

BODY OF WORK

DEVIANT BODIES 2.0

CEPA GALLERY

BUFFALO, NEW YORK

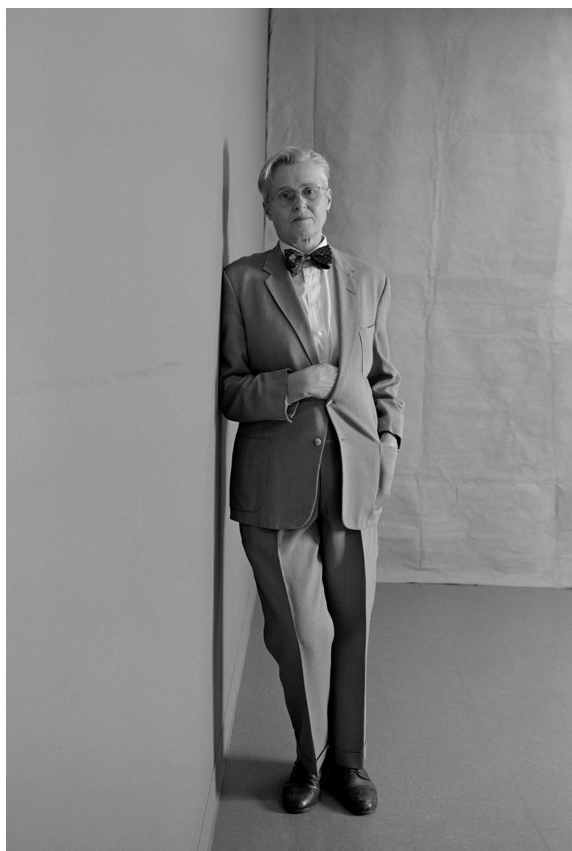
SEPTEMBER 29–DECEMBER 17, 2006

Following on the heels of the Center for Exploratory and Perceptual Art's (CEPA) groundbreaking 2004 exhibition "Deviant Bodies 1.0," which explored not art *by* gay men, not art *about* gay men, but rather the gay male aesthetic in visual art/media, "Deviant Bodies 2.0" focuses on work by, about, and from within the transgendered community.

"Deviant Bodies 2.0," curated by CEPA Executive Director Lawrence F. Brose and J.R. Martin-Alexander, explores a wide range of experience as expressed through photography-based visual media by and about "transgender[s], genderqueer[s], and [those from] gender variant perspectives," as noted on the gallery's Web site. "Deviant Bodies 2.0" is an expansive exhibition that covers spaces on three separate floors. The work in this provocative and important exhibition reflects the viewpoints of this varied group of artists, as well as the perspectives of artists *about* these "transgender warriors," to borrow a term from the title of activist Leslie Feinberg's 1997 book. It successfully identifies the beginnings of both new ways of being in the world and a new type of community.

Precisely because of the subject matter explored by these artists, the use of self-portraiture or, at the very least, the exploration of the body and its parts, is prevalent. Tobaron Waxman, for example, a Toronto-based photographer, depicts through large-format photographs female-to-male (FTM) persons, post mastectomy, interacting with members of a Hassidic community. Seen in photographs of ritualized haircuts, a prayer session, and expressions of affection, the unclothed central figure (wearing not even a yarmulke [skullcap] or tallis [prayer shawl]) is shocking—less for the unspecific gender and nudity than for the number of tattoos visible on his body—since bodily decoration like tattoos and piercings are proscribed in Orthodox Judaism.

Del LaGrace Volcano, a London-based artist, is represented here with a series of self-portraits—six of them busts, two full figure. The black-and-white backgrounds (perhaps small black tiles with white grout) allow the life-size portraits to be viewed head-on, so to speak. The tremendous variation of gender presentation among these eight portraits of the same individual removes limitations and describes just some of the choices open to any one of us. In addition to the self-portraiture, and in perhaps the most poignant image in the exhibition, *Bitte and Andy on a Bicycle* (*Stockholm, Sweden 2006*) (2006), Volcano photographed two nongender-specific individuals on a bicycle, wearing archaic, turn-of-the-century gender-specific dress. Behind them, clearly visible, is a bridge connecting the past and present while spanning across genders.



Linn Underhill of Lisle, New York, in a series of twenty elegant self-portraits titled "No Man's Land" (1999–2000), explores male privilege and its glamour. Referencing the work of gay male photographer George Platt Lynes in the 1930s through 1950s, Underhill transports herself, and us, to a time period that may have looked marvelous, but in retrospect was dangerous and frightening to everyone other than wealthy, white, heterosexual males. In these evocative 11- x 14-inch silver gelatin photos, the artist depicts herself in clothing ranging from period suits to informal attire to formal evening wear. The sheer variety of clothing from the period gives new meaning to the phrase "Out of the closet and into the street," and a natty closet it is. The poses, often with legs spread akimbo, a jacket or suit coat thrown casually over a shoulder, a Homberg hat placed squarely on the head or at a jaunty angle, speak volumes about the dominant role played by men in society of that period but question that very privilege when the gender of the model is unspecific.

