

ALOK

23•South Asian•Transfeminine•They/Them•Brooklyn

A lot of my ideas of Femme have shifted from growing up where I did to where I am now. I think I've only really had the space to start creating my own narrative of my gender and my femininity since becoming financially and socially independent. Previously, I didn't really have the ability to buy my own clothes or construct my own image or build my own friend groups. Now I think that as a young adult (whatever that means) living in New York City and not in Texas, I need to admit that being part of New York helped me realize myself in a way that I wouldn't have before. I think that's because I met a critical mass of transfeminine people here. Which is hard for me to grapple with, because one of the things I like about **Femme is that it isn't an urban cosmopolitan phenomenon**, it can be something that happens in your living room, something that happens in front of your mirror, something that happens in your bathroom. But when I started to meet transwomen, transfeminine people, gender nonconforming people, I began to see a social possibility in myself. Like oh, **people actually love these parts of themselves** that I felt so abject and disgusted by.

Since then, **Femme has really become a lot about reclamation** for me. About saying well you think fashion and aesthetics are superficial, but **this is actually where I derive my strength**. Femme is not just an aesthetic, it's a very political endeavor that's thinking about everything that this patriarchal society says is excessive or ridiculous or flamboyant, and finding my strength from that. **Femme for me is also about what it means to be South Asian**. I think about how in India there's tons of transfeminine people, what we call hijras or cotis, and there's a cultural understanding of feminine people that got completely erased in our diaspora. Because in order to assimilate here we had to be very gender-normative and very heteronormative. So growing up I never saw any role models at all of transfeminine people. For me as South Asian, presenting Femme is a way of arguing that my body is part of the lineage of the women of my family, which is really important to me. I feel like **when I do Femme, I'm doing justice to my mother and my female ancestors**. And it's also about trying to remind people that we're out here, that we've always been here.

I want to create a social possibility for other people, who have never really seen bodies like mine, who never thought it was possible. Femme for me is an aesthetic, but it's also a form of politics, a form of resistance that's really invested in challenging not just patriarchy but also transmisogyny. This idea that because I was assigned male at birth and I was assigned that this thing between my legs is a penis, that I have to enter into this ritual or this cult of masculinity, which is just not me and was never me. Femme is my way of saying look girl, we're out here.

I think Femme is also about community. I'm currently on a Femme Strike. As of 2015, I've decided I would no longer do or perform emotional labor for masculine people in my life who do not reciprocate. Femme for me has been about trying to build meaningful relationships with other Feminine of Center people. What happens is so many of us spend our entire lives coveting the cult of masculinity that we jump and topple over each other. **Femme on Femme competition** is the way in which patriarchy and cisnormativity and sexism happens not from masculine people to us, but from us to one another. I saw that so much in my life where I would just be jealous or angry at other Femmes or in this mindset of why are you getting my man, and it was such bullshit. So Femme Strike for me is about building community with other Femmes, specifically transfeminine and nonbinary, gender nonconforming, and trans people of color in my life. We're all in the same struggle but I realize we are all experiencing an isolation, so many of us were just crying at home. Why are we crying alone? Which is why that Femme community is so important.