

8.3 The portraits of the couturier: Dener Pamplona Abreu and the uses of photography

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A b s t r a c t

This article analyzes the uses of photography in the image construction from and by Dener Pamplona Abreu as a “couturier” through his portraits published in the Brazilian press between 1957 and 1968, that is, from the moment he opens his first Maison in São Paulo, until his breakup with his first wife - when his career begins to decline. I am going to observe how such photographs are used by him to aggregate and spread prestige to the couturier and to his products, especially because of their connection with luxury and elements associated with the past, such as clothing, antique furniture, and art objects. But, on the other hand, they raise questions about his gender and sexual identity, since on these photographs his image approaches what in contemporary gender studies is denominated as “queer”. I am also going to note how those images collaborate to create a mythical image on couturier in Barthesian meaning.

Keywords: *Dener Pamplona Abreu, photography, couturier, Brazilian Fashion, queer.*

gender,
differences,
identities and
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1. Dener Pamplona Abreu and his portraits

In the late 1950s and in the early 1960s, a new kind of professional emerged in Brazil, made up largely of men who were about to act as fashion designers and opened new fashion houses under their own names. These fact soon attracted the attention of the press – in most cases because they began to be patronized by the most important women in Brazilian society. However, at least two of the designers became well known not only for the clothes that they produced for high-class socialites but also for their extravagant well-publicized claims and their appearances. These are Dener Pamplona Abreu (1937-1978) and Clodovil Hernandez (1937-2009), who were also the main protagonists of what was conventionally called the “Needles Wars”, since it was very common for one of them to “stab the other with a needle” in their comments to the press.

There are a large number of articles about Clodovil and Dener in the national press, which has given rise to serious reflections about establishing the identity of this new professional category and, as a result, questions of gender have been raised. This is because the designers habitually crossed the border-line of what was considered the correct way of dressing and broke taboos on the masculine appearance, especially in the first half of the 1960s.

However, I have decided to set out by focusing on the “performances” of Dener Pamplona Abreu, who made use of clothes as icons in a performative manner. This is defined by Judith Butler as “the various ways in which a body shows or produces its cultural signification” (2003, p. 201). The choice is made especially because, from the information that can be found in the press, it is also possible to consult his autobiography which was first published in 1972 (Abreu, 2007) and became “the ideology of his own life where certain *significant* events are selected with a global purpose”. (Bourdieu, 2006, p. 184) This fact draws one’s attention to the construction of the fashion designers’ image (or images) propagated by Dener (which went against the standards of masculinity than in vogue).

But how can one explain that this effeminate fashion-designer was married and had two children? And to make things worse, when this same character posed for photos beside his family, he often cast aside his more outrageous clothes and appeared in a suit and in poses that blended with a belief in heteronormativity. In other words, in “a social world that tends to identify normality with identity as a constancy of oneself” (Bourdieu, 2006, p. 186), Dener lacked the constancy and was multifarious in his representations of himself.

In this article I analyze the uses of photography in the image construction “of” and “by” Dener Pamplona Abreu (1937-1978) as a “couturier” through his portraits published in the Brazilian press between 1957 and 1968, that is, from the moment he opens his first Maison in São Paulo, until his breakup with his first wife - when his career begins to decline. I am also going to observe how such photographs are used by him to aggregate and spread prestige to him and to his products, especially because of their connection with luxury and elements associated with the past, such as clothing, antique furniture, and art objects. But, on the other hand, they raise questions about his gender and sexual identity, since on these photographs his image approaches what in contemporary gender studies is denominated as “queer”.

That is, as Dener used the photographs published in the press to “(...) put oneself in a certain relationship with the world” (Sontag, 2004, p. 14). Although he was not the photographer himself, but the photographed, he used the clothes, the poses and the scenarios to propagate an image of himself

associated with the luxury, the tradition, and the extravagance, associations often established from the “patina” that made of himself by wearing clothes from the past and posing in scenarios that were unsettled by the decoration then in vogue¹⁹⁶.

