

Gender, fucked
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In 1995, CoCA sent out a call inviting proposals for an exhibition based on “queer culture.” I don’t know how many queers responded, but I did, and Catherine did. When we learned that ours were the final two proposals CoCA was considering, and that we had both proposed similar “all lesbian exhibitions” (radical in these assimilationist days), we decided to join forces and work together.

Despite what many people think, there actually have been very few exhibitions focusing solely on work by lesbian artists: “A Lesbian Show” in 1978 at the 112 Greene Street Space in New York; “The Great American Lesbian Art Show” (GALAS) in 1980 at the Woman’s Building in Los Angeles; and “All But the Obvious” at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE) in Los Angeles in 1990. That’s it. Nothing major since then. Catherine and I both felt the need for an all lesbian exhibition to counter the heterosexualization of feminist art histories being curated and written at this very moment, as well as the vaporization of lesbians and severance from our feminist roots in queer cultural projects.

We both wanted to curate an exhibition that interrogated gender in relation to lesbian identification—complex relations had in pleasure and in vengeance. First we thought of artists who worked with these issues. We talked, suggested artists, and even works. We asked around, looked at slides and made studio visits when possible. While we both make it our business to know who and what’s “out” there, each of us suggested work by artists the other was unfamiliar with. We didn’t want it simply to be butch and femme. Or heaven forbid, all butch. Or all femme.

From this initial list we began to see what issues and images emerged. For instance, when lesbians challenge constructs of gender, we are usually right in the middle of that sacred territory, “the family,” a hetero minefield that lesbians disturb by their very occupation.

Our collaboration is crucial to both the focus and diversity of the exhibition. We’ve both been around since the ‘70s and travel back and forth across the country. Catherine lives in Los Angeles and I in a small village near Santa Fe. She’s more west coast based and, because I lived and worked in New York from 1969 to 1984, I am more east coast based. While we are both interested in a range of work, we have expertise in different areas, Catherine in camera-derived work and text, myself more object oriented—painting, drawing, sculpture and installations. Catherine is, if I may say so, more conceptual and I’m more hands-on, interested in materials and process.

Obviously we have individual preferences and tastes, but we both like transgressive work that mixes up the categories and constructions, work that resists easy readings. Specifically, we wanted to examine that visual work from a lesbian subjectification that messes up, expands, extends, and dissolves the binary construction of gender mandated by patriarchy.

One of the interesting (and I think noteworthy) items to emerge is the realization that this exhibition of very contemporary work created in the last few years is cross-generational, with artists ranging from their early ‘30s to almost 60. The exhibition is also national in scope and easily could have included twice as many artists if we had the space.

Most of the works in *Gender, fucked* recolonize territories previously claimed by heterosexual feminists and by gay men. Any slippages are intentional. We are pleased. Good women, good art. What more could a girl want?

Harmony Hammond

Gender...fucked. It could mean so many lovely things: transgression of what Jacques Lacan called the system of urinary segregation, the play of a drag performance designed to expose the production of the very femininity it purports naturally to crave, the triumph of a seamless rendition of machismo, exasperated resignation at a rotten idea, a particularly excellent genderfuck, a sort of revolutionary insurrection of desire, or perhaps the future and emphatically more defiant pluperfect of gender bending. That it means all these things, and more, is a symptom of the fact that everybody's "doing" gender these days—erudite philosophers and canny talk show hosts, pre-op m-to-lesbians and unreconstructed whores—in a sort of millenarian orgy of autobiographical revelation and safe(r) sex perversity. Indeed, the 1990s may well be remembered as the decade when gender was discovered: altering it, revising it, reading it, crossing it, signifying it, performing it, inventing it, proliferating it, coloring it, erasing it, multiplying it, demolishing it. This, however, is a lesbian exhibition, hardly because we're the only people with a stake in gender, but because of our particular situation in relation to the uses of gender. In pragmatic terms, Monique Wittig's celebrated dictum be damned, momentarily, we are not only women but second class women, woman enough for no one, woman too much for everyone—fags, straight feminists, regular guys. We are everywhere and we are everywhere disappeared, vaporized in a queer movement dominated by gay men, a feminist movement dominated by heterosexual women, and a post-colonial movement that generally heterosexualizes race.

A short historical primer, then, a *précis* of the skirmishes. In the effort to combat gender oppression (a.k.a. feminism), certain lesbians have acknowledged a particular, necessary and often unpopular investment in unhooking gender from sex, in uncoupling the social construct "gender" from the biological attributes called "sex," in undoing the idea—to schematize it crudely—that what's between our ears follows from what's between our legs. If the term "woman" is meaningful only within a heterosexual economy, if the institution of heterosexuality constructs and enforces gender binarism, a lesbian investment in deconstructing heterosexuality by taking apart the idea of gender could not be other than radically reasoned and radically received. How else can one explain the immense impact of theorists like Wittig, Rubin and Butler on second-wave, dominantly heterosexual, feminism?

