

Her Take. Rethinking Masculinity

2.2. – 5.4.2020



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Image: Sara Terry, *(Re)Thinking Manet's Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, 2017

Her Take. Rethinking Masculinity

This exhibition stems from the initiative of the seven female photographers of the photo agency VII. They each propose a visual reflection on contemporary masculinity and its media and artistic representations.

Active in a professional field that remains predominantly male, photojournalism, the authors have taken this particular context as a starting point for developing a collective project, which they readily describe as a conversation. They explore, challenge and rethink images and archetypes traditionally associated with the masculine. Their projects are equally documentary and conceptual. They touch on masculine figures with limited public exposure, people who refuse the male/female binary, or men whose representations are generally highly stereotyped. Alternatively, they rethink their own gender identity and revisit iconic works from art history.

The exhibition will also host on 27 February a performance by Nicola Genovese, a visual and performance artist whose work also studies and deconstructs the codes and gestures of masculinity, and in particular of Italian masculinity.

With Anush Babajanyan, Linda Bournane Engelberth, Jessica Dimmock, Ilvy Njiokiktjien, Nichole Sobecki, Maggie Steber, Sara Terry & Nicola Genovese.

Exhibition curator : Danaé Panchaud

A collaboration with VII Photo Agency



© Linda Bournane Engelberth, *Gabriel*, 19, Denver, Colorado, from the series *Outside the Binary*, 2017-2019

Anush Babanjanyan: *My New Himself*

“In a search to observe and understand the men I have got to know in life, I dress into their outfits. While in their clothes, I dive physically and spiritually into memories and happenings of past, as well as present experiences. I go into an exploration outside of myself, reinventing an imaginary himself. Clothing and shoes become metaphors for an experience of the different, the opposite, that which is always close but never actually felt. The search does not stop, with findings along the continuous way.”



© Anush Babanjanyan, *My New Himself*, 2017



© Anush Babanjanyan, *My New Himself*, 2017

Linda Bournane Engelberth: *Outside the Binary*

“The male and female gender identities are well established today. However, there are also people who feel they fall outside this binary. That is what this project focuses on: individuals who do not identify as simply male or female.

The idea of more than two possible genders is a controversial topic. A debate flares up, where one side insists that it's binary, and another side claims there's a spectrum. Disputes arise, and many are left misunderstood and unheard. There's frustration, anger and pain. The wonderful thing, then, about this project, is that it shows the people the debate revolves around, in peaceful portraits. Each photograph captures individual beauty, but also a universal humanity. We see people living their truths, presenting themselves with confidence and hope. What they want is the freedom to live out themselves this way.

Various identities are represented here, as being non-binary can have several meanings. For one, it could mean having both male and female identities, or something in between. This could for example be referred to as androgyne. Another possible identity is genderfluid. This refers to a gender that varies over time. One can then shift between feeling more male or female, but also androgynous or neutral. Another identity is agender. This could mean not defining oneself through gender at all, for instance thinking one's personal traits are what's important. These are but a few of many possibilities. Some prefer the term gender-queer over non-binary. Also, many choose alternative pronouns like 'they' rather than 'he' or 'she'.

Where transgenderism and various sexual orientations are known, the non-binary isn't always heard of. Therefore, another purpose of this project becomes to raise awareness. It happens that non-binary people are mistaken for homosexuals or thought to be transgender when they're not. There are, however, non-binary people who are homosexual or also identify as transgender.

It's widely agreed that both physiology and environmental factors shape the individuals we become. Still, some are convinced that gender is nothing but a social construct. Emotional and psychological factors may be named as determiners for one's gender. Others think it all depends on biological sex. In other words, there are many ways to view what gender is, and how it relates to sex and identity.

Gender; a familiar word that may seem so simple. It's easy to take its meaning for granted, yet there are vastly different ideas on what it means. Now, when a multitude of new gender terms are introduced, it becomes even more complicated and confusing to many. Therefore, it's important to remember that people will use the words they know, with the knowledge they have. A discussion will first be fruitful, when we not only listen to each other's words, but also enquire about the meaning behind them.

As of now, many questions and conflicts are left unresolved; the gender debate is still ongoing. Meanwhile, we are all here, trying to live our lives in the best way that we can. Regardless of viewpoints, let's open our minds. Let's open our ears and our eyes. Rather than argue, let us converse, and a peaceful coexistence may start with this.

I am proud to be part of this project. It is my wish that this glimpse into the non-binary will spark some new thoughts or ideas within you, the beholder. I hope that you too sense the intimacy and feel the peace in these pictures. If you look close enough, maybe you even recognise a piece of yourself.”