Furthermore, I analyze how Dener’s photographs can also to some extent be considered performative in an artistic sense since the couturier seems to use portraits to construct, deconstruct, and reconstruct self-images such as “fully conceived and interpreted scenarios” (Rouillé, 2009, p. 376).

2. The clothes of couturier

At a time when the profession of fashion design was relatively unknown in Brazil, Dener seems to have had an unrivaled business acumen because he was aware that it was not enough just to display the models, he had produced but that it was also necessary to show himself alongside his collections. In this way, he gradually became the ‘poster boy’ of his brand and the products that he licensed.

The first example of this practice is the publication of the Rhodia Textile advertising, called *The fashion personality of 1961* (1961, April 04), photographed by Otto Stupakoff and published in *Manchete* magazine, where among other illustrious figures – such as Tom Jobim and Vinícius de Moraes (songwriters and singers of *Bossa Nova*), the designer was invited to pose alongside the models of Rhodia Textile, and was the only one character of the fashion editorial which photo occupied two pages¹⁹⁷.

However, what distinguished him from the other personalities of the advertising was the fact that he was the first person who had a photograph that extended across a double page. The photo in question appeared beside the models who were wearing garments that he had designed. Dener was thus a young 24-year-old fashion designer with collections on display at the 1958 Fashion Festival (*Festival da Moda*) and in National Fair of Textile Industry (*Feira Nacional da Indústria Têxtil - Fenit*) in 1959, but even while creating some models for the Rhodia - a French multinational company - which at that time sought to promote its synthetic fibers in Brazil, he still posed as a star¹⁹⁸.

Photography followed a common pattern in international fashion, which showed the full extent of the fashion designer’s collection since the clothes worn by the models ranged from everyday clothes to full evening dress. The setting was the Maison of the fashion designer, which was also a common practice in the photography of international fashion. The main novelty was the inclusion of the designer within the photograph, since by his striking contrast with the models, his image featured prominently, even if it did not necessarily occupy the central position.

Although much of the picture was filled with sumptuous garments and the grace of his models, it was Dener who attracted most attention. The designer appeared seated in a lavish chair with a leather covering and carved in dark wood of a Brazilian rosewood style. Dener looked tiny when compared with the models and left a space in his seat to be shared with a Siamese cat. Another cat of the same race was reclined on a cushion in front of him and the designer himself was dressed in a shirt, tie, dinner jacket and breeches! His ankles and the lower part of his legs were also on display and the breeches chosen for the photo reminded one of those worn by men at the beginning of the 19th Century.

196 I use here the expression in the sense given by Grant McCracken (2003), for whom the patina, that is, the impression that an object carries marks of the past, would be a way of authenticating the status. Thus, in presenting himself in photographs in clothes that, even new ones, refer to the past, in scenarios composed mostly of pieces of antiquary, and also with pets that, to a certain extent, evoke works of art from other times, for elaborating in his images a kind of “patina” of himself and his universe.

197 Otto Stupakoff (1935-2009) was the first internationally renowned Brazilian fashion photographer and took photos for several foreign magazines such as *Elle*, *Vogue*, *Life*, *Esquire* and *Harper’s Bazaar*. In 1969, a series of 43 photographs was included in the Moma collection – Modern Art Museum, New York. Currently, the Moreira Salles Institute (Brazil) has 16 thousand negatives of the work of the photographer.

198 On the advertising campaigns of Rhodia Têxtil in Brazil in the 1960s, see (Bonadio, 2014).

Apparently, it was based on this picture that Dener went on creating models for other photographs which he would go on to make throughout his career. This image included clothes that were out of fashion or that belonged to the fashion of another time; and the lavish furniture which recalled the past, together with the animals – such as that found in the portraits of monarchs and illustrious figures who since the Renaissance had appeared in paintings beside noble animals, especially dogs. However, since the designer was creating a new tradition, he replaced them with cats – and there was also the cigarette which was a feature that appeared in most of Dener's photos – in the 1960s the act of smoking was considered a form of sophistication. All those elements were a way to suggest that the designer belonged to a prestigious and traditional group.

