The New York Times

When It Comes to Gender, Let Confusion Reign

By **HOLLAND COTTER** SEPT. 28, 2017

"Crossing Object (inside Gnomen)," by Nayland Blake, from the exhibition "Trigger: Gender as a Tool and a Weapon," at the New Museum. Self-portraiture takes many forms in the show, one of them being trans-species. Credit Jake Naughton for The New York Times

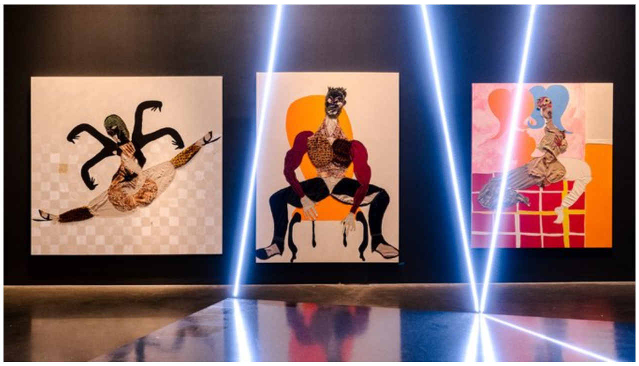
The New Museum isn't new any more. It hit 40 this year, by some reckonings early middle age, though it's still thinking young, or youngish, and living in the now. One thing that made it feel fresh early on was that it did shows on themes no other museums were tackling, like the 1982 "Extended Sensibilities: Homosexual Presence in Contemporary Art," the first major American institutional survey of work by gay and lesbian artists. Now comes another such venture, "Trigger: Gender as a Tool and a Weapon," a look at concepts of "trans" and "queer" as embodied in new art.

"Extended Sensibilities" had problems. With its inclusion of abstraction along with figurative work, it struck some viewers as not explicitly gay enough, as dodging the political issues its title raised. A similar charge of indirection, or indeterminacy — I'd call it healthy disorder — could probably be leveled at "Trigger."

As an exhibition, its brief is to break down, through art, the binary male-female face-off that gay and lesbian often represented, to stretch the perimeters of gender to the snapping point. The goal is to inject the disruptive power of not-normal back into the discussion of difference at a time when the edge of mainstream gayness has been dulled by the quest for assimilation.

The difficulty is that queer, and to some extent trans, are hard to capture, institutionally. Slipperiness is built into them; they don't sit still. Trans by definition is the act of changing, going beyond the boundaries of gender (and race, and class). Those boundaries are porous, and crossings in any direction are negotiable. Queer is even more category-aversive. It's not so much a personal identity as a political impulse, a strategy for thwarting assimilation and sowing constructive chaos at a time when culture wars are again escalating.

The question is whether a cohesive exhibition can be forged from such chaos. The answer in the case of "Trigger" — which includes more than 40 artists and collectives and fills three floors of the museum as well as its lobby – is just barely, to which an important coda must be added: Asking for cohesion in a survey of trans and queer art is probably asking for the wrong thing.



"Floor Dance," "Mane," and "Loner," by Tschabalala Self, who stitches figures from patches of fabric on canvas. In the foreground is "Toxic," an installation by Pauline Boudry and Renate Lorenz.Credit Jake Naughton for The New York Times

This is not to say there are no through lines. Grounding the show are historical references that keep the gay-trans-queer links always in sight. We get an encyclopedic dose of that history in a newsprint photo-collage posted in the museum's main elevator. Produced by the artist Chris E. Vargas, and attributed to the Museum of Transgender History and Art that he founded as an archive in 2013, the picture is a group shot of L.G.B.T.Q.I. (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex) celebrity spanning the centuries.

