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Beyond the Binary

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Beyond the Binary
An Exploration of Gender Expression Through Photography

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The College of Wooster
Department of Art and Art History
Studio Art

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The purpose of my senior I.S. is to convey with photography and interviews the complexity of gender expression in the context of our western society. This work is based on my own experiences of navigating 'masculinity' and my own gender identity. My goal is not to create images that contradict prescribed notions of masculinity for the sake of shock and awe. Rather, my images represent a range of identities, some of which are negatively, under-, or mis-represented, allowing for the public to reflect on and question their own perceptions of the gender binary and standards we are held up to. To give more representation and voice to the people I photograph, I have conducted interviews about the subject matter and collaborated with each person to produce a more personal image.

I've structured my writing to begin with my own personal experience growing up queer and the reasons why I want to explore this topic. This will lead into a discussion of the way in which our western society constructs gender and excludes people who do not fall under the gender binary, are transgender, genderqueer, etc…those who "deviate from the norm"[1] through language and visual media. There will then be an analysis of my images and the artists who influence the work, followed by the process and reasoning behind the creation of the images along with some excerpts from the interviews.

My experiences and research on gender issues have fueled my desire to create my work. The autobiographical and research portion of my paper is important to raise awareness of these issues.

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[1] In my paper, "norm" is loosely defined as being an able-bodied, white, educated, upper-middle class, heterosexual male.

AUTOBIOGRAPHY

My mother and father moved with me to North East Ohio from London Ontario when I was about two or three years old. This is where I grew up and went to school. My father is a physician and my mother previously worked in the medical field and raised me at home while pursing her passion for dance and ballet at the local arts center. I grew up around the arts center and eventually participated in one or two of the productions of the Nutcracker. It never once occurred to me that a boy participating in dance was 'not normal' and neither did my peers. I never experienced any sort of criticism growing up for being active in the arts and not pursing what most boys my age were interested in, such as sports or girls.

It was not until high school that I experienced gender policing[2] and bullying primarily through slurs, and verbal harassment. In my school, as well as many other schools across the US, bullying occurs on a daily basis which can lead to violence and other tragic events such as mental health issues and suicide.[3] Why was this bullying happening to me? Well, I was told that I was "gay, a fag, bitch, a pussy…etc." because I dressed differently, socialized with women, was not muscular, and had one close friend who was a guy. The verbal insults occurred because I was not living up to this idealized concept of what a man is supposed to be: tough, emotionally reserved, no "girly things", and the list goes on.[4] What surprised me at the time was that I was not "out" or did not

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[2] I am using the term gender policing to describe the enforcement of gender norms on someone who is perceived as not adequately preforming their perceived gender roles through appearance or behavior.

[3] Kimmel, Michael, *Guyland* New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 2008. 76-80.

[4] IBID. 45-46.

make it known that I was gay, yet I still dealt with gender policing. The bullying of LGBTQIA[5] youth in school is far more common and is a result of lack of understanding, hatred, and gender enforcement. Acts of bullying in schools against anyone can lead to horrible violence and mental health issues.[6] I was fortunate in that I was not a victim of more severe hate crimes. Beyond high school, college for me, is a much more accepting environment.

During my four years at Wooster, I have met amazing people, my best friends, and felt accepted on campus. My brief studies on the topic of gender and hearing the experiences of my friends—allies to and members of the LGBTQ community—have inspired me to purse my I.S. topic. It troubles me that outside of the Wooster campus the enforcement of gender norms is in the "dark ages" (not to deny that it happens on campus). As someone who does not adhere to the gender binary, I find myself presenting as male and preforming "masculinity" due to the pressure to conform to a particular gender. How do these pervasive gender norms manifest themselves in western culture and where do they come from? This is what I want to address in the next section to give a better understanding and raise awareness of my topic.

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[5] Acronym for Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, and Asexual. These will be defined later.

[6] Kimmel, *Guyland* 76-78, and Greytak, E., Kosciw, J., Diaz, Elizabeth M. "Harsh Realities: The Experiences of Transgender Youth in Our Nation's Schools" New York, NY: GLSEN, 2009.

Sex and Gender

In Western society, we commonly think of people as being male or female, and we

usually take that at face value, assuming that a person's gender aligns with the sex they[7]

were assigned at birth:[8]

> Sex is usually defined by physiological and biological categorization. While sex may be defined
> by biology, this does not mean that it is restricted to male or female categories. Many people are
> born intersex, with ambiguous sex chromosomes or genitalia, or with secondary sex characteristics
> that are not strictly male or female.[9]

From birth our culture (or society) makes it necessary to place people into the

category of male or female, and we become fixated on knowing a newborn's anatomy.

