

LOS ANGELES REVIEW OF BOOKS

Art Matters Now — 12 Writers on 20 Years of Art: Greg Youmans on the Pathbreaking Trans Media Art of 2008

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Tara Mateik as the Tin Man as Lionel Richie, from Endless Love music video, 2009, part of the series “Men with Missing Parts.”

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WHETHER OR NOT Tolstoy was right in suggesting that only art is capable of setting violence aside, artists have long been uniquely positioned to rouse, revolt, speculate, complicate, tell the truth, and offer protest and possibility in polarized and violent times.

In collaboration with Creative Capital, the nonprofit known for supporting provocative and progressive work, and which in 2019 celebrated its 20th year of funding and advising artists, LARB will publish 12 essays over 12 months on issues facing contemporary art in the United States. Each contributor focuses on a particular year of Creative Capital's history and/or on a specific artist, beginning with Johanna Fateman's introduction to the series, which reflected on the founding of Creative Capital (1999) in response to the subsequent decreases in federal funding for individual artists. In this essay, Greg Youmans pays homage to the work of two artists who brought attention to the experiences of trans and non-binary people in the waning months of the George W. Bush era, and in so doing reminds us that the fight for gender inclusion is ongoing.

Together, the essays in this series reflect the current state of arts writing as a field, just as they reveal the myriad ways that art matters now as much as ever.

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In year four of the Trump presidency and in the midst of a global pandemic, 2008 can seem like a vastly different and distant time, even though it was barely more than a decade ago. Yet it too was a fraught election year. Although Barack Obama was famously elected that November, for the first 10 months of the year George W. Bush was still in office. In other words, in 2008, the political landscape felt almost as bleak and uncertain as it does now.

Contestations around queer citizenship and visibility were at the center of the political tumult in 2008. The spotlight was on mainstream issues of marriage equality and military inclusion, both of which were mainly understood to be the concerns of cisgender lesbians and gay men. Those two issues had to be largely resolved — Don't Ask, Don't Tell was repealed in 2010, and the Supreme Court legalized gay marriage in 2015 — before a movement centered on the rights and concerns of transgender and non-binary people could take center stage. In May 2014, *Time* magazine heralded the "Transgender Tipping Point," suggesting that the undersung activists who had spent decades pushing the boulder up the mountain had finally gotten it over the summit and that now there would be no stopping its forward momentum. Let's hope so.

It is both inspiring and important, then, to look back on 2008 and honor some of the trans and non-binary cultural workers who paved the way for more progressive attitudes toward gender inclusion. Kalup Linzy and Tara Mateik both received Creative Capital Awards that year, and they used the support to make innovative, complex, and engaging digital videos and live performances that explore issues of gender nonconformity and cross-racial desire.

Kalup Linzy was already a *bona fide* New York City art star in 2008. He was first noticed for his soap-opera video series *All My Churen*, which he wrote and directed in 2003, and in which he performs every character. By 2010, he was engaged in a high-profile collaboration with James Franco that included a role on the TV soap opera *General Hospital*. Linzy applied his Creative Capital funding to what would eventually become his 2013 visual album, *Romantic Loner*, a project that combined a set of original songs with a feature-length video, supplemented by live

performances. Linzy shot the video while he was an artist in residence at the Headlands Center for the Arts in Marin County, California. Although the mise-en-scène reflects some of the limitations of residency art, Linzy compensates with a playful use of postproduction effects, for instance by using chroma keying to create a psychedelic heart-shaped cut-out over his crotch during a sexy nude number.

Romantic Loner was a departure from the soap-operatic videos that preceded and followed it and for which Linzy is best known. The project introduced a new character in Linzy's universe, named Kaye, who seems to be more closely modeled on the artist than his other personae. Kaye is, after all, a video artist at a residency. While Linzy's other characters tended to be, in the artist's words, "always on 10," Kaye is more dialed-down, introspective, and melancholic. What all of Linzy's characters seem to have in common, though, is the experience of unrequited love. In *Romantic Loner*, Kaye has isolated himself at the Headlands to do some deep soul-searching. As he puts it, "I don't want any distractions on my journey to falling in love with myself." He tries to give up drinking, along with destructive sex and dating behaviors. He wants to become capable of finding a long-term partner who will treat him right, instead of the guys he has been pursuing who have only half-reciprocated his affection at best.



Still from "Romantic Loner" by Kalup Linzy, 2013.

