

Breaking and blurring gender boundaries

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Exhibit plays with our expectations

By Victoria Shouldis / Concord Monitor September 30, 2010

At first quick glance, the guy in the sharp black-and-white photo looks like an old school, macho mechanic, not necessarily a mechanic you've encountered in real life, but the kind you find in tough guy movies, with the "you'll pay for the a new transmission and you'll like it" attitude and a cigarette dangling from his lips.

But a longer look reveals some other information: The mechanic's moustache and soul patch goatee are not real, but actually drawn in, perhaps with Magic Marker. And then there's the name of the work: "Hannah in Drag," shot by photographer Jess T. Dugan. Such tricks and implications of gender-bending and larger issues of just what makes us all who we are - as people, as one sex or another or somewhere in between, as players in a social game that requires us to accept and conform within certain preset boundaries - are at the heart of *Traversing Gender*, an art exhibition that opened last week at Southern New Hampshire University's McInnich Art Gallery. The show runs through Oct. 23.

Dugan is one of about 20 artists featured in the show, all offering unique, sometimes playful, and sometimes intensely personal visions and versions of gender issues and roles.

Some of the most compelling works come from TRIIBE, a set of identical triplets (Alicia, Kelly, and Sara Casilio), working together as performance artists and subjects for challenging and engaging photographic works. In "Miss," the triplets are dolled up in gowns and offering their best big smiles as each wears a banner that looks a lot like the banner the winner of the "Miss America" pageant gets to wear. But there's something not quite right about these banners: one reads Miss Apprehension, another reads Miss Lead, and the third reads Miss Represent.

In another TRIIBE photo - many of their works are shot by award winning and former National Geographic photographer Cary Wolinsky - the scene is deceptively straightforward. In "Homeland," a couple are posed in their kitchen, the wife in an apron and seated while her husband stands above. Both look concerned, and over their shoulders we see the focus of that concern: a framed image of a son in a military uniform and away at war. All the players in the shot, of course, are the triplets, creating an interesting take on couples and gender and, perhaps, a not-so gentle comment on "Don't Ask, Don't Tell."

TRIIBE offer a much less subtle message with the work "Abstinence Eve," which shows a woman in a chastity belt as more belts fly above her head, and on either side of her, kneeling, are two of the triplets dressed in full-fledged nun gear.

Artist Lauren DiCioccio uses a nice mix of thread and irony to offer her views on gender. In her work 2MAR10 (Sydney Crosby and Bruce Orpik) she embroiders an image of the two hockey players locked in hockey stick battle; the embroidery is done on a thin, see-through muslin that allows the viewer to see the newspaper underneath which is, in fact, a New York Times sports article detailing the exploits of the two players.

DiCioccio also uses cross-stitch to create perfect female silhouettes right onto the pages of books - Madame Bovary and A Passionate Rebel, a romance novel set in the Revolutionary war era.

Rune Olson uses mixed media - masking tape and wire and graphite - to create his provocative sculptures of men engaged in a brutal fight. The name of the work can't be included here, but Olson's theme can be - that sometimes, some men substitute alcohol and brutality for other, more intimate and emotional acts.

Some of the works may suffer in comparison to the more outlandish and in-your-face pieces in the show. Jesse Burke's series of photos depicting men or their environments - a father and infant son in front of a woodshed; a baseball player photographed shirtless, posed amidst pink flowers with his chest nearly hairless; a can of beer opened - are all explorations of themes of male identity, with a nod to Robert Bly's Iron John insights of the '90s. They are interesting and well-composed, but lack the punch of some of the other works.

And Lauren DiCioccio's works, such as "Ziploc Bouquet," which offers a plastic bag filled with a composition of plastic flowers found on the floor of an arts and crafts show, may be great examples of creativity with found art, but they offer little in the way of thematic connection to gender questions.

Lalla Essaydi challenges the politics and mores of gender in her compelling and most contemporary work "Converging Territories # 30," which depicts four Muslim women, aged from childhood to mature adulthood; the youngest in the image wears a shawl, covered in henna calligraphy, but she is able to be seen. Each woman in the piece is increasingly covered with the shawl, until the last, in which the shawl is so pervasive that we cannot make out the woman underneath.

Jess Dugan, though, may be the standout of the show. In addition to "Hannah in Drag," Dugan - who shoots always in black and white, mostly using a large format camera - confronts gender issues literally from the inside, out.

In easily the most disturbing and memorable work in the show, "Self Portrait With Mom," the artist is shown with her mother. Both are topless, and while the mother presents as a recognizable woman of a certain age, photographer Dugan is seen with stitches and deep scars in the place where her breasts had been.

In biographical information, Dugan declines to come down on the side of one gender or the other; generally, Dugan is referred to as female. She had breast surgery as a step in the process of going from woman to man, but Dugan has written that she found a level of satisfaction and identity following that surgery and has chosen to forego further surgical

interventions that might better help the rest of the world to categorize her.

And that is exactly Dugan's point.

The print "Ely On The Porch" offers a young subject in glasses, looking squarely at the photographer with inquisitive, kind face. Body posture and layered clothing make it hard to figure just where Ely falls on the gender spectrum, but what Ely is turns out to be less important to the viewer than who Ely is.

Similarly, Dugan's "Sam and Gina on Sunday Morning" shows a couple in a comfortable, soft black and white; one partner rests a head on the shoulder of the other. Sam and Gina appear to be a lesbian couple, but what Dugan has captured with his lens takes the viewer beyond worrying over whether the subjects are straight or gay, transgendered or not, or something in between. They are a pair. They are at perfect ease. And together, they are home.

(Traversing Gender runs through Oct. 23 at the McInnich Art Gallery at Southern New Hampshire University in Manchester. Gallery hours are Monday through Saturday, 10 a.m. to 3 p.m., and Thursday, 5 to 7 p.m. Admission is free. For more info and directions, check <http://www.snhu.edu/art> or call 629-4622.)