

# **Hanging in the Balance**

## **Portraits from the BAGLY Prom**

Zoe Perry-Wood

Courtesy of the artist & Gallery Kayafas

Archival Pigment Prints, 36x24

These images are the result of an eleven-year project photographing the Boston Alliance of Gay & Lesbian Youth (BAGLY) Prom. In this work I explore the challenges faced by youth on the margins of conventional youth culture. The long-term component of this project affords the opportunity to explore visual elements of fluidity in identity in response to shifts in our society's level of acceptance for marginalized youth. This moment in history represents an important juncture when a thirty nine-year tradition continues to play a vital role, while the lives of these youth hang in the balance between historical, outright discrimination and oppression, and imminent, broad social acceptance. The yearly BAGLY Prom fills the hole left when these youth are not allowed to attend, or don't feel a sense of belonging at the traditional youth proms in their own high schools. They are outsiders in their own youth culture and may not yet have a foothold in the adult gay world.

The images in this body of work reveal the delicate balance between youth vulnerability versus defensive self-protection, as these youth grow up facing intolerance of their developing identities. The most recent portraits show youth coming out younger, with more fluid gender identities, exploring and questioning the need for societies rigid gender expectations. The youth show courage and commitment to a more fluid approach to gender. The increased support LGBTQ youth have from their families, communities, and society as a whole, becomes more evident in recent years, with youth coming out at younger ages with a more solid connection and commitment to being themselves. But, in the Trump era there is knowledge of the need to continue the struggle for the right to be who they are. More connected, but softer in their gender identities, increasing numbers of youth attend the most recent Proms draped in trans and gay flags, exhibiting their politics and wearing pins and buttons advertising their preferred pronouns.