In *Transfigurations* (2003–5), Santa Cruz, California, photographer Jana Marcus celebrates the experience of FTM individuals; and then goes on to document the experience of male-to-female subjects. Each black-and-white photograph is accompanied by a statement from the person photographed. The statements, like the photographs themselves, illuminate a variety of experience and perspective, often hard-won. As Marcus states in the exhibition catalog, "I discovered

ABOVE

Untitled photograph from the series "No Man's Land" (1999–2000) by Linn Underhill

that gender is both real and illusory, natural and constructed.” And that is certainly true among the people photographed here. They range from Matt, a bearded FTM posed with his child Blake (“I had been a man for six years when I conceived my son”); to Ken, age twenty nine, who remarks, “[b]eing a man differs greatly between Chinese and American cultures”; to the lovely Nori, who states that “[b]eing a woman means my looks are important,” a hard, often unpleasant truism. The presentation of this multi-panel work bears more similarity to an expository display than to an artwork. Hence, the visages and the accompanying testimonials carry meaning, rather than the medium itself. This direct approach is installed, appropriately, in a special ground floor gallery space that is accessible to the general public at all times.

Also available to the public around the clock is “One Night in New York” (2006) by Jaishri Abichandani of New York City and Bombay, India, installed in CEPAs Window on Main Street. This multimedia installation, incorporating video, sound, kinetic light boxes, and still photography, features personal portraits of Muslim drag queens, with specific references to Indian art and culture.

In addition to photographs, this large exhibition includes videos by several artists, two sculptural installations, and monoprints on handmade paper. The monoprints and one installation are by Emmett Ramstad of Minneapolis. The paper, which incorporates gauze, is in mottled hues of browns and pinks, the varying colors of drying blood. The prints, with figures stitched into the paper, outline a human body seen from the front, rear, side, or as a hand holding a penis. The monoprints are suspended away from the wall, allowing both sides to be visible.

Accompanying the monoprints is Ramstad’s 12 - x 1-foot installation of a series of wood shelves, each surmounted by a brown pillow of rich fabric with an embroidered outline of a hand or pair of hands. Atop the pillows are twenty-two small round cases (with clear tops) that contain gauze and small bits—described in explanatory material for the exhibition as “surgical remains.” This work concerns the surgery necessary to transform the body; stitches can both heal a wound and simultaneously outline for emphasis or clarity.

Perhaps the most popular (and rightfully so) piece in “Deviant Bodies 2.0” is *Trapped* (1999) by Austin, Texas-based Sandy Stone. It is a small (17 inches long) fully functional maquette for a proposed human-scale work. What appears to be a human figure is completely wrapped in dirty cloth, banded with ropes, lying on a bed of ashes. The figure moves intermittently (mechanized from beneath) and appears to be struggling to escape its bindings, with audible sounds of struggle as it does so. Because the movement and audio is sporadic, it is both surprising to the casual viewer and all the more convincing. This is a stunning piece.

In “Deviant Bodies 2.0,” videos by several artists play in four separate booths. Mirha-Soleil Ross, a Quebec-based videographer

and performance artist, presents *Tremblement de Chair* (2001), an abstracted work involving body parts in unusual colors. Jay Sennett, from Ypsilanti, Michigan, shares *Phallosy* (2000), an autobiographical, double-exposed, sepia-toned video on the struggles of a FTM, which includes the memorable note “I’ll never be able to ejaculate.” *Operation Invert* (2003), a video by Tara Mateik of New York, compares Botox-related plastic surgery and gender reassignment surgery. Mateik reveals the often paradoxical medical regulations that permit physical alteration through plastic surgery while they are much more restrictive concerning gender reassignment surgery. Plastic surgery is generally used to heighten or enhance gender differences and can take place under casual circumstances such as “Botox house parties” where doctors make house calls to administer injections to groups of friends. At the same time, gender reassignment surgery requires a recommendation from a therapist. This double standard becomes particularly clear if we consider that plastic surgery is often “elective” and is just a cosmetic enhancement; gender reassignment surgery is, by comparison, radically transformative of self and to those individuals who pursue it, vitally necessary.

Phillipe Lonestar, of Oakland, California, exhibited three videos about childhood and gender difference. Often employing bright, kitschy colors and adults reenacting varying childhood experiences ranging from the chaos of *Something Wonderful to Say* (2004) to the troubled tableaux of *Secret Picnic* (2004) to the celebratory *Gender Play!* (2004), these videos are both entertaining and scary.

Michela Ledwidge, a London-based artist, allows us to assist in the creation of her work, *T** (2004). Using a keyboard, the viewer creates their own version of this multimedia piece, remixing one Web installation and three videos. The clips include those of a civil wedding, a figure skating in an urban environment, a solo performance, and very fast moving shots of passport and other official identification cards that identify gender. The juxtapositions and soundtracks are enthralling and just plain entertaining.

“Deviant Bodies 2.0” brings together a wide range of media and approaches in a significant body of work. The perspective of this community is that of a marginalized group of individuals who are at worst discriminated against, and at best much put upon. Yet the exhibition is remarkably liberating. With so many ways of being in the world, individual gender or sexual presentations of the self can be, and are, fluid for all of us. For viewers, it becomes clear that our choices are broad in terms of what we feel, think, and experience and how we choose or are compelled to present them to others. In this exhibition, CEPA successfully presents a broad spectrum of photography-based artwork concerning the gender variant experience and, once again, demonstrates its ability to present pioneering, important new work.

REINE HAUSER is an arts administrator and critic.