Individuals who are born intersex, or even with abnormal sex characteristics (such as an

enlarged clitoris, or a small penis) often undergo several complex surgeries, usually

recommended by a doctor, to "fix" their genitals so that their body aligns more with a

"normal" male or female body.[10] It is truly disgraceful that there seems to be a need to

alter a child's natural body to conform to the expectations of a gender binary based on

anatomy. This illustrates our obsession with gender conformity. A person's physical

attributes do not define their sex or their gender and it is no one's business to tell anyone

how to perform based their anatomy, especially children because this can have profound

impacts in their future such as their ability to feel accepted. Sex and gender are distinct

and cannot be associated with each other.

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[7] I will be using the gender neutral pronoun throughout my discussion to avoid using more gendered
pronouns.

[8] Gagné, Patricia, & Tewksbury, Richard, *Conformity Pressures and Gender Resistance Among
Transgendered Individuals* Social Problems vol. 45, no. 1. 1998. 8.

[9] Corwin, Anna I., "Language and Gender Variance: Constructing Gender Beyond the Male/Female
Binary," *Electronic Journal of Human Sexuality* Vol. 12, 2009. 3-4.

[10] IBID. ;Holmes, Mary. *What is Gender? Sociological Approaches*. London, UK: SAGE Publications,
2007. 26.

There is no obvious point at which sex leaves off and gender begins, partly because there is no single objective biological criterion for male or female sex. Sex is based in a combination of anatomical, endocrinal and chromosomal features, and the selection among these criteria for sex assignment is based very much on cultural beliefs about what actually makes someone male or female. Thus the very definition of the biological categories *male* and *female,* and people's understanding of themselves and others as male or female, is ultimately social.[11]

The moment when it is announced "it's a boy" or "it's a girl," we being to gender children and attach the ideals and norms that come along with being a boy or a girl, man or woman, male or female.[12] Before I explain further, I should define gender, because I am not trying to deny that gender exists. Gender has been crafted by society and is learned over the course of a lifetime in the context of social interactions through mediums such as spoken or visual language, and perceived performance or behavioral norms prescribed to each gender: "One's gender emerges over a lifetime through an interactive process in which individuals accept, reject, or modify the cultural and gender norms in which they are socialized."[13] This quote reinforces the idea that gender is a malleable part of an individual's identity; however, our society makes it difficult to "reject, or modify" gender norms. So what exactly are these norms? When looking at the man-woman dichotomy, we tend to attribute the word "masculine" to men, and "feminine" to women; yet these can also be used as descriptors such as a feminine man, or masculine woman. These words are powerful and shape our perception of gender which I will discuss later. I will primarily analyze the concept of masculinity and its implications because it is what I am most familiar with. I will touch upon the concept of femininity in relation to

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[11] Eckert, P., & McConnell-Ginet, S. *Language and Gender.* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003. 10.

[12] Throughout my paper, I will be occasionally using male/female and man/woman interchangeably.

[13] Corwin. *Language and Gender Variance.* 2009.

masculinity due to the inseparable nature of the two, but first it is necessary to discuss gender identities that fall outside of the man-woman binary.

<u>Sexual Orientation vs. Gender</u>

It is important to distinguish the difference between sex, sexual orientation, and gender when writing on the topic of gender due to confusion between them in the public sphere. Sexual orientation, also known as sexuality, is generally known as the pattern of romantic emotion and sexual attraction, or lack there of, that an individual feels towards other people.[14] Sexuality in our Western society is typically thought of as belonging to one of three categories: one's attraction to someone of the same gender (homosexuality), the opposite gender (heterosexuality), or both genders (bi-sexuality). There have been additions to the spectrum of sexuality that are not as well-known, such as not experiencing sexual attraction (asexuality), or experiencing sexual attraction regardless of gender (pansexuality). Sexuality is independent of one's sex and gender identity.

I have already explained how the gender binary is constructed in our society; however, there are other identities that need to be defined in order to move on with my paper. The T in LGBTQIA stands for "transgender" (adj.) which is defined here by the group GLAAD:

> Transgender is a term used to describe people whose gender identity differs from the sex the doctor marked on their birth certificate. Gender identity is a person's internal, personal sense of being a man or a woman (or someone outside of that gender binary)…People in the transgender community may describe themselves using one (or more) of a wide variety of terms.[15]

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[14] The definition of sexual orientation/sexuality is my own and is not concrete; it is a suggestion.