This is not to say, of course, that lesbians, or feminists, have presented a unified front on the implications of gender. Far from it. In so far as lesbians have functioned as the self-appointed incarnation of essentialist feminism (i.e. feminism is the theory, lesbianism is the practice), lesbians have also been among the harshest critics of the threat to the status of women posed by the transgendered (remember Janice Raymond? the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival?), functioning literally as conservators of gender. Let us recognize, though, an alliance of more than theoretical convenience between certain sex radicals and lesbians, some biological women and some not. Let us acknowledge that fags and m-to-fs have been our allies and our teachers, blowing the lid off certain silences, allowing us to imagine what we might appropriate for our play, positioning us to investigate the slippery ground of gender, sex, and sexuality with a politics rarely born of privilege.

This, then, is the context for *Gender, fucked*—a sampling of work that unravels gender, opens it out, refuses its binary, invents it before our eyes, relocates its signs, readdresses the objects of its desire, in fact, calls into question everything but fucking.

Unsolved Crimes: Sex, Gender and Dykes

Masculinity is a necessary territory to recolonize, and an irresistible moving target. Linn Underhill's *Drag Piece*, with its Muybridge-like dissection of the gestures of putting on the phallus, allows us to see some of the nuances, plotting the transformation of a butch dyke into not just any passing man but into the prototypical WASP suit. This film, however, we can run backward, taking pleasure in the perfection of the masquerade while relishing our knowledge that under the costume is the body of a woman. Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan's artists' book *In the LIFE* aims the heavy artillery of photojournalism at another classic performance of masculinity, the bulldagger. While parodying the breathless titillation of the mainstream's ponderous delectation of *The Other*, Dempsey and Millan simultaneously produce a tongue-in-cheek tribute to the life of one very big butch surrounded by adoring women, carnivore among vegetarians, fox in the hen house.

Catherine Opie's work has long dealt with the "being and having" (to borrow the title of an early series) of gender drag of all sorts, whether achieved through hormones, surgery, costume, gesture, or attitude. *Mitch* has sat for various portraits over the years and, although the title does not so identify him, is a lesbian-to-male pre-op transsexual. *Renée*, on the other hand, reads as a faggy sailor in uniform, in other words, as a female body performing a man who desires men. We are left to speculate as to how deeply the performance of masculinity is marked on and marks the body, whether it resides on the surface, in mind and in memory, or at some molecular level we would prefer to consider immutable, against the evidence of our eyes and our intelligence.

These are representations of masculinity that play with and on the conundrum of the visible body. In contrast, Deborah Kass inhabits the space of the male artist—specifically the work of Andy Warhol—to introduce her own heroes, heroines, and allies. By remaking the oeuvre of America's most celebrated homosexual artist in what appears to be simple homage, Kass functions as an admiring but determined saboteur. Mary Klein's *Inverted Hat (for Brandon)* declines any figurative representation of Brandon Teena, a 21 year old passing man raped and murdered in the small Nebraska town where he had chosen to invent himself in a new gender. Instead, Klein's memorial and homage to this gender outlaw tells the story through quotes from those who knew him. Klein recirculates a community's projections on, and desires for, a figure of manliness that we never actually see, compelling our complicity in producing yet another fiction of masculinity.

Other artists address the institutions that construct masculinity by the reiteration of heterosexual difference. In *Families Next Door*, Cheri Gaulke and Sue Maberry appropriate commercial studio portraits of families. That is to say, they turn to their own use a means of representation that produces and surveils heterosexuality in popular (a.k.a. dominant) culture, but they switch the objects of the camera's gaze, using framed portraits of gay and lesbian couples with their children. In addition to the clear political message, the work's erasure of the sexually (in)different gendering of the "family unit" renders apparitional the masculinity constructed by that institutionalized heterosexuality. Kaucilya Brooke's photo-novella/comic strip *Tit for Twat: Madam and Eve in the Garden* demolishes a canonical (well, in this culture, that's the canonical...) story of heterosexuality by writing lesbians, and race, in from the very beginning. Adam is disappeared to make room for another kind of difference.

Brooke's omniscient narrators are popular talk show hosts, like Donahue and Oprah. In sweet revenge, Brooke fills their thought balloons with reasonable, sympathetic, even objective insights about sexual and philosophical differences among lesbians, two of whom are shown walking naked through the desert in bloom.

