

The New Museum Takes Aim With ‘Trigger: Gender as a Tool and a Weapon’

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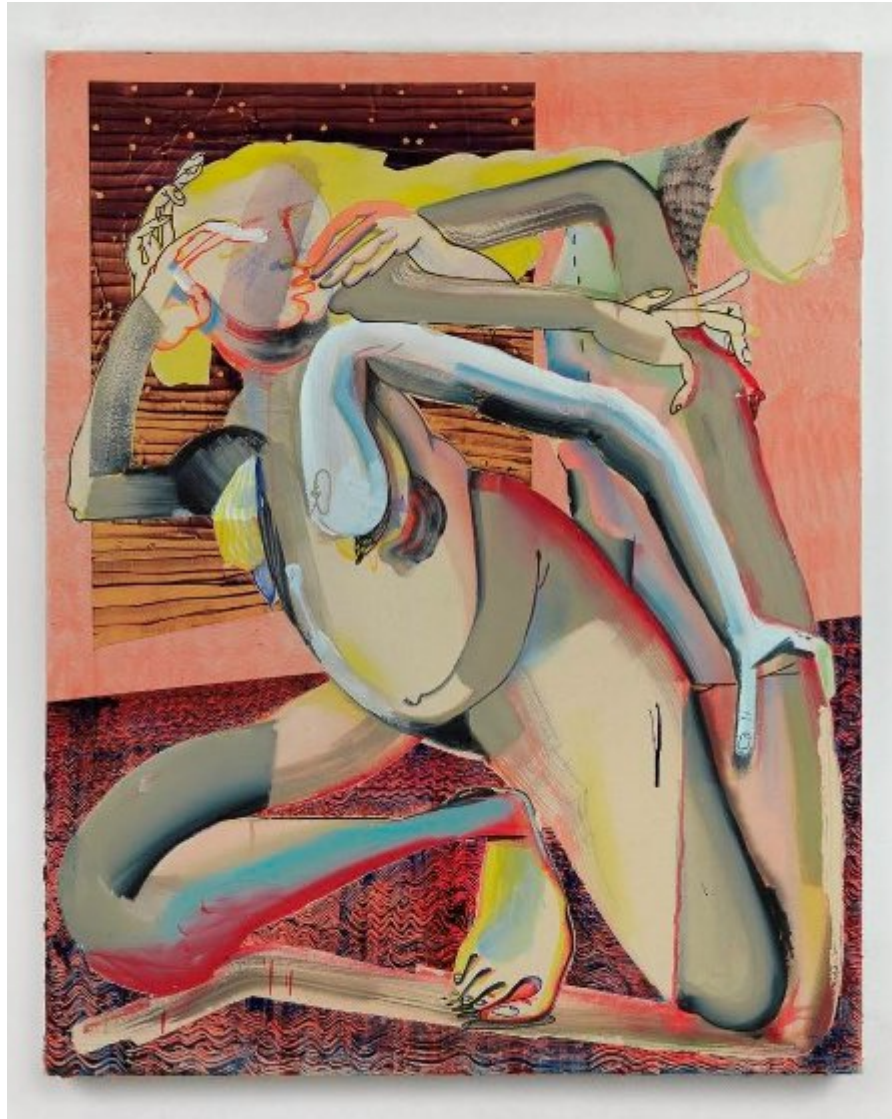
Sandra Bertrand



Imagine you're standing in front of a mirror, then suddenly the glass in your gaze shatters. The "you" perceived is suddenly in a thousand pieces and where are you now? It's that disorientation that defines the New Museum's current exhibit on gender and you'd be wise to leave any residual ideas about identity at the door. Just when you thought the social contract had allowed for a comfortable assimilation of most if not all parties on the planet, the 42 mostly LGBTQ-identified artists and collectives in "Trigger: Gender as a Tool and a Weapon" blast that assumption apart. Just how they manage to do that remains a bit of a mystery, but the tools are familiar to most museum-goers. Installations, text pieces, photography, performance art, expressive paintings, and a fulsome and flashy series of videos are all in the mix.

Race and class remain combustible issues here.

Diamond Stingily, a transgender woman who at 27 is one of the youngest artists represented, has said that it's a good thing if the art world "gets more people who look like me to come into those spaces and not have them be so exclusive to a predominantly white audience."



Johanna Burton, "Trigger's" head curator estimates that two-thirds of the show's participants have no gallery representation. That may be the case, but much of the work on display screams out to be noticed—not unlike Stingily's 200-foot-long synthetic black hair she created that runs through four gallery floors of the museum. (A Chicago-born artist, her childhood was spent largely in her mother's hair salon and hair is obviously an unmistakable power symbol to this artist.) If identity is nothing short of fluid, Nayland Blake's most obvious attempt at

trans-species self-portraiture is his Fursona character, a full-length bear costume that he dons to stage bear hugs for visitors. The big brown beast sans occupant was positioned against one of the walls during my visit, but it demanded attention nevertheless.