[15] GLAAD "Transgender FAQ" accessed 02/28/16 <http://www.glaad.org/transgender/transfaq.>

"Genderqueer" is a newer term that "has not entered popular discourse, and has therefore not yet attained a strict definition, its definition is still in flux."[16] The best source that I have found for defining "genderqueer" is as follows:

> Genderqueer…[is a] catch all term for gender identities other than man and woman. People who identify as genderqueer may think of themselves as being both male and female, as being neither male nor female, or as falling completely outside of the gender binary… Some genderqueer people see their identity as one of many possible genders other than male or female, while others see "genderqueer" as an umbrella term that encompasses all of those possible genders. Still others see "genderqueer" as a third gender to complement the traditional two.[17]

Gender expression or performance is the multi-faceted concept of how we perform gender. Our use of speech—such as phonetics and style—language, and embodied performances—i.e. clothing choices, whether or not we wear makeup, posture, and so on—all have gendered meanings in our culture.[18] There is no true correct way to perform gender; however, our society values certain performances over others depending on the way an individual's gender or sex is perceived. Gender expression is usually held up to standards known as "gender norms," or the expectation that a person is either a male or female and that they should act accordingly.

Gender norms are pervasive and harmful to everyone. Gender norms are a part of the larger set of social norms in our culture, which have assigned more value and privilege to certain attributes within race, gender, class, sexuality, ability, education, and so on. Lower valued identity traits experience oppression from systems such as racism, homophobia, classism, sexism, etc…These separate identities are all a part of one's intersecting identities, which all interact with one another and are inseparable, making

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[16] Corwin. *Language and Gender Variance.* 2009. 3.

[17] IBID. 3.

[18] IBID. 5.

everyone's experiences with privilege and oppression different and unique.[19] My research

seeks to explore how gender is constructed and enforced, so I will be looking at gender

norms by first defining the concept of "masculinity" and then applying that to how we

enforce gender norms.

Masculinity, as Carrie Paechter describes it, "becomes 'what men and boys do',

and femininity the Other of that."[20] aside from our applied stereotypes or generalizations

about men, there is no real way of knowing "what men and boys do". What are these

stereotypes? They are usually ways of being which we attribute to the dominant male in

particular social scenarios.[21] Many men do not fulfill these roles, and sometimes the

people who perpetuate these roles are imaginary like an actor or perhaps a business

person.[22] This dominant male behavior which is known as hegemonic masculinity is not

stagnant, it changes over time and is now more than ever, rooted in hyper-masculine

behavior which emphasizes factors such as physical strength, aggression, overt-sexuality,

being emotionally reserved, and most importantly not feminine.

As Paechter's quote stated: "femininity is the Other of what men do". Femininity

is "constructed as a variety of negations of the masculine. . . masculinity and femininity

are not just constructed in relation to each other; their relation is dualistic."[23] What this is

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[19] "Intersectionality: A Tool for Gender and Economic Justice." *AWID*. 2004. accessed 03/02/2016 <https://lgbtq.unc.edu/sites/lgbtq.unc.edu/files/documents/intersectionality_en.pdf>

[20] Paechter, Carrie. "Masculine Femininities/Feminine Masculinities: Power, Identities and Gender." *Gender and Education* Vol. 18, no. 3, 2006. 254.

[21] IBID. 254.

[22] Connell, R. W. *Masculinities* 2nd ed. Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 2005.

[23] Paechter. "Masculine Femininities/Feminine Masculinities" 2006. 256.

saying is that femininity is everything masculinity is not, for example: men are strong, women are weak, men hold power, women do not. Therefore masculinity has cultural power and benefits from the patriarchy or the system which men and being "masculine" is the norm and holds power. Since hegemonic masculinity sets the standard for the ideal man, anyone falling outside of the norm lacks power and representation. Even though I stated earlier that most men fall outside of the category of hegemonic masculinity, gender norms still pervade our society and can be reinforced by anyone or anything, even within oppressed groups.

Men police gender among themselves by comparing each other to unrealistic ideals of what it means to be a man. When they do not live up to these expectations or fall outside of the gender binary, they are labeled as "feminine" or not good and often are harassed verbally and physically. This can attribute to mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, etc. due to rejection and fear of experiencing hate crimes. Heteronormativity, or the concept that men and women should be attracted to the opposite sex reinforces gender norms by demanding that men look and behave like men and the same for women.[24] Even within the LGBTQIA community there are gendered expectations.

