

Pride of Place

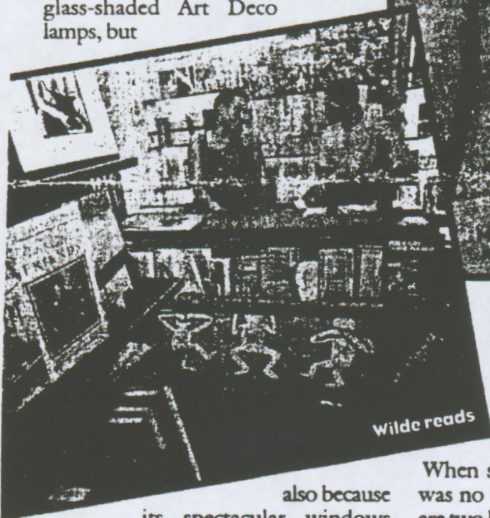
BY LYNN YAEGER

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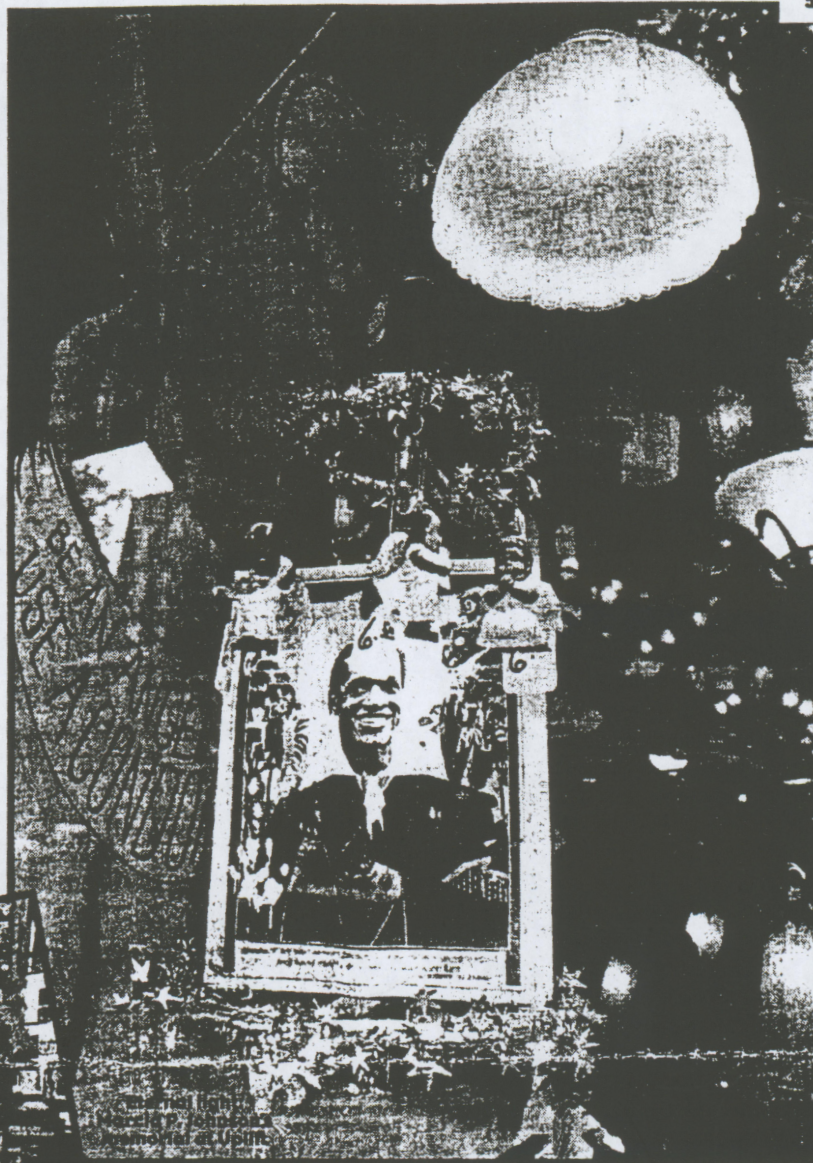
Decades before anyone considered turning the Empire State Building lavender, or hiring k. d. lang as a spokesmodel, or majoring in Queer Studies at the local university, Greenwich Village was the preferred destination of “long-haired men and short-haired women” from small, unfriendly towns all over America. Who among us could have imagined that the Stonewall revolution’s glorious ramifications would include queer-positive characters on network sitcoms, or, even stranger, the existence of actual gay bars on the creepy homophobic south shore of Long Island, where I grew up? Here are the stories of three valiant Village merchants who don’t just sell interesting items, but whose struggles in the pre-Stonewall era are what the fireworks on Sunday are really all about.