In the photograph that appeared in *Manchete* magazine on 18th July 1964, with the caption *A Brazilian Style Collection: towards Japan*, Dener appeared alongside the model Mailu – who posed in a dress created by the designer – and wore a suit with a lapel which was larger than the acceptable standard size at that time. The photo was taken in 1964, and Dener has flowing hair that is long for the period. The chair where Dener is seated on, is in the style of the throne of Louis XV which makes the image even more resplendent and the whole effect is exactly the image Dener wished to present of himself – that of a haughty and splendid fashion designer.

Again, Dener is not in the middle of the picture, but as in the photo of 1961, it is he who faces the camera in a way that again makes his presence the central feature. The caption below the picture strengthens this idea by proclaiming that “Dener, with his strong sense of responsibility and indisputable talent, was one of the creators chosen to form the extensive collection (...)”. The photograph is on the opening page of a report with several pages in which other creators appear beside their clothes, but none of them stand out to the same extent as Dener – who seems to be understandable in the midst of a “chaotic mass” of fabrics and designs scattered all over the place.

The impression made by the photos of Dener that appeared in the press from the beginning of the 1960s (when he began to become well known in the printed media) to 1968, the years of his separation from his first wife, Maria Stela Splendore (when the news of his collections began to turn into gossip) makes clear the following: Although his collections may not always be governed by a guiding theme, with regard to his personal image, Dener knew exactly what he was seeking to achieve¹⁹⁹. Through his clothes which were extravagant and out of the fashion, he sought to build an image of a designer-artist or artist-artisan²⁰⁰. However, this was not the only image propagated by Dener, who also allowed himself to be photographed in a suit and tie or shirt and dinner jacket, especially when he appeared alongside his family or with the First Lady Thereza Goulart (1940 -)²⁰¹, who was one of his clients.

Dener had a very clear awareness of his personal image importance, as well as, the fact that this image should not be easy to decipher, simply because of uncertainties about his identity, this led to an even greater interest in his work. In this way, perhaps he was a pioneer in Brazil as he made use of a changeable and performative appearance and spent a part of his time displaying a sexually ambivalent image, and a part of his time as a perfect member of the family and businessman.

199 In the autumn collection which appeared in *O Cruzeiro* magazine published on 18th August 1962, for example, which resorted to several kinds of inspiration such as Turquoise, The Snows of Kilimanjaro, Safari, Chanson Blue, Between the flower and time, Aphrodite of the Pantheon.

200 Diana Crane (2006) classified a costume-designer as an artist-artisan who “laid emphasis on continuity, predictability and elegance” and “made a considerable effort to distinguish his activities from those of his predecessors, emphasizing his autonomy as a creator and the quality of his art” (p. 303).

201 Maria Tereza Goulart was married with João Goulart (1919-1976), who was President of Brazil between 1961-1964. João Goulart was deposed of Brazilian Presidency by military coup in 1964 April.

3. A man in suit

When in May 1965, Dener officially announced that he was going to marry Maria Stela Splendore (1949-), the press quickly turned its eyes to the new couple. At that time, Dener was already a well-known personality and his mannerisms, and way of dressing or the fact that he was a designer by profession, left little doubt about his sexuality. Dener, to use the term of that time was a “queer”. Thus, on May 15th, *Manchete* magazine announced his marriage in the following article which had the heading *Denner (sic): the costume designers can love too*, which said:

Denner who is the most controversial personality of Brazilian haute-couture has announced his marriage to a young girl with a stormy temperament. When the television and radio broadcast the news, there was a malicious smile on the lips of the newscasters and presenters

If the news of the marriage caused a furor in the press, it very likely had the same effect on the public. In August of that year, when the wedding took place, the couple was the subject of at least three reports in *Manchete* magazine and one of them (1965, August 14th) showed Dener beside his future bride on the cover of the magazine, just one week before the wedding! The tradition of keeping the wedding-dress hidden from the groom was not a problem since he had designed it himself.

