

Arts & Entertainment

She, He, They, Ze: Transgender art and artists at Columbia College



Artwork by Mark Aguhar is part of "Bring Your Own Body: Transgender between archives and aesthetics," a group show at Columbia College. (Mark Aguhar)



By **Lori Waxman**

JANUARY 27, 2016, 5:38 PM

The transgender community lost an icon when [David Bowie](#) died of cancer two weeks ago, days after his 69th birthday and the release of his latest album. Bowie — whose personas included a space alien, a sexual adventurer and a lost astronaut; whose androgyny seduced all, from [Mick Jagger](#) to [Iman](#); whose musical styles ranged from glam rock to jazz and what he called plastic soul — left just as the world has finally begun to catch up with his sexual and gender fluidity.

"Bring Your Own Body: Transgender between archives and aesthetics," a group show at [Columbia College's](#) Glass Curtain Gallery featuring the late surrealist Pierre Molinier, the inimitable Vaginal Davis and Genesis Breyer P-Orridge, as well as up-and-comers like Math Bass, explores the past and present of this moment.

The moment is this: "Transparent," the Amazon.com series now in its second season, won an Emmy last fall for best director and another for its star, Jeffrey Tambor, who portrays Maura Pfefferman, a retired professor who has just come out as a transgender woman at the age of 68. Caitlyn Jenner, the Olympic athlete and reality-television star formerly known as Bruce, announced her transition on national news last spring. The year before, Laverne Cox, who plays a transgender inmate on "Orange is the New Black," became the first openly trans person featured on the cover of Time magazine. Popular media are not radical. Transgender is now.

It was not always so. Up until four years ago, the American Psychiatric Association classified transgender as a disorder. Harry Benjamin, the German emigre and endocrinologist who invented the category, contributes to "B.Y.O.B." a set of his decades-old lecture slides, which present men made up in the bouffant hairdos and housedresses of their generation's women, their need to live as those

women achingly palpable.

Historic photographs and publications borrowed from the Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender and Reproduction and the University of Victoria Transgender Archives tell other stories, most of them a pitiful mixture of the brave and the tragic. In "Glad Rag," a journal published in the '80s and '90s by a U.K. support group, an anonymous man gives advice on how to get a credit card in a female name to avoid hassles when out about town dressed as a woman. What kind of hassles? Nearby hang a trio of mug shots from 1960 showing trans women of color under arrest in Baltimore. Their crime: female impersonation.

How far we've come and yet, transgender people are dying. "B.Y.O.B." is in part a memorial exhibition. Effy Beth, an Argentine artist who performed with her own blood as a stand-in for the menstrual blood she could not biologically produce, took her own life last year at the age of 25. Mark Aguhar stitched gossamer chemises with knotted fringe like droopy breasts and snapped bondage Polaroids of male friends, some sexy but most awkward or cheery. One of her glittery posters proclaims: I'd rather be beautiful than male. She died of suicide at the age of 24, while pursuing a graduate art degree in Chicago.

Yes, "she" and "her." Pronouns are a big deal for transgender people, and English is painfully lacking adequate terminology to describe their reality. Vocabulary validates: it must be unimaginably hard to live life unacknowledged by language, with a name and feelings that don't match your ID card. The alternatives on view here, in the form of wall labels, include a lot of "hers" for artists born male, and the self-declared "Mx. Bond," used by Justin Vivian Bond, a famed chanteuse and drag queen whose glamorous installation includes a chandelier, gold mesh and wallpaper patterned with delicate self-portraits interspersed with the uncannily similar visage of an Estee Lauder cosmetics model. Columbia College offers a series of buttons with more options, including the novel "ze" and "they" used singularly, part of a universitywide campaign to allow students to choose how they'd like to be identified.

For all the importance of pronouns, they're bone-dry. The best work in the show is juicy with humor, like Aguhar's rainbow erotica drawings, so perky with silly patterns the pornographic registers at a delay. Or niv Acosta's comfy cushions, penis-shaped and covered in denim. A pair of wee sculptures by Buzz Slutzky titled Double Incision, one soldered from steel, the other sewn with paper towel and felt, picture breast removal surgery with all the hurt cuteness of an Uglydoll.

(The show, as far as I could tell, almost exclusively includes artists and historic figures classified male at birth, with Slutzky as the exception. That's only part of the story. It's not quite as glamorous, but females transition to male, too, or live somewhere in between.)

A short film by Pauline Boudry and Renate Lorenz features a hirsute and busty lecturer in a woman's gown cracking up, as if Annie Jones, the real-life bearded lady who died in 1902 after a life spent on display in freak shows and medical theaters, finally got the last laugh. In "Southern for P----," Zackary Drucker and her mother trade vagina slang, bleach and style their long platinum hair, and send Drucker off in a flowered mini-dress for an online date. The skit is as ribald in its comedy as it is ideal in its display of parental support for a trans child. Like on the show "Transparent," for which Drucker consults, sophisticated wit — not about trans people but by and with them — forces and confirms a societal shift.

Don't get the joke? Hopefully you will one day soon, darling.

Lori Waxman is a Tribune special contributor and lecturer at the School of the Art Institute.

"Bring Your Own Body: Transgender between archives and aesthetics" runs through Feb. 13 at Glass Curtain Gallery, Columbia College, 1104 S. Wabash Ave., 312-369-6643, www.colum.edu/deps.

ctc-arts@tribpub.com

Twitter @chitribent

Copyright © 2016, Chicago Tribune

This article is related to: [Entertainment](#), [Columbia College Chicago](#), [David Bowie](#), [Mick Jagger](#), [Iman](#)