



Burlesque artist Kitty Victorian uses performance, props and costumes to challenge ideas about what is sexually attractive.

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Local gay artists tackle gender issues in new, month-long exhibit

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Friday, Nov 11, 2005 | By: GREG MARZULLO | COMMENTS | SHARE

VERY BUTCH lesbian, feminine gay man and transgendered person has at one point overheard someone asking the question "Hey, is that a boy or a girl?" Sometimes, it's an innocent question and sometimes it's an aggressive taunt.

No matter the motive behind the words, the question is often posed by someone looking to lash out against those who don't adhere to societal gender norms.

Beginning Nov. 4, a group of artists is posing the gender question in an exhibit titled "Hey, Is That a Boy or a Girl" at the Warehouse Theater and exhibition space. It will run through Dec. 4 and is peppered with special events, including poetry readings, concerts, a film screening and a gender burlesque show.

"I find gender is something that kind of pokes at us," says Ruth Trevarrow, 46, one of the co-curators of the show who says she's been nursing the idea of a gender art exhibit for 15 years.

Trevarrow first got the idea to curate a gender show after seeing the play "Hidden Agender" by transgendered playwright Kate Bornstein.

"Here are these queer, faggoty, lesbian, transgendered people performing this bizarre way-out piece at George Mason University. Even this queer dyke artist was challenged by gender stuff," Trevarrow says of herself.

Her self-professed love of D.C. queer artists led her to put together an extensive collection of multi-media works and performances intended to question viewers' preconceived notions about gender.

UPON ENTERING THE Warehouse exhibit, patrons are quickly transported into a world where the socially acceptable polarity of male and female is turned upside-down.

A large painting of a man robed in the iconography of the Virgin of Guadalupe nearly dominates the first room.

The traditional Guadalupe imagery is full of gender assumptions and challenges. The Catholic mother of Jesus is depicted standing on a crescent moon, a long-time feminine symbol embodied in Greek and Egyptian mythology. She eclipses the shining sun, a typically masculine symbol.

In the standard depiction, she inhabits and transcends both the masculine and the feminine. The painter of this new work takes this idea one step further by putting a man into Mary's place. S/he looks on benevolently, close to the entrance, inviting visitors to reexamine not only how they view the masculine and feminine, but gender roles in religion as well.

The "Lady" in the Guadalupe painting is actually a self-portrait by the exhibit's co-curator, Richard Kightlinger.

In reviewing the variety of works, Kightlinger, 43, says, "I have found [the works] involve the blending of gender. We are all people with the same feelings and emotions, and gender really does not play into that."

A selection of works from the exhibit 'Hey, Is That a Boy or a Girl?,' an examination of gender issues by gay artists, showing at the Warehouse gallery space through Dec. 4:



Samson Huang's 'Five Faces.'

Kightlinger, who is gay, says there isn't a link between gender and sexuality.

"[People] are very much like a flower. We all have male and female parts, and so I am just attracted to the male part of the flower," he says.

Next to the Lady of Guadalupe are two photos of lilies, one of the



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Kitty Victorian

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sacred flowers of the Madonna cult — the religious figure, not the pop icon. Each flower is gaping wide with stamens heavily pixilated and standing straight out from the heart of the blossom. The flower, containing both male and female sexual characteristics, becomes a metaphor for the entire exhibition.

LOCAL GAY ARTIST Jim Adams doesn't just create pictures of lilies. He has an installation that takes up an entire room at the exhibit and questions gender in atypical ways.



John Borstel's 'Stillborn'

In the center of the room is a black box with silver clasps, and on the lid sits two jars filled with a yellowish-looking liquid. Submerged in the liquid of each jar is a single Japanese figurine, stripped of all paint and reduced to a white finish. The figures are two children, one boy and one girl.

A soundtrack of distorted urban rhythms and fractured speech and melody plays in the background as part of the installation. Black arrows are placed against two walls of the room, and four copper equilateral crosses are nailed to the floor, one on each side of the box.

At times, a watery piano sound dominates the soundtrack, and it's easy to get ...

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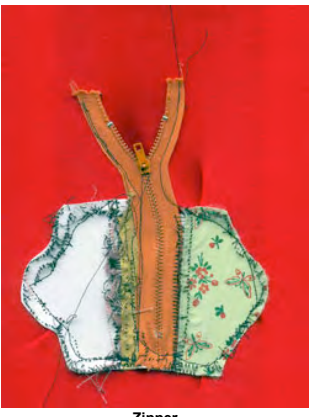
the feeling that the distorted voices are the long-drowned words of the Japanese figurines. The children look archetypal with their simple joyful expressions, and yet their haunting prisons beg the question of what society does to its little boys and girls.