Homosexual men still navigate hegemonic masculinity and police gender among the community. Some gay men criticize other gay men for being too feminine and use the term "straight acting" as a way to preserve their own sense of masculinity, even though

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[24] Holmes. *What is Gender?* 2007. 21.

they are not attracted to women and fall outside of the norm and are an oppressed group.[25]

Michèle Alexandre defines the word Sexploitation as: "the legal and social structures that facilitate and, even tacitly, promote gendered norms and ideals via sexual profiling…the tool used to institutionalize and systematically perpetuate gender stereotypes."[26] These gender stereotypes are learned at a young age through the process of socialization, or the way which we learn cultural norms through social institutions such as school, families, work, media, and social interaction.[27] It is in through these social interactions where we police gender on a more personal and confrontational level.

Beyond the assignment of gender at birth, we gender our children through the clothing they wear, (boys wear pants and girls wear dresses) and the toys that they play with (boys can't play with dolls and girls cannot play in the mud). Schools enforce norms with gendered dress codes, bathrooms, and athletics.[28]We teach gender through stories and fairytales that the woman is a helpless damsel in distress and they need a strong brave man to save the day. Kids also learn to gender police by mimicking our societies gendered ideals.[29] Language is another way we exchange information in our society which enforces gender norms.

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[25] IBID. 58.

[26] Alexandre, Michèle. *Sexploitation: Sexual Profiling and the Illusion of Gender.* New York, NY: Routledge, 2015.

[27] Holmes. *What is Gender?* 2007. 67.

[28] Alexandre. *Sexploitation*. 2015. 41.

[29] IBID. 28.

Language is the way our culture exchanges information and gains insight into the

world. The information which is exchanged is not concrete and varies from person to

person, however patterns do occur and even though some forms of language might take

different shapes, we are still able to understand them.

> Where is meaning produced? Our 'circuit of culture' suggests that, in fact, meanings are produced at several different sites and circulated through several different processes or practices(the cultural circuit) Meaning is what gives us a sense of our own identity, of who we are and with whom we 'belong'.[30]

Language is one of the primary ways we understand gender, especially through

speech. Anna Corwin explains how when we say "it's a boy/girl" those words are no

longer just descriptive, they become prescriptive. Anna goes on to state how "the world is

shaped based on language since the little girl [or boy] will be socialized . . . and expected

to act in specific ways based on the statement "it's a girll".[31] Language is not restricted to

only speech, there are visual elements in our world which we derive meaning from that

inform our understanding of ourselves and reinforce gender norms and expectations.

> Meaning is constantly being produced and exchanged in every personal and social interaction in which we take part…. It is also produced in a variety of different *media;* especially, these days in the modern mass media, the means of global communication, by complex technologies, which circulate meanings between different cultures…[32]

<u>MASS MEDIA</u>

We are a visual society, there is no denying that. We are constantly bombarded

with imagery from mass media through the television, movies, magazines, billboards,

advertising, and the internet. We have almost constant unlimited access to these forms of

media with widespread smartphone technology. In more recent years, awareness of the

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[30] Hall, Stuart. *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices.* London: Sage in association with the Open University, 1997. 3.

[31] Corwin. *Language and Gender Variance.* 2009. 4.

[32] Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, 1997. 3.

problematic and unrealistic body and gender representations in mass media has risen and

some people have chosen to fight these issues through literature, analytical film, and

production of body positive campaigns. The list of problematic and non-inclusive

imagery in the media could go on forever, so for the sake of my paper, my exploration of

gender representations and roles in the media is brief.

What I want to reinforce is that since we live in a society dominated by

hegemonic masculinity, the media bombards us with unrealistic body, gender, and

sexuality expectations while lacking representation of positive and diverse

representations of anyone who is not primarily white, straight, and complying with their

apparent gender role.

> The way in which meaning is constructed within male dominated society does not easily allow women to represent themselves except via rather limited patterns or images. . . women are viewed as 'other' and as "lacking."[33]

To take the previous quote a step further, not only women, but anyone who does

not fit the norm are seen as an 'other' and is either not represented or portrayed in a

stereotypical or negative light. Our society does not gain awareness of those who do not

conform to the pervasive norms that are embedded in our society. This goes to show the

power of visual language and how impactful it is on our understanding of humans around

us.