UPLIFT

I’ll see if Randy or Sylvia’s in back,” says the young woman behind the counter at Uplift on Hudson Street, a store I’ve always loved not just for its hundreds of glass-shaded Art Deco lamps, but



also because its spectacular windows serve as a combination lighting display, AIDS memorial, and militant community bulletin board. I expect Sylvia to be just some woman helping Randy in the store, but out comes legendary Stonewall veteran Sylvia Rivera, who greets me with the news that “Randy’s off xeroxing leaflets for tomorrow’s gay marriage ceremony in Bryant Park.” A few days later, when I catch up with Randy Wicker, he confesses, “I’ve always been political. I was one of the first openly gay media spokespeople, way back when I was in the Mattachine Society. I was on the radio in 1962.” I



PHOTOGRAPHS BY TERU KURATAMA

ask about the window displays, especially the striking, heartbreaking memorial mobile decorated with black ceramic cherubs for drag queen Marcia P. Johnson. “Marcia was my roommate.

When she was murdered, and there was no investigation, I realized there are two levels of law enforcement. I had to make them remove the suicide designation. I’ve always used my windows for political purposes: I had Larry Gutenberg’s ashes—you remember, he had a program on WBAI—in the window, so he could watch the boys go by. And my lover David’s ashes are behind me on the counter right now.”

How’d an activist get into the lamp business? “In the ’60s, I sold antiwar buttons and strobe lights and color wheels on St. Marks Place. When I first met David, he worked in an antique shop, and sometimes instead of paying him they’d give him end tables

or chairs or paintings. We had this huge seven-and-a-half-room apartment in Brooklyn, and it started filling up. Then I found a mint-condition torch lamp for \$10 in New Jersey and sold it for \$70. I thought, this is easier than driving a cab! I’ve been here 22 years now. Of course, you never know if some fundamentalist Christian lamp customer is going to pass you by, but I think it cuts both ways. To be self-employed is to be free! That wonderful picture of David that’s in my window? I carried it at the wedding demonstration last weekend.”

OSCAR WILDE MEMORIAL BOOKSHOP

Today, every bookstore in Manhattan, from the behemoths to the dinkiest holdouts, has a gay and lesbian section, but in 1967,

when gay activist Craig Rodwell founded the Oscar Wilde Memorial Bookshop, the words “gay books” were synonymous with gay porn. William Offenbaker, who bought the store after Rodwell’s untimely death three years ago, remembers, “In those years, Oscar Wilde was the *only* place you could find gay and lesbian literature.” According to Martin Duberman’s *Stonewall*, Rodwell was “determined to have a store where gay people did not feel manipulated or used. There was no ‘Adult Reading’ sign in the window, and no peep show in the back room. And the ad Craig later took out in *The Village Voice* was headlined ‘Gay Is Good.’” I ask Offenbaker about reports of the store’s imminent demise, hoping he’ll tell me they’ve been greatly exaggerated. “Of course, we’ve noticed the impact of the big chains,” he admits, but reassures me, “We struggle a lot, but we get by. There are so many dedicated, regular customers. And we’re almost a tourist attraction to gay visitors from all over.”

R. J. WHITE, INC.

You’re standing in the USA’s oldest continually operated gay-owned establishment,” claims D. Michael Iradi proudly, reposing behind a glass case filled with tasteful lavender-enameled pendants, lambda stud earrings, double-female symbol charms, and other delicate jewelry. “I’ve been making commitment bands here since 1954,” the store’s founder, Richard White, chimes in. “I made a set 42 years ago for a couple that’s been together for 50 years. And I made rings for people living on Jane Street that’ve been together 37—they met in the Navy. They say the boys don’t last, but it’s not so.”

“The girls do!” pipes up a very in-love couple picking out their rings. She wants gold, her partner wants silver. I think they’re too young to get married, but I keep my mouth shut. “We have to be the largest gay-themed jewelry store in the world,” adds Iradi. “At one time, in the ’50s, when there were absolutely no maverick priests or sympathetic Unitarians, Richard was almost clergy. The engraver used to tease him when he’d show with a couple of size 12 orders: ‘Oh Richard, you married another couple!’” Is business brisk right now because Pride is coming up? “Oh, no... it’s because it’s June.” ♦