Not to be outdone, the performance artist Justin Vivian Bond periodically strikes a pose in the museum's window attired in a fetching pink gown. He uses as a backdrop hand-drawn wallpaper revealing the face of former Estee Lauder model Karen Graham, Bond's alter-ego. His project, "My Model/Myself: I'll Stand by You" puts his own queer stamp on the legions of gay designers that served the fashion industry but remained often invisible in the larger culture.

Highlights of the video installations include "Girl Talk," performed by black poet Fred Moten, a charismatic presence in this projection by his collaborator Wu Tsang. The piece illuminates the pleasures of gossip and is a crowd-pleaser. Mickalene Thomas elicits lesbian desire in a 12-monitor video "Me as Muse," as she reclines naked on a sofa with the gaze moving on her body parts. A soundtrack of singer Eartha Kitt, recounting past racial abuses sounds in the background.



A straightforward and refreshing entry is Sharon Hayes' documentary wherein she gives us interviewees from Mount Holyoke, an all-women's college in Western Massachusetts. The young women are unselfconsciously frank in their responses to their awakening sexuality. Asked about comparisons to their own mothers, one student

remarked, "She married at 16, she didn't have time to experiment." One girl identifies as a "he" but is adamant that she/he is still the same person. Another noteworthy entry is "Weed Killer" by English-born Patrick Staff, which manages to be a meditation on chemotherapy based on artist Catherine Lord's memoirs.

It wouldn't be unfair to ask when such explorations of the psyche—either one's own or another's—transcend the subject to become art. In such a politically-charged exhibit on gender, such questions may seem superfluous. We are, after all the struggles for gay recognition and equality, living through the Times of Trump. Calls for bans on transgender service members to laws governing public restroom access are reminders of how tenuous certain freedoms can be for anyone who doesn't fit the societal norm.

But "Trigger" if anything, is an ambitious show. And it has set its site lines on some formidable talents, chief among them Tschabalala Self and Christina Quarles. Both artists combine elements of abstraction with the human figure as subject. In Self's

case, her large canvas collages present distorted, sometimes masked beings, rhythmically contorted to the artist's design. Pieces of stitched fabric make up their diverse anatomies, such as "Wild Blue Cherry," the Cherry of the title adorned with polka dot shorts, the word WILD in caps emblazoned across her buttocks. Another dancer stretches out her four arms spiderlike, a Shiva you wouldn't want to tangle with. Brilliant blues and oranges intermingle in another seated figure, a pantheistic creature with leopard patches for a vest. The figures in Quarles' paintings startle with their elegantly incongruous forms, such as the couple in "Beautiful Mourning." The surreal yet domestic landscape is intimate with flowers shooting out of a checkered table, and a jingle-jangle of limbs suggesting a scene of comfort in grief.



There are those pieces that elicit delight, exhibiting an entrepreneurial spirit as much as shock value. Vaginal Davis, a Los Angeles-born, Berlin-based transgender artist has created a generous series of small abstract wall reliefs in a blood-red mixture of nail polish, Aqua Net hair spray and other Dollar Store beauty supplies. If you look closely enough, faces and genitalia emerge from the crimson plaques. A more formalistic abstraction is offered by Ulrike Muller's geometric enamel on steel pictures, exhibiting a clean mastery of minimalism and grace. Clues are to be found to the breakdown of identity as a theme. All one has to do is look at Harry Dodge's unsettling cartoons to sense the absence of a self. A tiny hooded figure tells us, "Without the sheet I

would be invisible." Another caption reads "We exceed our skins, feel through others." When Nayland Blake is not donning a bear suit, his own cartoon panels evidence nothingness. A melted snowman appears in one panel, in another the artist sits in front of an easel, drawing a mushroom cloud explosion.

Life experienced as covert or clandestine is revealed in the cloistered, bordello-like "Cave of Secrets", an installation designed by Liz Collins. The furled drapes, the tufted red chairs that titillate with their bulbous patterns, the hypnotic floor panels and the sleek black walls are seductive but ultimately cloying, claustrophobic. The narrow, darkened museum corridors, with their black curtains connecting the visitor to yet another exhibit or floor heighten the effect of a nether-world.



Such shifts toward issues like sexuality and gender are hardly new to The New Museum. The first breakthrough was “Extended Sensibilities” (1982), followed by “Difference” (1984–85), “HOMO VIDEO” (1986–87), and “Bad Girls” (1994).

This show is perhaps the most comprehensive if at risk of being

misunderstood. The Leslie-Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art in Soho has been mounting relevant and challenging exhibits since Charles W. Leslie and Fritz Lohman began promoting such artists in their loft back in 1969. But the efforts of mainstream museums to embrace the LGBTQ community, with the aim of defying easy categorization is essential.

Curator Johanna Burton summed it up recently for the *New York Times* when she admitted, “If the show is done right, it makes people interested but doesn’t allow them to think they fully understand something. If you stop thinking about yourself as a stable identity looking at something made by another stable identity...it changes the whole game.”

In a time when “selfies” are the instant answer to self-portraiture and identity-seeking, maybe looking beyond the shattered mirror isn’t such a bad idea.

(Trigger: Gender as a Tool and a Weapon runs through January 21, 2018 at The New Museum, 235 Bowery, New York, NY 10002. 212-219-1222)