A study done in 2009 interviewed 219 people ,who do not identify as cis-gender[34],

asking them how often and how they felt trans people were portrayed by the media. 73%

of the responders felt as though portrayal was inaccurate, 70% felt that trans

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[33] IBID. 68.

[34] Cis-gender for the purpose of this paper will mean that someone's gender identity aligns with the sex they were assigned at birth.

representation was negative and 95% of responders felt like the media did not care about how they portray trans people.[35] GLADD comes out with yearly reports providing research and statistics on LGBT, people of color, and people with disabilities' representation in television. Here are some of the findings that I found to be illuminating:

Of the 881 regular characters on primetime, 35 (4%) were identified as gay, lesbian, or bisexual—the few that are bisexual are portrayed with harmful stereotypes.—There are 0 Transgender characters on Primetime, and 7 on streamed services and cable—out of those only one transgender man—43% of women are regular characters on primetime, and only 1 character with a disability, lower than previous years, 33% people of color are regular characters on primetime—less than 1% identify as LGBTQ.[36]

This lack of representation for the LGBTQ is dismal, leaving few positive role models who are so desperately needed for members of the LGBTQ community to look up to. This lack of representation along with the media's reinforcement of the gender binary and problematic norms does nothing to benefit our societies views of gender, leading to misunderstanding of those outside the gender binary, all while tainting the perception of gender for those within the LGBTQIA community. The misunderstanding and lack of representation further casts those who identify as LGBTQIA under the shadow of oppression. Those who deal with oppression often are victims of hate crimes, discrimination, and violent life-threatening acts. The tragedies of hate and violence often

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[35] Kermode, Jennie "How Transgender People Experience the Media," *Trans Media Watch.* April 2010. Accessed 02/12/16 <http://www.transmediawatch.org/Documents/How%20Transgender%20People%20Experience%20the%20Media.pdf>

[36] "Where We Are on TV" *GLAAD.* 2015, accessed 03/2/2016. <http://www.glaad.org/files/GLAAD-2015-WWAT.pdf>

leave individuals scarred and unable to lead a normal life that can have tremendous

impacts on mental health, which can lead to poverty, suicide, and substance abuse

especially among LGBTQ youth and people of color.[37]

It has been made very clear through my research of the negative impacts of living

in a gender policed society. We place so much emphasis on our bodies and policing the

way we present ourselves. This has devastating effects on everyone, especially those

within the LGBTQIA community. This research supports the studio art portion by

providing important insight into the topic of my artwork. The power of representation in

visual media is why I chose to use photography to express the complexity of gender

expression in the context of our western society. In the next two sections of my I.S I will

explain the process of how I created the work and then provide a critical analysis of my

own work while discussing the artists who informed my work.

<div align="center">PROCESS</div>

One of the first exciting ideas I had for I.S. was to photograph "man-caves" or

places of comfort or refuge for men, usually filled with all sorts of paraphernalia which

guys collect over the years. Usually, a "man-cave" is filled with stereotypical "guy stuff"

such as sport memorabilia, hunting equipment, smoking rooms, "boys toys" —such as

pool tables, arcade games— and so on. These spaces are typically gendered and "unique"

to the person that created the room which is what I wanted to examine. The final body of

work would have been very "male"-centric and I wanted a more broad spectrum of

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[37] "Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual/Transgender Communities and Mental Health" *Mental Health America.* accessed 03/07/16. <http://www.mentalhealthamerica.net/sites/default/files/Fact_Sheet-GLBT_Cultural_Competency.doc.>

representation as men dominate the media and the art world. I did experiment with the "man-cave" idea early on, which is why I am including my photographs of interior spaces. To add more diversity and relatability to my images, I chose to photograph people instead.

Initially I planned to photograph people and strangers I did not know in order to include a range of identities, however, this required going too far outside of my own comfort zone especially regarding safety. As I continue to photograph individuals in the future, my goal is to expand my collection of images to include a more diverse representation of ages (beyond college age), people of color, queer identities, physical build, and ability because some of these identities are the most under-represented.

The people who had the most time to work with me were my peers and friends of mine. This made the photoshoots much more casual and relaxing. Prior to any images being taken, I always inform whoever I'm photographing what my intentions are and what the photos will be used for. The photoshoots became a collaboration between the people I photographed and myself. I offered most of the models suggestions on how to pose but I ultimately gave them[38] control over position, facial expression, clothing. I wanted them to be as comfortable as possible, and to portray themselves naturally without wearing a "photogenic mask". This turned out to not always be the case in every image as it is difficult to open up and be venerable in front of the camera, which I will discuss in my critical analysis.

