

The Last Supper in Seven Contemporary Takes

BY JACKIE VALLE

On The Collective, a collaborative series by Steven Vasquez Lopez and Brandon Roberts



Steven Vasquez Lopez and Brandon Roberts (SVL/BR), *The Celebration*, from the series *The Collective*, 2025. Photographed at the former Lusty Lady, San Francisco.

A wood-paneled space with an assemblage of objects and materials—HVAC tubing, metal piping, a turned over stool, and staircase leading up to nowhere—loops around to frame 13 figures. They pose in seated, standing, and leaning positions around and on a horizontal table filled with flowers, fruits, edible greens, bottles, and horned animal bones. The figures are adorned in a variety of bright and at times fluorescent knitted masks, patterned scarves (the kind that could be found either at a thrift store bin or purchased for upward of \$400 at Bergdorf's), costume jewelry, colored silicone gloves, a neon ribbon, a leather harness, faux pearls, and colored beads (so many beads). This

scene could be flammable; there is a red and white emergency exit sign at the left corner of the image and a red and white fire extinguisher label behind one of the figures placed left of center. A horned cow's trophy head is displayed just above the figure at the very center of the scene. One could nearly miss the neon green spray-painted spot to the left and lettering that moves vertically on a panel to the right which appears to spell "L O O S t." The lettering is unclear, L O O S t, or possibly decipherable to those fluent in building construction, abandoned attics, or industrial sites. There is a compositional tension between the enframing space and obsessively perfect and symmetrical arrangement of the figures around the table. This tension—between the raw and stylized, muted and vibrant, industrial and opulent, flirtatious and humorous, shadowy edge and lit center—creates a contemporary and performative nod to the grandeur and drama of the 17th to 18th century European Baroque period. Taking it one step further, given the excessive flamboyance at the center of the scene, the image exaggerates the Baroque to speak in the visual language of the Ultra Baroque, a Latin American artistic style that weaves together traditional and contemporary elements characterized by a disorienting use of space and extravagantly ornate features. This work, entitled *The Celebration*, is central to *The Collective*, a collaborative series of works by artists Steven Vasquez Lopez and Brandon Roberts (SVL/BR). The series of images employ the Ultra Baroque to move in a theatrical direction that defies conventional logics of style and its commodities and challenges myths of homogeneous masculinity.

The series is set in the Lusty Lady, an iconic former peep-show establishment that operated for nearly 40 years in San Francisco's North Beach neighborhood. Today, the unused space is owned by Anna Weinberg who generously provided the venue as the setting for *The Collective*. The Lusty Lady was not only a place where women performers worked, flaunted, and moved their figures, but also became the world's only unionized, worker-owned cooperative. The women who took up space here were unconventional in their relationship to their livelihoods and bodies and as a collective force. As a site of reinvention and radicality, the Lusty Lady holds the traces of its absented feminine bodies, life, and memories. Their spirits loom between the space's cracks and around its interiors, edges, and abandoned objects. In *The Collective*, SVL/BR reactivate the space, invoking its spirits as a call for continued acts of invention and revolution.

The figures in the series oscillate between singularity in each of their respective "looks" and collectivity by way of this group performance. *The Collective* reveals the critical role played by men in the lifting up of the feminine; there is no doubt that this work takes a village and sometimes that village must gather together around a full, spilling-over table. One can see how these men, visually coded in the queer, disidentify with conventional understandings of masculinity. The faces of the figures are

inaccessible—fashioned behind sunglasses, neon ski masks, and handkerchiefs. Their radical colors and embellished detail draw exorbitant attention to the identities they cloak. This gesture appears to exaggerate or mock the construct of the disguise itself, rendering the function of a mask useless. Here, the mask's function is overturned. The mask flirtatiously reveals as it conceals; it draws attention toward, rather than deflects away from figures who do not shy away. They strike their poses and look beyond the visual field. They confront the viewer, aware of the moment at which the image is being captured and the presentation of their bodies before the viewer's gaze.

The primary scene in the series is of The Last Supper, inclusive of the key visual signifiers that make it recognizable across cultures: A set of figures around a table positioned at the center of a visual frame. Over millennia, artists have long taken part in creating visual retellings of the biblical Last Supper, the event of Christ's final meal at which he gathers with 12 apostles in The Upper Room in Jerusalem just before his arrest by Roman soldiers and the inevitable state-sanctioned crucifixion. While visual depictions of the Last Supper have generally been employed to point toward contemporary socio-political matters, signal power, and dispute biblical interpretation, each iteration of the scene marks the particularity of certain times, social contexts, forms, styles, and figures. The Last Supper is not a neutral subject by any means.

SAVOR

The Collective series is doing work that is aesthetically rigorous, visually stunning, culturally multi-dimensional, and functions at different sensorial registers. SVL/BR's table is plentiful with glimmering grapes, plump oranges, juicy lemons, filled wine glasses, frosted donuts, kale, and flowers that tastefully spill onto the table's surface. The scene does not only stimulate the gustatory senses but also carries a variety of figurative smells, some of which come from sawdust, a random dusty corner, rusty metal, citrus fruits, and bodies, sometimes fully clothed and other times scantily clad, that fill up and perform around the space itself.

GATHER

Conventional visual cultures present one with acceptable forms of masculine homosociality set in the context of team sports, politics, and the ordained Catholic priesthood—uniformed men's soccer teams, a college of cardinals, a televised appearance of congressmen in a stately building. Here, the homosocial takes up and then

queers a variety of institutionally coded spaces using pictorial vignettes. The work at once identifies with and critiques traditional masculine identities by using alternative masculinities.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jackie Valle is an art doula, advisor, and culture producer. Her purpose is to support others in creating on a variety of levels grounded in their core values and highest good. In her practice, she works with artists, creatives, do-ers, executives, writers, and mission-aligned organizations to realize creative and strategic projects. As a coach for artists and executives, she seeks to build on what's working to support others in creating an ideal vision of their future. Jackie also leads executive strategic planning workshops and presents visual literacy seminars, writing intensives, and art tutorials in the form of a "DIY Art School" for groups and individuals. As a culture producer, her body of work includes writing(s) on art, visual culture, and the role of the aviscual senses (olfactory, haptic, sonic, and otherwise) in visuality. The focus of her research examines art's capacity to develop critical understandings of contemporary culture. In this capacity, she is also co-founder of Dissolve, an art collective where art-making and looking are personal, performative, entangled, and unexpected.

Jackie is based in the U.S. Bay Area via the East Coast. She earned an M.A. degree in History and Theory of Contemporary Art at the San Francisco Art Institute and a B.A. degree in Art History at Florida International University. During her 20-year career in the arts/museums, education, and social justice institutions, Jackie focused on cultural equity in BIPOC, diaspora, and First Generation communities. Her body of work and services are directly informed by her core values, experiences as a First Generation U.S.-born Latinx woman, and professional journey.

Written on the occasion of *The Collective*, 2025 — a collaborative series by Steven Vasquez Lopez and Brandon Roberts (SVL/BR), photographed at the former Lusty Lady, San Francisco.

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