



THE BPA CHARLES GATEWOOD EXHIBIT

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(Unless otherwise noted, all photos are by the author)



Charles Gatewood holds a special place in the heart of the body piercing industry. He used his camera to bring what was once private to the masses. He had a very special ability to capture what others viewed as grotesque in the most beautiful ways. After the passing of Charles last year, the Body Piercing Archive knew how important it was to preserve our history as it intertwined with the photography of Charles Gatewood. From this, the 2017 Body Piercing Archive exhibit at the APP Conference was born. We were fortunate enough to have Eva Marie the “last Gatewood girl” present to lead tours of our exhibit and share her own accounts of her time with Charles. I was able to set some time aside to take one of her docent tours; it was truly the highlight of my Conference week. I



Two views of the BPA Charles Gatewood exhibit. Visible at the rear in the upper photo is the pavilion containing The Dream Machine.

have long been a huge fan of Charles’s work and had begun conversing with him regularly just before he passed. Getting the opportunity to listen to someone share their personal accounts of time spent with Charles, beyond what we can read in a book, was absolutely wonderful. Here is what Eva Marie had to say about her experience at Conference.

“I was first introduced to Charles by his friend Steven Leyba, the painter. Steven had approached me asking if he could use images of me for some of his paintings. Here are my requests he said ‘I need up close, in focus, hi-resolution photos of your genitals.’ I was excited for the collaboration, but wasn’t sure who to approach for such an intimate photoshoot. Several days later I got an email saying ‘My dear friend Charles Gatewood agreed to the photos. Why don’t you give him a call?’

Charles and I talked on the phone several times and set up a time to meet at his studio. When I arrived, he gave me a lovely tour of his penthouse apartment and made a pot of tea. We talked for hours discovering we shared similar interests and hobbies. We both loved to make collages from old magazines, write short stories, and take kooky self-portraits. ‘This is a direct hit my dear!’ We agreed to meet once a week every Sunday, then more and more frequently until I was a full time “Gatewood Girl”.

Charles liked to create and go into what he called magic space. He would get bored with traditional pose and shoot models and would turn down most offers for photoshoots unless he felt someone had a spark. Sometimes he would create magic space with something as simple as a scrap piece of fabric, or he’d use the sunlight peeking through the kitchen windows to create patterns of shadow across your face. He would grab an old can of paint and splash some on a piece of black plywood to create an interesting background. When he got a really killer photograph, he would get a creative high, and his eyes would light up and shine. He always insisted there be a bag of toys, props, and accessories somewhere nearby whether it be goofy sunglasses, studded leather collars, or fuzzy bunny ears. On his



Photo by Eva Marie

Longtime Gatewood companion and archivist Eva Marie with BPA curator Paul King giving another presentation on the photographer at San Francisco’s Center for Sex and Culture

living room table, he kept a fresh bouquet of stargazer lilies, his favorite flowers. There would usually be whipped cream, chocolate syrup, candy sprinkles, or spaghetti-o’s on hand, not to snack on, but for messy splosh photoshoots. There was an inflatable kiddie pool in the living room at all times!

Charles and I would sit in the living room, drinking cups of tea, and he would tell me these incredible stories behind his photographs. We would flip through pages of his books and he would grab Wall Street say ‘Now this is the time I was out with my camera on New Year’s Eve in Manhattan and I got mugged.’ Or pick up True Blood and say ‘This is when a bunch of vampire blood fetishists called me up at 8am for a wild photoshoot that scared even me!’ He would tell me stories about the first time he met Annie Sprinkle and how through her Sprinkle Salon gatherings, he was introduced to Fakir Musafar.

It was amazing to see such an extensive body of his work in one place during this year’s Association of Professional Piercer’s Conference. I was flooded with memories of



Eva Marie commenting on one of the exhibits.

Charles telling me stories and filled with immense gratitude that I was able to share these stories with so many people from all over the world. Some folks were very familiar with Charles Gatewood's books and art, some had stories to share with me of their time with Charles. For those who weren't as familiar with his work, I think they walked away with a definite idea of the contribution Charles made to the history of body piercing. What I thought was really special was every now and then someone would flip through a book or see one of his collages and say 'Hey, that's me!'

I believe Charles was aware of the impact his work had on the Body Piercing Industry. He began photographing pierced people in the '70s after his friend and fellow Hellfire club regular tattoo artist Spider Webb told him that one day piercing would be as popular as tattooing. Charles used to say he made the art he did for the 'True Believers'—the peo-

ple who choose to live outside societal norms. True Believers for him were the folks who weren't afraid to be different or original, and held conviction in the unconventional lifestyles they lived. I believed photographing people in the piercing industry was so significant for him because to Charles, he had found a very special community of True Believers."

Indeed, he had many true believers in our community, with myself being one of them. It was an honor and pleasure to be able to speak with Eva Marie, all while looking at a collection to honor the life and works of Charles Gatewood. I would like to add a special thanks to Paul King, Becky Dill, Matte Erickson, Danielle Greenwood, and Jennifer McMahon for their contributions to this exhibit, without which would have been impossible.

Jennifer McMahon was responsible for building a replica of The Dream Machine which was available to view in the archive display. It brought Charles' vision and the entire display to life. Post conference it was purchased by Steve Joyner and will reside with him as part of his personal collection.



Images from a scrapbook of Gatewood photos