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[38] I will be using the gender neutral they/them/their pronouns to refer to the people I photograph unless someone requests that I use other pronouns.

In order to make images quickly and as discretely as possible, I found it best to work with a digital SLR camera, which also allowed me to review the images afterwards. I wanted the subjects to be as comfortable as possible which often took us into tight quarters such as a bedroom. The full frame digital camera paired with an ultra-wide, low aperture lens was perfect for the unknown lighting and size of the environments I would be in. The decision to photograph in color is an aesthetic decision, which is informed by artists who I find influential which I will discuss in the following section of my paper.

<div align="center">Critical Thought and Analysis</div>

I have always played around with idea of doing a body of work dealing with gender identity or sexuality but never knew where to begin or where to look for inspiration. Robert Mapplethorpe's portrait work was an inspiration for me early on. It was not until the College of Wooster Art Museum presented the show *Shapeshifting: Contemporary Masculinities* that I had seriously considered pursuing the subject matter of gender. The work of Alec Soth, Marcella Hackbardt, and Kris Knight in *Shapeshifting* conceptually and visually inspired the body of work which I have created today.

Marcella Hackbardt's series *All Boy* resonated with me as I used to dance at the local arts center in my town. here is an excerpt from the description:

> Photographed at various dance studios in Northeast Ohio, Marcella Hackbardt's 2007 series, *All Boy*, investigates what it is like to be the minority gender in dance classes. According to Hackbardt, "Boys grow up within regulated societal pressures that are no less of a challenge for boys than girls—each faces obstacles to the development of a sense of individuality and belonging. *All Boy* challenges the gender normative and socially approved stereotype of being 'all boy' only if they are rough and tumble". . .the boys themselves were not anxious about whether or not dance is an appropriately male endeavor.[39]

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[39] Zurko, Kitty McManus (curator and director). "SHAPESHIFTING: Contemporary Masculinities" Art Exhibition at The College of Wooster Art Museum, Wooster, OH, Oct. 14-Dec. 7, 2014.

Figure 1

Marcella Hackbardt's images in *All Boy* (Figure 1) are all focused on the subject

of the male dancer in the space where they practice ballet. The studios are simple and

could be interchangeable which maintains the focus on the isolated dancer. The power of

a full body portrait is evident in these images expressing the confidence each dancer has,

as well as an ability to express a range of emotions with subtle gestures. These are some

of the elements used in my own images. Subtle gestures, facial expressions, and body

positioning are all key elements which influence the readability of my images.

Additionally, eye contact is an important aspect of portrait photography. The

subject's eyes have the ability to express emotions and establish a connection with the

photographer and viewer. In the portraits of Conlin, there is a lack of eye contact which

suggests that he is probably either camera shy or perhaps a little introverted. Conlin's

attention is drawn to his cat making the moment between the two caring and intimate,

Figure 3 next page. On the other hand, Acadia's portrait conveys a sense of confidence

and engagement with the camera and audience evident by the direct eye contact, Figure 2. The positioning of the eyes in relation to the camera also holds meaning. For example, if I were to shoot from above my subjects, I would literally be looking down on them which does not have a pleasant connotation. I always kept the portraits at eye level or the subject slightly above my camera to create a sense of balance or engagement with the viewer.

Figure 2

Figure 3

Body positioning and clothing also contains meaning in a portrait. In the context of a "formal" portrait, posture can tell a viewer a lot about the person's confidence. I mentioned in the discussion of gender about how our body posture communicates gendered meanings and this is absolutely relevant in my images. Acadia's portrait is more

open (literally in a way with the positioning of the legs) and engaging with the viewer. The relaxed body posture conveys a sense of comfort and security with themself. Acadia's clothing choice also pushes the ambiguity of their gender which challenges gendered clothing norms. Looking back at Conlin's images, he is never directly facing the camera, which emphasizes the message of an uneasiness around the camera or shyness. Conlin's quiet nature and closeness with his cat is juxtaposed by his "masculine" appearance, especially while wielding an axe.

The axe is a signifier in the image or an object that possess meaning. There are many signifiers through out my images, especially the interior spaces. There is a lack of context for the interiors except for what is contained in them. Sometimes the objects juxtapose one another such as a blonde synthetic wig next to a basket containing nerf guns and a football. Other images such as the cluttered basement, or the blue painted room serve as "portraits" of a person without anyone being physically present. They are spaces which are meant to be contemplated, some might be humorous or relatable. One problem with the interiors might be the readability or continuity with the rest of the show since there is a lack of context for the spaces. In the future, I would like to photograph more of these interiors with more variance.