"How much information do you need or not need before you assign a gender?" asks Adams, 51, about the difference between biological sex organs and the socially codified series of behavior that makes up gender.

The artist has a unique perspective on gender and sex.

"I've been involved with the leather community in the Midwest. It's not about gender; it's about power," Adams says.

He remembers talking to people who were not able to conceive of a woman being a "master" in the leather scene. According to him, the master is in that position because of the agreements among the participants – not because of some gender-informed concept of sexual roles.



Zipper

"In terms of sexuality, more so than in a cultural way, I've been able to overcome gender-limiting information," he says.

DYLAN SCHOLINSKI COULD be one of those confined figures in Adams' installation. A female-to-male transsexual, the artist was put into an adolescent psychiatric treatment unit by her parents for a "gender identity disorder" in 1981.

"For me, gender is part of everything that I do. It's about me walking down the street, eating at a restaurant, and going to the movies," he says.

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Scholinski, now 39, has a number of pieces in the show, and many of them are multi-layered in meaning and media. Polaroids, snippets of printed words and layers of paint are all plastered onto canvases and wood.

In many of the works, there seems to be a conflict between confinement and liberation. A photograph of an old mansion distorted by falling rain, thick strokes of red dissipating into a cross-hatched cage, and the old piano-school maxim "Every Good Boy Does Fine" dominates one of Scholinski's larger

pieces.

That particular work was created from an experience he had in Memphis.

"Using the men's room was a constant source of stress for most of my life," he says. He would go into the women's room and his "masculine" appearance caused him to be yelled at, assaulted and threatened by the women in the restroom.

"[In Memphis] I saw a sign on the door saying the women's room was out-of order and to please use the men's room. No one had ever given me permission to do that," he says.

Aside from displaying his art, Scholinski will be reading some of his writings along with other poets and authors at the gallery on Nov. 19.

ANOTHER ONE OF the special events featured during the month-long show will be an evening of burlesque and gender performance created by D.C.'s Kitty Victorian.

"Ruth [Trevarrow] is a friend of mine and told me her ideas around the show. I wanted to make sure that we could have a performance aspect as well as the art and spoken word," Victorian says.

Victorian, a bisexual woman, founded the D.C. Girlie Show, a glam burlesque produced on the third Wednesday of every month at Club Chaos, a Dupont Circle gay bar that caters to a lesbian crowd on Wednesday nights.

Victorian says that by adding gender ambiguity to her show, she is challenging her audience's assumptions of what they find attractive. She has acts where sensual women surprise the audience by showing their strap-ons during tease performances, and she recently added a transgendered woman to her troupe's shows.

"We try to surprise the audience using different types of props or costuming," she says.

For the performance at Warehouse, she plans on using burlesque art, the D.C. Drag Kings, and a couple of drag queens to push the gender envelope.

"I don't think there's one exact definition for gender, and I think that's where society has halted," she says. "A girl is supposed to like the color pink and Barbie dolls; boys are supposed to like the color blue and play with trucks."

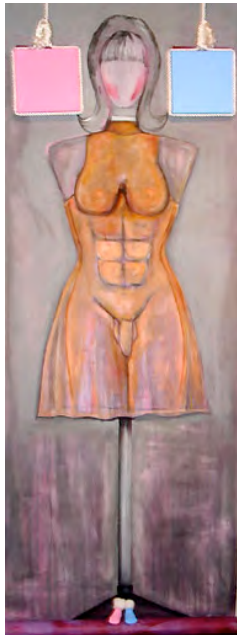
According to Victorian, those kinds of stereotypes are unfair to children and adults alike.

VICTORIAN WOULD HAVE a ball (so to speak) at the exhibit's the interactive piece "Try This On," which allows attendees to become a gender bending work of art.

A mirror hangs on a wall and next to it are two pairs of tie-on breasts and a pair of tie-on penises. The sex characteristics are meant to be put on in varying combinations. Trevarrow and Jane Lincoln covered each of the body parts in patterned fabric one might find on a dining room chair in Middle America. The breasts have tassels, and the penises are ringed with shiny beads.

There's a Mardi Gras kind of feel to the pieces. Being adorned with new and/or enhanced genitalia can be a disorienting and even liberating experience.

People are encouraged to try each piece on individually, together or all at once in a limitless display of overwhelming gender inclusivity.



Gilbert Trent's 'Repress, Release'



A sample from Matthew Best's series 'Paper Roses'

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