"Lost in the Music," by Reina Gossett and Sasha Wortzel, tells the story of Marsha P. Johnson (1945-1992), who is credited, in some accounts, with triggering the 1969 uprising at the Stonewall bar. Credit Jake Naughton for The New York Times

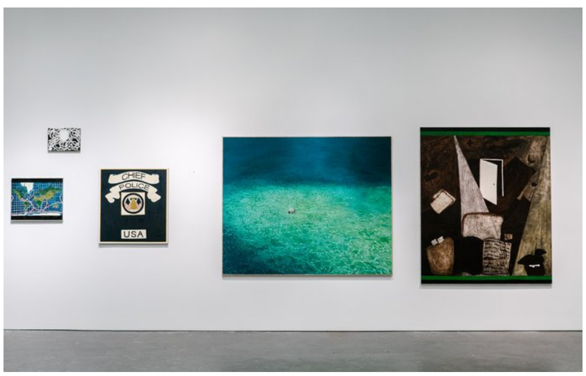
On the second floor, the New York painter Leidy Churchman serves up a hot pink version of a hot Marsden Hartley hunk. And Mariah Garnettprojects images of herself, impersonating the 1970s gay porn star Peter Berlin, on a spinning disco ball. One floor up, two young filmmakers, Reina Gossett and Sasha Wortzel, commemorate a figure who gay visitors to the 1982 New Museum show might have recognized: Marsha P. Johnson (1945-1992), born Malcolm Michaels and self-identified as a drag queen, who is credited, in some accounts, with throwing a mirror-shattering shot glass that triggered the 1969 uprising at the Stonewall bar.

From left: “We Gunna Spite Our Noses Right Offa Our Faces,” and “Din’t We, Didn’t We, Din’t I Have a Gud Time Now?,” by Christina Quarles, and “Landscape III,” by Sable Elyse Smith. Credit Jake Naughton for The New York Times

Johnson was a “drag mother” to young trans women living in the New York City streets, and the tendency to replace hostile birth families with families of choice has long been a hallmark of gay, trans and queer life. The artist and performer Justin Vivian Bond made the switch as a teenager, nominating, from afar, the Estée Lauder model Karen Graham, seen in magazine ads, as a surrogate mother.

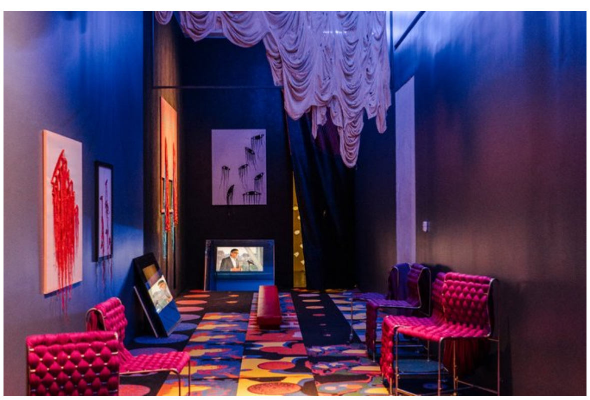
Works from the “My Model | My Self” series, with “These Old Laurel Leaves: Wallpaper,” both by Justin Vivian Bond. Credit Jake Naughton for The New York Times

The artist, who identifies as “trans-genre,” uses “Mx.” as an honorific, and prefers to be referred to as “they,” tells this adoption-by-proxy story in an installation called “My Mother | Myself,” which sets drawings of Ms. Graham by a teenage Bond beside recent, superglam Bond self-portraits to illustrate how trans self-fashioning works.



Credit Jake Naughton for The New York Times

Self-portraiture takes many forms in the exhibition, one of them being trans-species. During the show’s run, the artist Nayland Blake will periodically don a full-length bear costume and, as a character called Fursona, will stage hug-fests for visitors. More generally, however, images of trans and queer bodies tend toward abstraction. Troy Michie cuts and pastes images from pornographic magazines to create poly-racial erotic figures. (His work is also in “Found: Queer Archaeology; Queer Abstraction” at the Leslie-Lohman Museum in Soho.) Paul Mpagi Sepuyaedits and blends bodies photographically in the studio creating an atmosphere of entrapment and seduction.