As it was made clear by an article in *Manchete* magazine on 28th August 1965, the wedding had five thousand guests and was the most widely commented in São Paulo that year. After the wedding reception, the couple stated that they would take refuge in the countryside:

During their honeymoon, they seemed like two kids on holiday, laughing and playing around. They went riding, ran about and played with the green and red macaws that were fluttering outside their chalet. And they took even more delight in a waterfall which they dipped their toes into and splashed around in the fresh water.

In the photos which show this occasion, Dener and Maria Stela were fondling each other without looking at the camera as if they only want to be absorbed in their love. But in all this “casual behavior”, there is one factor that catches one’s attention. Contrary to what the time and place seem to require, Dener does not wear sports clothes but formal shoes and a suit with or without a waistcoat and tie, which formed the ‘uniform’ of the designer when he appeared with his wife and children.

When the photos show Dener, or at least, when he appears together with his family, he knew how to separate the father from the designer. It is as if the designer made use of clothes and poses as a technical means to produce himself (Lauretis, 1994). The uses that Dener made of clothes, appearances and gestures allow one to ascribe to Dener what David Le Breton referred to in his discussion of transsexuals

Far from being evidence with regard to the world, femininity and masculinity are the object of a permanent production for an appropriate use of signs, of a redefinition of oneself that conforms to physical design, and thus become a vast experimental field (2003, p. 32).

In other words, Dener was always involved in a “deliberate staging of himself” (Le Breton, 2003, p. 31), in which clothes and appearances played an essential part. Thus in 1965, most of the photographs in the press projected an image of him as father and husband.

Dener’s marriage was indirectly exploited even for advertising purposes, because there was news about the marriage of the designer in all August editions of *Manchete* magazine.

In the same magazine issue in which the report about his honeymoon was spread, Dener also appeared in an advertisement for stockings manufactured by Titânia and signed by him, in which posed seated on a wooden chair – which looked like a royal throne – holding a packet of stockings in one hand and a cigarette in the other – in which one could also see the wedding ring of the bridegroom²⁰².

That is, the photograph may have been taken before the wedding, but the company probably expected that the “best fashion designer in Brazil” – as the advertisement described him, would be married and would soon be around to spread the advertisement of the stockings.

In the advertisement, the designer appears dressed in an ash grey suit although with blond streaks in his hair. This meant that although he was dressed in the most traditional form possible, he challenged the norms of heterosexuality since having streaks in one’s hair was not socially accepted in Brazil in the mid-1960s. Moreover, these streaks provided grounds for mockery in the *Intervalo* magazine on 22nd February 1964, when Dudu D’Almeida in his *TV Society* column expressed disapproval of the designer’s appearance and stated the following: “Dener – was a guest at the Municipal Ball in Recife, with golden streaks in his hair. Does not our fashion icon know that no one uses golden streaks any longer? (...)”.

As well as the marriage, the pregnancy of Maria Stela and the birth of her children Maria Leopoldina and Frederico Augusto – whose names referred to those of past royal figures, also attracted considerable attention and left no doubt about the ambitions of their father and were the object of numerous reports. It was as if being a father was once more challenging the expectations of the public and soon the paternity of Dener was a reason for a headline!