"Male" functions as the dominant term in the gender hierarchy—indeed the only term, since "female" is merely the second, lesser term that reflects and enables the existence of "male." It's therefore not surprising that a number of lesbian artists choose to mine the landscape of the unwomanly, selecting a strategy of avoiding the margins, and being marginalized, by playing havoc in and from the position of excess. Take, for example, Donna Evans's "hoyden" drawings, a hoyden being "a high-spirited or saucy girl, a boisterous, ill-bred girl—a tomboy." Evans's work is a compacted inventory of women who deviate from proper femininity, by virtue (serendipitously, a word derived from the Latin for "manliness") of rage, sexual desire, intelligence, class, size, hairiness, strength, and so down the familiar list. Or consider Nicole Eisenman's prototypical bad girls, the legion of (literally) castrating females gamboling among abject, silly, unmanned men. Eisenman's women, however, are as bent on investigating their own kind as they are on undoing masculinity. In an hilarious demolition of Freud's castration theory, to say nothing of reams of heterosexual feminist exegesis thereon, Eisenman's little dykes in *First Gaze* line up eagerly to get a good look at the genitalia of an outsized naked woman, butt in the air.

Deborah Bright's photo/text work *The Management of Desire* vividly suggests the gender battle waged to control women's bodies. Bright inserts herself into the world of a Thomas Eakins painting depicting a mastectomy by montaging herself, a defiant post-mastectomy Olympia, into relation with the one woman Eakins situates among the men in the operating theater, the nurse. The work reiterates the notion that a woman would be unsexed—or more accurately, ungendered—by removal of a breast, only to refuse victim status—or a desexualized and degendered status—for that woman. Bright cuts herself into a work and a world bent on cutting her out.

Other artists have chosen to work closely with contradictions and paradoxes in the very formation of gender. In so doing, they imagine states between, along, and beside the two (or three, or four . . .) conventional genders. Often, this involves locating desire and the formation of gender in childhood, thus exploding the notion of any pre-sexual state or any state of innocence, and by implication even the idea of childhood itself. The sculptures of Julia Kunin and Maria Elena Gonzalez, for example, make sexy chaos of gender, suggesting in quite different ways the erotic potential of an unruly collision of signs. Nicola Tyson's drawings invoke surrealism to unp(r)ick gender, and in so doing suggest to us how surrealism might have functioned freed of misogyny. Bodies of uncertain age and utterly uncertain sex undergo *change*, ballooning and shrinking, growing cunts, dicks, anuses, mouths and nipples in unexpected places. Childhood fears are writ large, freakishness transmuted into a kind of daredevil curiosity. Carrie Moyer's paintings often play explicitly on the figure of an empowered little dyke who revels in the world of older lesbians, angling to be seduced by the mythical predator in a trench coat, wanting—indeed fucking—the mother and the girlfriend too. Or, Moyer inverts that cliché of abject, heterosexual femininity, a mouth smeared with red, turning it into a battlecry for lesbian sex by her title: *The Pussy Eater*.

