangerous dames, being one of 50 known female sword swallows worldwide. Inspired by circus freak show acts, Sally employs sword swallowing, glass walking, fire eating, whip cracking, human pincushion, and bed of nails in her strange, alluring, and death-defying performances. Sally wants her audience to have visceral and whimsical experiences that stick with them well beyond her on-stage performance.

Zahradka Tonic is the full embodiment of the DIY spirit alive in contemporary burlesque. Adorned in her self-made costume pieces, she creates self-portraits and performance art, reinforcing the multitalented nature of Chicago performers. Zahradka has embarked on an extensive line of questioning, deconstructing, and recreating the sorts of images that have long shaped ideas of what it means to be a glamorous woman. She has been performing for the past several years, gaining power along the way in reclaiming her sexuality. She uses her body to make proud value statements of pleasure and self-celebration through her performance on stage and in front of the camera.

Cruel Valentine addresses the issues that are most important to them: the history of civil rights, equity, access, and lifting the voices of the marginalized. Known as "Chicago's Own Community Chest," they are an award-winning, international burlesque entertainer and a lifelong singer, actor, dancer, writer, and artist. Cruel began performing the art of burlesque in 2007. Since then, they have spent over the past decade performing their way across the nation and abroad, racking up multiple awards and honors. With extensive experience in theater, music, and dance, Cruel is a triple threat, fusing multiple styles in their dynamic performances. A dedicated storyteller, they are never afraid to "go there" or to make a mess with their art.

Crocodile Lightning uses the art of striptease to rekindle the connection with her body and femme sensuality. Similarly, she uses performance art to unpack the socially constructed notions of gender and to express her courage, vulnerability, and resilience. Crowned the Queen Ambassador of the Noire Pageant, Crocodile collaborates with local performers Egypt Blaque Knyle and Perle Noire to create access and representation for performers of color and queer artists through various community-based projects. Crocodile incorporates self-compassion and mindfulness practices in her performances and teachings by inviting the audience to challenge the status quo and awaken to the moment-to-moment vitality of life. Crocodile Lightning is a high-voltage temptress whose face tells a tale and whose gaze electrifies with a blast of humor, a splash of sensuality, and a flash of naughtiness.

THE PHOTOGRAPHERS

The exhibit includes photographs by both commercial and documentary Chicago photographers whose subject matter is consistently or occasionally burlesque. The images were originally mined from the performers' social media accounts with the intent of representing the performers through a collection of images that they use to express or promote themselves.

The images range from live performance photographs (Gregory Bell, Jenna Braunstein, John Brodie, Khianna Hanson, Greg Inda, Brett J. Lawrence, Bob Perkoski, Matt Josephson, Jordan M. Graves, and Peter Serocki) to posed, studio or on-location constructed variations of the classic pin-up (Steven Brown, Michael Cabrera, Marco Felix, Harlow Pin-Up, Ethan Jollie, Kachi Mozie, Chris Nightengale, Rococo Royale, Eric Strom, and Mike White), to iPhone self-portraits (Zahradka Tonic). Not made with the intention of gallery display, most of the photographs are in public exhibition for the first time. I embrace the idea that burlesque as a subject matter, no matter how it is visually conceived, is worth looking at and putting in the forefront — for its immediacy in modern culture and as an art form with relevant and powerful implications.

— Erica McKeehen, Curator and Burlesque Performer

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