Cut-outs and inserts of Kaye's previous lovers and crushes reveal his preference for white or at least light-skinned men, and also, apparently, for straight-acting ones. (Linzy revealed to me that most of the men in the video are actually played by straight guys — an extratextual detail that adds to the sense of doomed and one-sided desire unfolding onscreen.) *Romantic Loner* places Linzy in the genealogy of Marlon Riggs and Isaac Julien, two black gay filmmakers who made seminal work in the late 1980s and early 1990s about interracial desire, racial fetishism, and the

figure of the “snow queen”; as well as in a lineage with Bruce LaBruce and Curt McDowell, both of whose films have explored the gay male fascination with trade.

Lest these gay male forebears make Linzy’s work seem more cis than trans, it is important to recognize the dimensions of his identity. While he is often presented as a cisgender male artist who does drag in his work, he understands himself more expansively than that determination. He uses they/them pronouns in addition to he/him, and he understands everything he does as drag, not just when he’s playing women characters. *Romantic Loner* is different from many of Linzy’s other videos and live performances because the act of drag is not foregrounded and because the line between artist and persona is so difficult to establish. The result is a remarkably frank and vulnerable exploration of the challenges of having normative gay desire for a person who is black, genderqueer, and profoundly sensitive.

Tara Mateik is an artist with a digressive practice: one idea or interest leads to another and then another until a chain has formed of interconnected performances and videos. The project he proposed for Creative Capital was “Men with Missing Parts,” a series of performances and music videos in which he lip-synched pop songs in the guise of the Scarecrow, the Tin Man, and the Cowardly Lion. For this work, *The Wizard of Oz* was a way in: a means of talking about transgender identity and issues in a non-threatening and humorous manner, and through a cultural reference point with which everyone was familiar.

It spun out from there: “Men with Missing Parts” became a prequel to a multifaceted project called *There’s No Place*. Part One, “Army of Revolt,” engaged with L. Frank Baum’s books, especially the second volume, *The Marvelous Land of Oz* (1904). In this classic from the beginning of the last century, feminist content inspired by Baum’s mother-in-law, the suffragette and abolitionist Matilda Joslyn Gage, meets transgender content when Tip, the rightful heir to the throne of Oz, is awoken from a spell and transitions into the Princess Ozma. Mateik didn’t grow up reading the Oz books — nor, surprisingly, was he a fan of the movie *The Wizard of Oz*, nor of Judy Garland, nor even of the later film *The Wiz* (though he loved Diana Ross).¹ It was through the organic growth of his project that he discovered these points of interest.

His fascination with the politics of Baum’s books led in turn to Part Two, “Friends of Dorothy (Judy Garland),” and Part Three, “Friends of Dorothy (Diana Ross).” For these two components, he worked with celebrity impersonators of Garland, of Ross, and of Michael Jackson (another star of *The Wiz*) on a series of performances and videos exploring issues of gender performance, racial appropriation, and racialized power dynamics. Mateik cast himself in the role of various white male directors and impresarios, such as *The Wiz* director Sidney Lumet, Motown producer Rob Cohen, and, in a particularly fantastic performance from 2012, Studio 54 founder Steve Rubell. He also made space for his collaborators to voice their own critical perspectives on the same issues, for instance in a video in which Ross and Garland impersonators reflect on questions of cross-racial fandom and appropriation.



Production still from "Friends of Dorothy Screen Test #2," *Shoot the Lobster*, New York, 2012. From left to right: Lupe Rosales, Lumet's hair and makeup; Emma Hedditch, wardrobe; MPA, second camera assistant, Tara Mateik as Sidney Lumet; and O'Neill Hayes as Sapphira Cristàl as Diana Ross as Dorothy Gale.

Mateik is a transgender artist who, like Linzy, also understands himself as gender non-binary and gender non-conforming. While he usually performs as male-identified characters, he inhabited the role of Billie Jean King for another project. His work is notable for its humor and playfulness, as well as for how it manages to be at once accessible and archivally dense. A profound sense of empathy pervades everything he does. For instance, his work on Judy Garland, which extends into a new project about the star's involvement in *The Valley of the Dolls*, is informed by his deep compassion as a former child gymnast and figure skater for Garland's experience as a child star who was victimized by abusive labor practices, and the effect that early experience had on her later life, including her issues with addiction.



Tara Mateik as Steve Rubell, J. Moses Harper as Michael Jackson, and K8 Hardy as Jane Pauley, from “Unauthorized Interview #1” (Live from Studio 54) live feed performance, Public Assembly, New York, 2012.

Both of these artists contributed to the “transgender tipping point” by making work that delved into the full complexity of transgender and non-binary lives and desires. They didn’t restrict themselves to simplified, positive-images work designed for a straight, cisgender audience who need to be walked through the basics. Instead they made, and are still making, complex and revelatory works that continue to enrich us.