The placement of the interior photographs in the MacKenzie gallery was intentional. I decided to install the images in a narrow corridor to encourage the audience to take a closer look. The images are smaller and detailed which might get lost in the open-ness of the gallery. The scale of the corridor almost acts as a room within the gallery which I thought was a fitting place for the interior images. In regards to the installation of

the portraits, there is not not be any particular order to them. All of the images from a single photoshoot will be in a cluster together and there will be space between photoshoots. Sean Fader's image layout in his series *SUP?*[40] inspired me to connect the frames together, letting the viewer know the images belong together. The choice of frame style with the sunken image is another aesthetic decision that also follows trends in art world.

The final installation of the portraits will include one large print with secondary images that support and expand upon the larger image. This creates a visual hierarchy over the other images. In the case of Acadia's grouping, the reasoning to place two images on either side of the chair portrait is to demonstrate the multiplicity and layeredness of Acadia's gender expression.

Ben and Liv's portraits are transgressive, provocative, and empowering Ben and Liv are in the queer-punk band PWR BTTM whose progressive lyrics inspire me. Ben and Liv are the only members of PWR BTTM so I felt that it was necessary to include images of both of them. Ben and Liv used the opportunity of being photographed to express themselves in the way they wanted to be seen. I asked Liv if they wanted to take a photo that was less staged for the camera, they refused, resulting in more dramatic and confrontational images. There is also a detail of a heart shaped patch which says "they" in the image of Liv executing a leg raise. The pin is referring to the pronouns which Liv prefers, they/them/theirs.

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[40] IBID.

FIGURE 4

The image of Ben and Liv reclining on the floor is almost like a playful exaggeration of the painting by Kris Knight, *Slumming It* (2013), Figure 4. Knight's dreamy paintings of young men and characters really drew me in. The artists describes the subjects of his paintings as "lost between youth and adulthood . . . they examine performance in relation to the construction, portrayal, and boundaries of sexual and asexual identities." Knights paintings also highlights a "contemporary interest in androgyny, psychotropic alterations, and the post-modern gaze."[41]

Knights use of pastel's are beautiful, but do not convey the same message which I am looking for. I am very drawn to the tones of color and clarity in images made by Alec

Figure 5

Soth.His color pallet is a range of earthy muted tones to with romantic, mundane, tragic, sometimes dangerous subject matter, ranging from the across the midwest, to tourist destinations like Niagra falls. Shots such as *Sugar's, Davenport, Iowa, from 2002,* Figure 5, have a timeless quality which reference works by William Eggleston and Stephan Shore, both artists are credited with bringing color

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[41] IBID.

photography into the fine art realm. The deadpan documentary approach to photography has had an impact on the way I photograph and can be seen throughout the still lives and portraits I have taken.

Other artists who inspire my work include Ryan Pfluger's work from his series *Men I've Met*. Pfluger's models are all photographed in what appears to be different locations unique to the model. There are a few reoccurring backgrounds in his work such a studio with a directional light, however, I am more interested in the ways he incorporates the model's into distinct spaces. Through out the process of making my work, I was able to photograph in people's home, music venues, or hotel rooms we stayed in achieving a unique background for each individual in my work.

It was important for me to make it clear in my artist statement that my portraits did not definitively portray all possibilities of gender expression, they are of my friends and family who I am close with and inspire and inform my understanding of gender. Another concern of mine when presenting this work was "how do I give a voice to the people I am photographing?" To me, using someone's photograph is very personal and you remove that person's ability to communicate besides visual cues from that moment. I did not want to reduce someone's complex identity to a few images to show someone who does not conform to standard norms for shock or awe. I felt that it would be best to include excerpts from interviews I had with each person in the gallery next to their portrait. I will include these excerpts at the end of my paper.

This body of work has made me more aware and compassionate for advocating for equality and change in our society. I have begun a series of images which will

continue, grow, and fluctuate throughout my lifetime alongside my perspective of the world and people I meet. I have formed even closer bonds with some of the people I photographed and it has been a privilege to hear their stories and share a part of that through my art.

<u>Interviews Questions:</u>

1. Is gender an important part of your identity?
2. Do you ever feel the need or pressure to conform to what society expects of you in terms of your gender? In what ways and how:
3. What do you think is important for people to know about gender identity

<u>Responses:</u>

TERIK

1. I would say yes insofar as I feel that I've grown comfortable conducting my life in the gender that I currently identify with. As such I feel it has been an important part of my identity, though I have wondered what it would be like or how my personality would change if it were different.

