

# EAST BAY EXPRESS

## Tammy Rae Carland: "What Was Withheld – Tammy Rae Carland's 'Some Of Us Did Not Die'"

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In her new book, the Oakland photographer visually recalls coming of age as a queer woman amid the silenced AIDS epidemic and pre-riot grrrl milieu.

Sitting on a vine-covered bench in the backyard of her North Oakland home, Tammy Rae Carland made an off-handed comment about how bizarre it is to start growing gray hairs. The texture is totally unexpected, like another person's hair growing out of your head, she remarked.

Today, fifty-year-old Carland is known mostly for her fine art photography. Her minimal photographs track the traces that people leave behind and the capacity for objects to encapsulate certain feelings. She's a dean at the California College of the Arts, where she also teaches photography. But, once in a while, she's also called upon to contribute to a documentary, scholarly article, or archive concerning the feminist and queer-centric punk subcultures that she was involved in during the Eighties and Nineties.

A few years ago, Carland was asked to contribute ephemera to New York University's Fales Library Riot Grrrl Collection.

She handed over about 350 riot grrrl and queercore zines that she had made in her twenties – plus, a comprehensive archive of everything put out by Mr. Lady Records and Video, the influential lesbian, feminist record label that she ran with musician Kaia Wilson from 1996 to 2004.

She was also recently on sabbatical from her teaching job, which gave her time to sift through her prolific output, taking an "emotional inventory" of her past before sending it across the country to be crystallized into history. She unearthed material that she hadn't seen in decades, including items she inherited from close friends who eventually died of AIDS. "I became very focused on this idea of an entire part of my generation that didn't get to make it to fifty," she said. "That didn't get to make it to the other side of young adulthood."

It's out of that contemplation that the content for Carland's new book of photography, *Some of Us Did Not Die*, precipitated. The black and white publication was recently released in a run of one hundred by Land and Sea – a tiny, tasteful North Oakland press that focuses on publishing artistic work that has no other outlet. Unlike Carland's recent photographic output, this compilation is overtly personal – diaristic, even. It offers ephemera from her most formative years, honing in on 1986, the year she turned 21.

That was the same year Carland left her home in Maine and first arrived at The Evergreen State College in Washington. For Carland, a queer woman having been involved in a straight, male-dominated East Coast punk scene, the city of Olympia was a refreshingly welcoming place (although still hetero-dominated). Throughout her time there, she began to photograph and self-publish zealously, and contributed to a political and creative community that would eventually birth the riot grrrl movement.

But by the time that riot grrrl took off, Carland was more interested in queer theory than girlhood, she said. And *Some of Us Did Not Die* has subtle inflections of not feeling fully represented even as women

were creating a subculture centered around them. In an emotional way, its contents outline the silencing and erasure of the queer community — both socially, in terms of being "out," and literally, due to the AIDS epidemic of the Eighties. As Carland's singular textual inclusion states, "The book is mostly about what didn't get said, what was withheld, what was cut short, and what was left undocumented."

Aesthetically, *Some of Us Did Not Die* employs Carland's metaphorically minimal aesthetic filtered through her familiarity with zine-making. Rather than singular photographs, most of the pages feature scanned contact sheets — revealing sprocket holes and sequencing, like a miniature film. Others hold scans of crumpled pieces of paper with esoteric notes scrawled on them or envelopes with no indication of what was inside. Many pages show mixtapes without their song lists, others: a box of letters, record sleeves, two clocks side by side, a single pin that reads "SILENCE = DEATH."

Any inclusion of bodies in the book is rare and heavy with apparent intention. The layout and sequencing feels intimately deliberate, with weighted white space acting as punctuation. That aesthetic restraint evokes a sense of quiet, sad aggravation, alluding, through withholding, to the deafening silence that tragically permeated the AIDS epidemic.

The collection of analog objects also wrestles with mortality. Carland's interest in the analog becomes a metaphor for things that were once so important, and are now gone — encapsulated in an earlier era, like so many friends that she lost. "People that I really loved and cared about who were really great thinkers and artists who had a lot to contribute didn't even see the interweb," she said. "It's kind of shocking how fast and furious the height of the AIDS crisis was and then how fast technology moved. To me, there's something about that dynamic that's really interesting for my generation."

Today, the internet offers online spaces for marginalized communities to connect, but Carland came of age at a time when being visible required analog interaction. *Some of Us Did Not Die* is segmented by sequences of "discograms" — exposures that Carland made by placing a disco ball under a dark room enlarger and letting the light refract onto photo paper, capturing the pattern you'd see on a nightclub wall. The discograms refer to a time when Carland would frequent discos, even as a punk, because that was one of the few spaces where queer people could fully exist. "I was really into this idea of the performance of dancing in a gay bar and being seen and sometimes going by yourself but being alone together," said Carland. "[Disco balls] became kind of these memorials to people that died in a way — like trying to create a trace of them."

For every book that Land and Sea puts out, it releases five \$500 artist editions. Carland's comes in a mirrored box with a pink, letterpress print of the lyrics to "There is a Light That Never Goes Out" by The Smiths printed backward. Only when the print is held up to a mirror, can the lyrics be decoded. *Take me out tonight/ Where there's music and there's people and they're young and alive/ Driving in your car/ I never want to go home/ Because I haven't got one anymore.*

It's with loaded details like those letter-pressed lyrics that *Some of Us Did Not Die* manages a remarkable degree of thoughtfulness through what feels like fragments of a film. By oscillating between offering and omission, it expertly navigates the complex spectrum between visibility and invisibility in regards to both identity and politics. Meanwhile, takeaways about grief and growing older, the relationship between materiality and mortality, and the odd experience of grappling with disappearance during the rise of digitization texture the contents with conceptual nuance.

Throughout, Carland is tactfully poetic. Tucked into the end of the artist's edition, there's a photo strip of filmmaker Gene Barnes — a friend to whom Carland dedicates the book, and who died of AIDS-related illnesses at a young age. In a series of four frames, Barnes presents an embedded caption by holding up paper placards: "A very short film." And below, a photo of Carland from the same era holding up her response: "Forever."