Some artists work not so much within the field of the unwomanly as within the

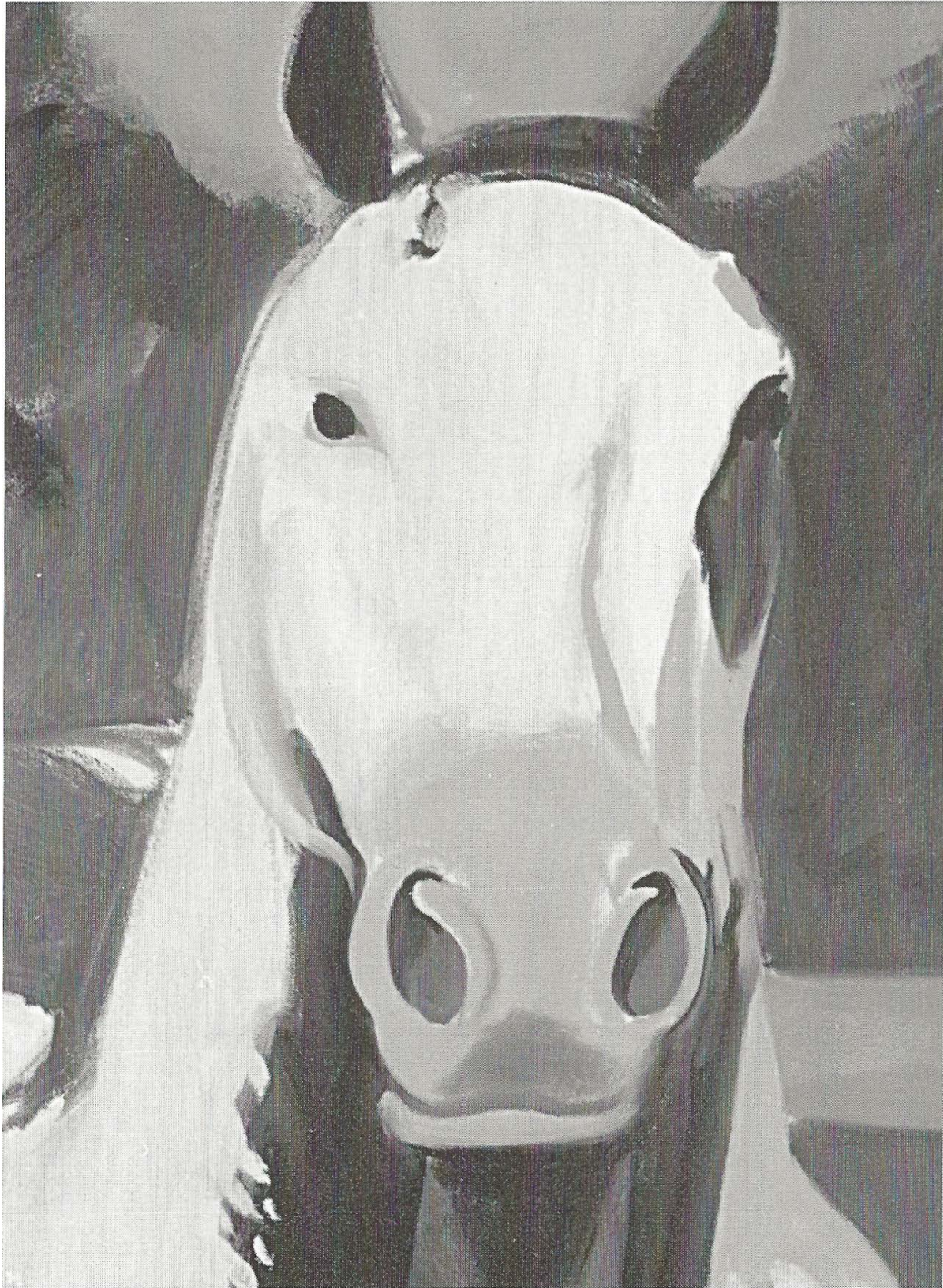
bounds of what might be read as the conventionally feminized, whether or not that performance be intended as seamless or even seamlessly femme. Elise Dodeles requires of us patience with ambiguity, a state of suspended disbelief. Her representation of herself, an apparent “femme” with dildo strapped on, insists on “femme” in relation to signs for butch, backed by the monumental authority of the tradition of realistic figure painting. Hanh Thi Pham, describing herself as a female-to-female transsexual, confronts the sexism of religion while producing a pro-sex, pro-woman, terrorist macho femme. (Or, as one of her text panels reads, “A MIDGET DUDE WITH A HARD ASS AND A CLIT TAIL THAT WORKS AS A DILDO.”) Pham locates her pro-sex representations at the feet of the Buddha, disconcertingly suggesting the links between gender, nationality, and religion.

Claire Garoutte’s documentary series on an s/m lesbian community locates the construction of femme—and butch—within relations of consensual pain and sexual power. Amy Adler’s *What Happened to Amy?* depicts a pretty, preteen girl posing conventionally in a dress. All seems business as usual, representationally speaking, until one deduces that the work consists of photographs of painstakingly rendered drawings themselves based on photographs. But using this strategy, Adler labors within the gaze of that male photographer for whom she had been flirting so many years ago, setting up a *mise en abyme* of mirrored desire—male, lesbian, femme, autoerotic. Jocelyn Taylor’s video installation places the artist’s body, the body of a naked black lesbian woman, on the fine edge between surrender and control—lying still underwater, or striding through the streets of lower Manhattan. Taylor frames the images of her body—defiantly naked, defiantly female, defiantly black—with a mass of text from Audre Lorde and Lorraine O’Grady, rewritten by hand on the walls that surround her small video monitors. The texts quoted, and the labor of reinscribing those texts by hand, address woman’s reclaiming of the erotic, the exclusion of the non-white from the construction of “woman,” and the predicaments of the “exotic” object of desire turning herself into a subject.

A caution, lest the artists (or the curators) be mistaken for inhabitants of a utopia. It has no fixed address. No one stays there long. These artists are working to create the conditions of lesbian visibility by working around and about, among other things, the conditions of gender. There is no other choice: we have to go forth and multiply, to borrow a handy phrase. At the same time by its very visibility the work of these artists, and the various others working in this vein, runs the risk of once more commodifying gender, of being a heightened, more elaborate, even more decorative articulation of the same old system of sexual (in)difference.

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Patricia Cronin
Hot Shot, 1996

Oil on canvas, 24" x 18"
Courtesy of the artist