2. Yes for the most part I feel some pressure to play the idealized hyper-masculine role, but then I realize how much effort it would take for me to pretend to be such a thing.

3. To be aware and open to understanding. And further, I feel like most ignorance can be resolved from genuine conversation, but it does take an open mind and suppression of personal bias.

CONLIN

1. Gender is more important to my identity than I would like it to be. I have always felt pressured to behave and act in certain ways because of my gender, which is often at odds with what is going on in my mind.

2. I feel incredibly pressured to conform to gender norms. I grew up in a rural area where conservatism rules, so having long hair in kindergarten gave me a bad start. Because I didn't look like the other boys I felt very excluded. That, mixed with other similar situations, has made me incredibly anxious and nervous to be different.

3. I think people need to realize that binary gender labels have become such a hurtful thing to so many. If a man is too sensitive, "he's a pussy." If a woman stands up for herself, "she's a bitch"
We place so much value on gender norms, when they hold no merit

JEN

1. Yes, very. As someone with a gender identity that's only constant is its inconsistency navigating that is important. It's mostly important for navigating violence. My body

creates this framework in a lot of people's mind where I am male and I understand myself as male sometimes, but other times as woman, as nonbinary, etc. I see my gender as fluid, which influences my clothing choice, because I never stop to think "This is girls clothing" because fabric isn't sentient enough for gender, I am tho.

2. I feel the need to be more femme when claiming female identity. Even though I know that I will never measure up to cis people's standard of what it means to be a woman, I feel compelled to conform to a quality of "womaness" that people will see as performative of woman. And honestly this performance is most often for cis women, because I know that when someone who has a body like mine and facial hair like mine claims womanhood some cis women feel like they are being made a mockery of and having their experiences diminished, so I up my femme to make myself more comprehensible as a woman to cis women, so that we can have bonds of sisterhood.Other than that I pretty much do what I want and only conform when safety is a major concern. It feels kind of gross, because as someone who is sometimes a woman I know women are much more than feminine and as someone that knows there is more than one way to be a woman, it wreaks of misogyny. Nevertheless, people, even my close friends, don't even humor the notion that I could be considered a woman unless I'm extremely femme, like 6 inch heels femme. And I like heels but I don't like performing gender just like I like wearing whatever I want but don't feel like being the next gender fluid person to get murdered this year. So conforming to what society expects in terms of my gender feels gross because it's a compromise on the sacrifices I make every day to be myself.

3. The normative performance of gender is far stranger than freely performing gender to an individuals liking. The way hegemonic gender norms are enforced, policed, and performed is low key scary and high key violent. Trans people are often overqualified and underemployed because when you look at trans people there's an inability to qualify us positively because culturally we're considered abnormalities, but if people had the opportunity to be who they wanted to be without face hiring discrimination, higher rates of poverty, HIV/AIDS, being disowned by their families, and had lowers chances of being loved openly, we'd be a much larger minority.

ACADIA

1. Gender is a very important part of my identity. I identity as genderqueer and I identified as transgender when I was younger. Unfortunately, gender has been a constant source of discomfort for my life. I've never felt right in my body or assigned gender. I've also feared misunderstanding and violence since I was a toddler about truly living as my identity. The small amount of trans representation in the media wasn't positive either so my identity scared me and I thought I was a freak who never find love. Gender is important because it's been the source of much oppression and repression in my life. At the same time, embracing my identity has benefited me greatly.

2. I've never really conformed to my assigned gender. I was always labeled a Tom boy and then just weirdly alternative; always something to erase the possibility of me being trans. I used to feel pressure to conform to some toxic masculinity in an attempt to make people more likely to recognize my transness. As a lifelong musician, being forced to wear a dress in high school for performance was one of the most dysphoric experiences of my life. Now, I kind of just put a big middle finger up gender's butt to help it relax a bit.

3. It's made up. Gender is a tool of oppression. While it's still important to respect and acknowledge people who identify on the binary, one must also acknowledge that gender is just a performance. The illusion that your genitals should dictate any part of how you express yourself is hierarchical bullshit. Even if one doesn't want to acknowledge the true irrelevance of the binary, the most important aspect of gender identity is respect. If I can respect your choice to categorize according to your genitals, you can respect my choice to transcend.

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