



**Jess Dugan**

*Coffee, Roxbury, MA, 2005*

Image courtesy of the artist and Gallery Kayafas, Boston

**Interview with JESS DUGAN**

Vika Gardner: What happened in 2005 that made you start wanting to photograph trans people?

Jess Dugan: The trans project began after I had chest surgery; the first picture I took with my new camera was one of my mother and I without our shirts. I'd only had the camera for two weeks and so I was experimenting with both my new body and the new camera. I feel very similar and different at the same time with my mother. I was trying to understand more fully the different choices we made/make.

I moved on from that to photographing others, people I knew and then people I did not know well.

VG: Do you use text to direct a viewer's experience?

JD: I'm not trying to represent narratives, or even identities. I know some people include more information on the subjects of the photographs, but I use only their names, and let the context of the images tell more about the gender. Because I'm using a 4-by-4 camera, I have to have a lot of participation with my subjects. The large format camera means the subjects need to be still for longer than a snapshot would typically require. The classical format and the shallow depth of field don't immediately mark anything as trans, but leave

it open.

In my work I try not to see trans as a fetish, or a subject from a horror film. I want to balance it. It's like everyone else but it's not. I don't want to sugarcoat it, but rather present people as they are. I want to include scars, to show the moments of change. I've tried to do photographs of testosterone injections, the more obvious moments of transition, but they haven't worked well as photographs.

VG: Do you see yourself as part of a lineage?

JD: When I began, I looked at the radical photographers -- Mapplethorpe, Opie -- I liked that they were in your face, I was interested in that. Then I started working with the photographs of a more classical style, like Walker Evans and Dorothea Lang, and started fusing the two. But I also still have a desire for queer photography.

Trans photography is a hot item, although I understand it's not that way in every context.

VG: Is your work grounded in a location?

JD: I think my work is specifically American. It can be very Boston; I have access to people there, to different kinds of people. I'm not sure how my experience as a photographer would change in a different place; I've only been to Vietnam.

I work full time at the Harvard Art Museum, and rent a space for a darkroom in Cambridge. I also do commercial photography, weddings, and so forth to pay for my art. Graduating was like jumping off a cliff: nothing happens the way you expect it to. Because I'm working full time and having to do other paying work, I don't have time to hang out with my girlfriend or hang out in the park on a nice day the way people with fewer commitments can. It does mean that having the time here visiting my dad [in Arkansas] includes visits to people I know here who I have been photographing, like Ely. I plan to go photograph him while I'm here. So I don't want to be too negative.

VG: Tell me about the picture with the shirts hanging out to dry?

JD: I have done a lot of portraits, and I wanted to expand into more still lifes when I did that. I had just done laundry and hung it there, and I liked it. The t-shirts -- white t-shirts -- are symbolic of masculinity for me; I wanted to wear white t-shirts. Gender sometimes seems to me as a uniform, something malleable. The pictures of drag kings also sometimes seem that way: a hyper-charicaturized masculinity that individuals put on and take off. It's common for people to like that photograph but not understand why they're drawn to it.

VG: Are the images staged? Do you collaborate with your subjects?

JD: I like to not stage my photographs. I don't bring lighting with me, I just come and work with what's there, work with the environment that I have. The coffee photograph in particular was of my roommate; I saw them and told them to just stay there while I brought the camera to capture the moment. So on some level, yes, I knew how the light struck in that time in the morning, but it also was capturing a natural moment in a natural

setting.

At conferences I take pictures in the hotel lobby. I wasn't that interested in the backgrounds, since using a shallow focus meant it was all blurred anyway. I look at shapes and tones. But my work in the past two years photographing in the Museum has been changing that; I'm doing new work in relation to space, people in space, the environment itself. Triptichs are also a new form for me, which allow for a greater relation to space, environment.

In Boston I use people's homes; it allows for a level of comfort and privacy that you can't get elsewhere, and people are more relaxed. So you get a relaxed environment and image.

VG: Why do you work in black and white?

JD: All my personal work is in BW; color isn't my favorite. I worked with it in college when I had to, but BW is more comfortable.

VG: Why photography?

JD: I was always drawn to it, even as a child. I would take pictures of my teddy bear [laughs]. I moved to Boston [from Arkansas] with my mother when I was 13. In high school I wanted to take photography, but I was only able to when I was a senior. In college we weren't supposed to declare a major until sophomore year, but I started on photography right away and have always felt an affinity to it.

VG: You grew up in Arkansas?

JD: Yes. I've always had an attraction and repulsion to the South. I romanticize it and then when I'm confronted with the reality of it again, I reject it. I'm so impressed with people I meet who live here. Ely works in a restaurant with some good ole boys, and I am so amazed with the amount of energy that he spends just getting through the day.

VG: The images in the prints seem to be framed by dark corners.

JD: The vignetting was planned, although in the triptich it's a little distracting. I almost always print full frame. I compose in camera normally, and print 16x20 at home. It's my pattern.

VG: What kinds of emotional qualities do you want to convey?

JD: I go for a subtlety. The look in the eyes doesn't translate well over the internet; a print is much better. I want a quiet emotion. My subjects are not usually smiling or laughing. It's understated.

VG: Do you see yourself doing this -- the trans series -- until you're old and grey?

JD: As time goes on the trans work is harder to separate from the rest of what I do. I've started to blur the boundaries. I see myself as trans -- but a bigger part of my identity right now is "photographer". Trans is a big part but not necessarily the major part.

VG: How do you see gender?

JD: It's complicated. I'm trying to see who people actually are versus the cultural signifiers within which they find themselves. Even when the cultural signifiers are questioned, it's hard not to use them. We have to navigate within the system. Personally, it's not about the male-female differentiation. It sometimes seems simple and basic, but we have to make choices. My project is about blurring how these are seen. I photographed a butch woman who's a mechanic in front of a car -- it's about the crossing of gender, not meeting the expectations, not necessarily about being trans specifically. I'm examining the markers of gender, those that people are choosing to fit into, and those that are inherent in the culture.

I feel like gender is a spectrum. It's expressed in how you feel comfortable. This isn't confined to people who are trans. A better world would have this as less strict, more universal. Letting go of the constraints would benefit everyone.

Gender and sexuality have everything and nothing to do with each other. Only a few of the trans people I know have transitioned into the normative het[erosexual] model, of a straight man and a straight woman.

I don't always fit well into communities. Some people [in the trans community] want to know when I'm going to continue on with my surgeries, and have a harder time accepting that I'm happy with myself now just the way I am. I feel more true in some ways saying I'm an artist; it feels more like my true self.

VG: I'm married to a man who often sees himself as being both feminine and masculine while having to act only masculine, and who sees me as being both masculine and feminine, and he wants me to act feminine, even though he sees us as fitting together well because we're neither one nor the other. The boxes of gender don't always fit us well even when on the surface we're "conforming" to expectations.

JD: The boxes are exhausting! The trans projects helped when I first has the surgery and was talking about trans idea all the time, but after a year, I was bored and wanted to talk about something else. Everyone wants to put you into boxes. Even when they themselves don't conform to expectations, they want you to not conform in their way. It gets awkward. Everyone has so much pressure. I wouldn't say straight men are oppressed, but they have to conform to these pressures as well, fit into roles.