

## NEWS FROM GALLERY KAYAFAS

### IN TODAY'S GLOBE

#### Exploring gender

By [Cate McQuaid](#)

Globe Correspondent / March 24, 2010

Jess T. Dugan's formal portraits of couples at Gallery Kayafas can also be unnerving. Every one of Dugan's subjects is a woman, was a woman, or wants to be a woman. Some are transgender. Others are not. Some fall into the category we identify as feminine; others do not.

The portraits can be confrontational: They have red backgrounds, and the subjects stare directly out at us. I found myself puzzling uncomfortably over those whose sex wasn't immediately evident; I'm still used to discrete categories when it comes to gender. "Lee and Gunner," for instance, are two round, short-haired people who balance feminine softness with a tough mien.

Then I saw "Steph and Adelaide." Adelaide wears a sleeveless black T-shirt and a leather fedora, and she has frilly blond locks curling around her ears. Steph has her hair in a ducktail and wears a track jacket. Their drag places them in the fluid realm between feminine and masculine, but I felt at ease with their portrait. They looked like a fun couple to chat with at a party.

My habit of breaking folks into two genders certainly colored my reaction to Dugan's photos — it's her intention to poke holes in that kind of habit, and she does it well. Good portraits reveal something of both viewers and subjects, and the posturing and defensiveness of Dugan's subjects is bound to make the viewer uncomfortable. Then, as with "Steph and Adelaide," she finds a pair at home in their own skin, and they make us feel at home, too.

Rick Ashley's sweet and goofy photos of prom couples in Marblehead make a terrific counterpoint to Dugan's more emotionally charged works. Shot against a white backdrop as they enter the prom, the kids often ham it up for the camera. In "Prom Couple #103," a solidly built girl in a cherry-red satin number looks as if she's about to heave her class-clown date over her shoulder. They don't seem to be taking themselves, or the prom, too seriously.



Steph and Adelaide



Lee and Gunner