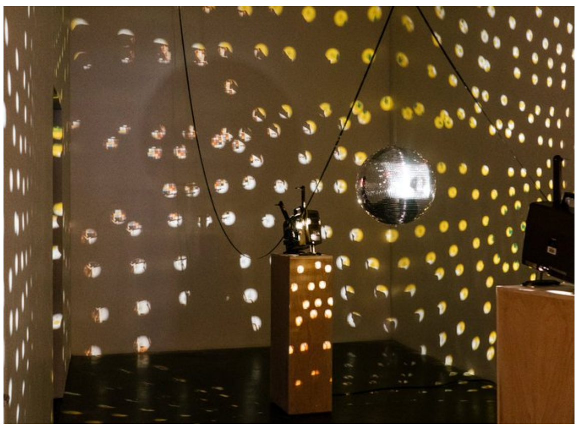


“Cave of Secrets,” an installation by Liz Collins. Credit Jake Naughton for The New York Times

Tschabalala Self, who stitches racially and sexually ambiguous figures from patches of fabric on canvas, is one of several artists working with traditionally female-associated media. (Feminism is, of course, deeply folded into the show.) Diamond Stingily, who as a child hung out in her mother’s Chicago hair salon, is another: her sculpture, a single long braid of artificial hair, trails through all three floors of the show and into the lobby. Vaginal Davis, originally from Los Angeles, now in Berlin, adds social class to the mix in small wall reliefs made from Dollar Store beauty supplies: Wet n Wild nail polish, Aqua Net hair spray and perfume by Jean Nate.

"Community Action Center," by A.K Burns & A.L Steiner. Credit Jake Naughton for The New York Times

Ms. Davis's sculptures are only subtly figurative. And the show's organizers — Johanna Burton, director and curator of education and public engagement at the New Museum, working with Natalie Bell and Sara O'Keeffe, assistant curators – have included a substantial amount of entirely abstract work of a kind 1982 audiences perceived as apolitical, though here it is not.



"Encounters I May Or May Not Have Had With Peter Berlin," by Mariah Garnett. Credit Jake Naughton for The New York Times

Although you wouldn't know this without reading a wall label, the fine netlike patterns in Ellen Lesperance's gouache paintings are inspired by photographic close-ups of clothing worn by female activists, past and present. Surely the residents of the women-only retirement park that Connie Samaras has been photographing over the past six years — 15 prints from the series are on view — would qualify as Lesperance subjects.

It may mean something that almost all the abstract painting in the show is by women, from Ulrike Müller's small geometric enamel-on-steel pictures, as precious as antique cameos, to Nancy Brooks Brody's black-and-white grids radiant with half-hidden color.

So are the best videos. Stanya Kahn's tragicomic "It's Cool, I'm Good," about ecology, animal wisdom, and salvation through abjection, is transcendent: one look and you're hooked. And anyone encountering the poet Fred Moten doing a joyous, swirling dance to the sound of Betty Carter's "Girl Talk," in a video of that name by trans female artist Wu Tsang, won't want to move on soon.

At the same time, it's hard to figure out why certain art is here: the many wonky little sculptures (a few would do), the big, boxy "stage" that technically goes with a Pauline Boudry/Renate Lorenz film, but mostly just takes up space.

In the exhibition catalog, Mr. Moten speaks of "Trigger" as an example of "a poetics of the mess," a fair description, in good ways and not. The show avoids the standard institutional tactics of curating your thinking, mapping your path, telling you what you basically already know. It hands you a slew of ideas and leaves you to sort through them, which means it leaves you confused. You're not alone: the catalog includes three round-table discussions among "exhibition advisers," and they sound confused too — but thinking hard, which is the point of an experiment like this.

Confusion may be the only reasonable response to the world at present. And creating confusion may be queer's most useful weapon. Queer has no fixed fan base. Genders, races, classes: bring them on. But it has one broad political mandate: to foster instability as resistance to any status quo. Resistance is good exercise. It helps keep you young. And it can keep you alert. Even when you lose track of what "normal" is, you know you don't want to be that.

"Trigger: Gender as a Tool and a Weapon" Through Jan. 21, New Museum, (212) 219-1222; newmuseum.org