The report in *O Cruzeiro* called *Dener* that was published on 21st July 1967 included the following statements: *Father for the second time; Frederico Augusto at seven months old; Leading actor in the TV soap opera*. Looking at these can help us understand that far from being the father of an ordinary family, Dener wished to project a very complex identity and that an ambivalent gender would only be one of the factors of this complexity. The article provided the following information:

Dener, who did ballet dancing from the age of 14 to 17 and was a collector of silverware and records of famous operas (he knew 36 by heart), is currently regarded as the principal costume designer in Brazil (...). His dream which he intends to carry out, is to set up a national ballet on as grandiose a scale as that of Marques Cuevas (...). He lives in a well-decorated house (designed by himself) surrounded by precious works of art (...). At the moment, he is devoted to buying old Chinese articles (...). He

²⁰² In many of his photographs, Dener employs a cigarette for advertising since he is often seen clutching a cigarette. It is as if the cigarette formed an indissoluble link with his body and was also a sign of his success.

*loves reading biographies of famous celebrities (...)
He has dressed about 100 elegant people throughout
Brazil. His main passion is Maria Callas. (...)* (p.
196, January 21).

In the photographs illustrating the report, Dener appears in a dinner jacket, pants and shirt. He does not flirt with the camera because his son Frederico Augusto was the center of attention. Even when he appears in one of the photos seated on one of the chairs shaped like a throne, (with Frederico Augusto in his lap), these photographs lack the same lavishness and oddity which associate Dener with the image of a great creator. This is because the clothes chosen are simple and sober – the suit which has been worn since the 19th Century, can be characterized as something suitable for a businessman, and there are no lingering doubts about sexuality (Beward, 2016; Souza, 1987).

There remains the task of showing the *sui generis* character of the costume designer who divided his time between needles, antique collections, and opera records. All this is without ignoring a more popular aspect of his character which is revealed when he welcomes the chance to become a television actor (Manchete, 1967, January 21).

As has been seen, the costume designer seemed to understand that it is possible to form magazine covers of cultural significance through clothes and that these can seem natural when they are close fitting to the body (Entwistle, 2002). However, what is Dener striving to achieve by forming images so disparate as the father and husband devoted to a suit and tie with brilliantine hair or that of the designer omnipresent among his creations and wearing clothes that obliterate the boundaries of gender and often make references to earlier periods of history?

Following the procedure already adopted by other costume designers such as Charles Worth (1825-1895), Jacques Doucet, who often (or at least in some of their most well-known photographs) decided to be photographed in exotic clothes of another period or place²⁰³, it is possible that Dener seeks to show that he is someone with a sensitive eye who does not let himself be carried along with fashion trends and for this reason is in a position to advise his clientele about what to wear for each situation²⁰⁴. This concern to break away from his time seems also to appear in his statements to the press when he says: "I make extremely outmoded costumes [...] I am someone who belongs to the year 1888. In fact, I feel I belong to another century. I have the sophisticated character of Oscar Wilde" (Bianco, Borges & Carrascosa, 2003, p. 188). At that point it is possible to ask: Was Dener really a man of 1888?

I will return to this question in the conclusion.

4. A man of 1968

There seems to be a convention in the fashion field regarding fashion designer clothing, which suggests that the professionals who design new lines of garments should not follow the fashion but create and propagate a striking personal style. It is as if when noting the wishes of society and putting forward new fashions, the costume designer cannot allow himself to be contaminated by this. By renouncing the use of the seasonal novelties, the designer can observe society with greater precision with a view to understanding its desires

203 Some fashion designers still adopt this procedure today. One example is Karl Lagerfeld, a German designer responsible for the Chanel brand, who practically only appears in public wearing black and white clothes with white hair bunched in the form of a pony tail – in a clear reference to the hairstyles for men in the second half of the 18th Century.

204 The setting up of a personal style in contrast with fashionable clothes is a common practice not only among costume designers but also among fashion journalists and formers of public opinion. These reports are written in the "fashion weeks" often by famous journalists and formers of public opinion who go to fashion parades wearing clothes that are neutral and have little connection with fashion, in particular black clothes. The practice seems to have been established for at least 60 years, ever since the film *Funny Face*, directed by Stanley Donen, in 1956, which was set against a backcloth of fashion, and Miss Prescott (Kay Thomas), the editor of the fictitious magazine called *Quality*. In one of the musical scenes of the film, it is decided that 'pink' should be the color of fashion and all her assistants are seen using this color although she herself refuses to give up her black suit

and anxieties, as well as strengthen his image of being a “high-class artist”.

As early as the 19th Century, Charles Worth, had rejected the suit and top hat (at least in his most popular portraits), which characterized the elegant men of the period, and appeared in public wearing a cap and dressed in a smock. This created an image that was not only detached from the fashion then in vogue and corresponded with the image of Rembrandt in some of his self-portraits. Moreover, it underlined the idea that a “consecrated artist” is someone from another age or else someone living in different times.

It is this model created by Worth, which Dener adopted when he displayed himself in breeches, laced cuffs, *jabot*, slippers, buckled shoes and a series of other features from different historical epochs, such as the furniture and the Maison. However, despite being surrounded by and dressed in features from the “past” – even a past that was invented – Dener was a man of his own time – since some of the clothes worn by the designer, did not really belong to a particular time because they blended styles from different periods.

Dener perhaps gradually came to understand not only the ways of imposing himself on the world of fashion and high society, but also learnt how it is possible to experience the changes that occurred in the aftermath of the Second World War in what Hobsbawm described as a “Cultural Revolution”. This broke with the traditional patterns of family life and gender identities to seek a more personal realization and a sense of individuality (1995). And as James Green points out, despite being an effeminate figure who personified “an opposition to the signs of normative behavior with regard to the masculine virility expected of Brazilian males” (1999, p. 26), Dener was fully accepted by the public and was able to move freely in high society.

As already stated, Dener was called a “queer” by his rival Clodovil, and probably was a homosexual, despite being married and having two children. In the photos in which he appears beside Maria Stela, he seems to be entirely absorbed in the relationship. The same applies to the photos with his wife and children where he seems to be a fond father. The devotion to his wife and children did not prevent that in other situations he had effeminate attitudes. But, together with his first wife (since he married again in the 1970s), he often appeared dressed in a suit and tie and showed himself to be a traditional man, at least in some situations.

In summary, Dener was not a person whom it is easy to define, but I venture to say that at least one label can be attached to the costume-designer – through the use of clothes and appearances, his handling of gestures, his attitudes and his statements to the press. Dener not only knew how to turn himself into a great Brazilian designer and possibly had the greatest success of any of his competitors in the 1960s, but also made himself into a celebrity, and why not, a myth²⁰⁵. As Barthes states “(...) myth is a type of speech chosen by history that cannot in any way arise from the nature of things.” It is something that is constituted through representations “but also photography, film, reporting, sport, shows, publicity, all these can serve as a support to mythical speech” (Barthes, 1982, p.132).

Last, but not least, it may be possible also, to point out that Dener, from his design of self, might suspect that, as W.J.T. Mitchell points out, the images have desires and desire “to change places with the spectator, to fix him in his place, to paralyze him” (Mitchell, 2015, p. 174), in a kind of “Medusa”, since many of his photographs have the potential to generate this effect. The couturier, who sought throughout his life to constitute an artistic image through himself, also

205 A research study of newspaper archives at the Biblioteca Nacional [National Library], and more precisely of the examples of the *Cruzeiro* magazine published in the period 1960-1969, obtained 175 results for the names Dener and Denner (this was carried out at a conference where everyone mentioned the costume designer), while the same research for the name Clodovil yielded 79 results

endeavored to be seen not only as “creative genius,” but as a star; in this sense, he seemed to be aware that the light that made him shine was par excellence photography, which, according to André Rouillé, works at the same time as “an optical machine and a machine for illumination, more precisely a machine to produce visibilities (Roillé, 2009, p. 150).

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