Introduction par Edea A. Wang



© Linda Bournane Engelberth, Ozi, 22, Jakarta, Indonesia, from the series *Outside the Binary*, 2017-2019

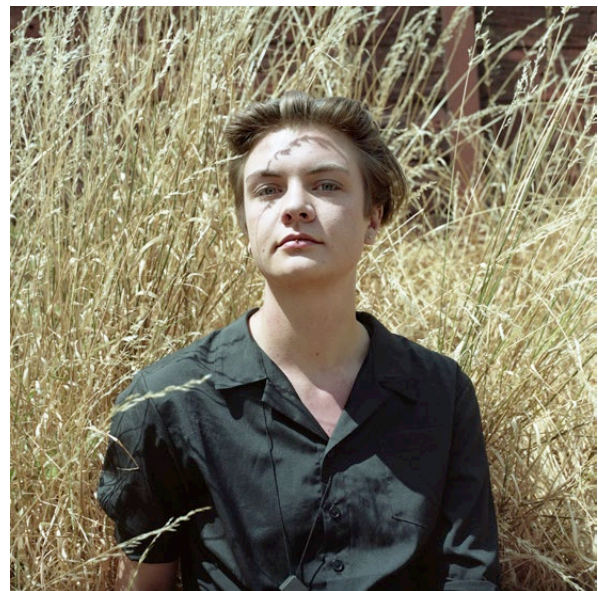
Born in East Java.

Lives in Jakarta, Indonesia.

Ozi identifies as non-binary, uses the pronoun she/her.

Testimony from Ozi: “I lean more towards being non-binary because I love my feminine side. I explore myself through art, fashion, I wear women’s clothing, heels and so on. It’s been a long journey for me. I came out as LGBT in junior high school, to my close friend. After being in Milan and working in fashion, I started to feel more like myself. I realised it was ok to be me and after moving back to Indonesia, I felt more comfortable in being myself. I feel like I’m more woman now but it has been changing. Like this is a male body but a woman’s soul. But I have experimented a lot with my gender. My parents are still close-minded about this, and I want to help them become more open-minded, I told them times are changing and they have come to be more accepting once they understood that I am capable of supporting myself and living independently. I have felt this way since I was very young. Non-binary to me is a person that is either male or female but actively takes on the role of the opposite gender. Transsexuals would want to change their whole identity to female or male. Transsexual is more like the next level after non-binary. For me the name is not so important, the self is more important.”

Testimony from Luca: “I rather use genderqueer than non-binary. It’s a political term not only describing my individual positioning but my rejection of the binarism as a whole. I think gender is something fluid and the world is non-binary in itself. I always struggled with narrow expectations of gender. The gender binarism that surrounded me felt really oppressive. And I don’t want to conform to something that feels oppressive. To me, it’s very much about complicating gender to make space in between what most people see as male and female. Embracing genderqueer let me explore different ways of living with gender, queering gender and breaking free from gender. I want to confuse people with my gender expression, play with their assumptions. This is how I feel that there is some space in between all these rigid ideas and images of how women and men look, move and sound like.”



© Linda Bournane Engelberth, Luca, 25, London, UK, from the series *Outside the Binary*, 2017-2019

Jessica Dimmock: *Brick*

“This project uses interviews and written testimonies of middle-aged and senior transgender women in the Pacific Northwest to recreate the scenes of hiding their female identities for decades. The women of this project often speak of seeking out hyper-masculine roles—both in work and in social life—to mask a reality that they knew but could not speak of. Because of the time in which they grew up, and the part of the country they lived in, most buried their secrets deep inside, finding only sparse, private moments to express their true selves amidst an otherwise highly masculine facade. The women of this project are members of the military, mechanics, fathers and grandfathers. And they have all done an excellent job of ‘being men’—one of the many factors that makes coming out at this later stage in life especially complicated and extremely risky. In the years I have spent working with this community of brave and resilient women, I have come to see their journeys not as ‘becoming women’ but instead an exploration of what it means to leave behind living as a man.”



© Jessica Dimmock, *Gina*, from the series *Brick*, 2017

Témoignage de Gina: “I’ve felt different ever since I was 9. Through life I always question myself because I didn’t know if I was, you know, I didn’t know about transgender at the time. And I thought—well am I a crossdresser? Am I gay? Am I this, am I that? None of them really fit, so I never knew what was wrong with me and because I couldn’t put a name to it I figured I was the only one that was like this. On almost a daily basis I was praying to God every night to let me wake up as a woman.

I went into the military ‘cause I was hoping I’d get shot in the war or something. I was confused about myself with my mind saying I should be a girl and having this boy body. And God never did let me wake up a woman. I was really hoping I was going to die in the military. Unfortunately there was no war when I was in there.

I would find places where I could just walk around in the heels. I'd park and walk around and it would feel so good just to walk in the heels and feel that feminine feeling. I'd still be in male clothing. There's a trail beside the river and I would walk up and down the trail just to get that feeling, that feminine feeling of 'I'm in heels. I'm not in the clothes, but at least I'm in the heels.' It would help me start my day. I could feel better about myself.

I would keep a really close watchout both ways and if I saw somebody coming, I would sort of make a mad dash to the car if I needed to and wait for them to pass.

I did it every day. And I did it for 18 years. I was 57 when I came out, and I'm 60 now."



© Jessica Dimmock, *Mharie*, from the series *Brick*, 2017

Testimony from Mharie: "I have a lot of things stuck in my head that I have never told anybody. Even the wife of 53 years. The secret life was very hard to keep secret. It did not push a lot 'til I was older.

When I was 12 years old, I stole a lipstick to put on at times. When the house was empty, I would raid my sister's things—she is three years older. I was found out a lot of times. So I overdid everything to show that I was turning into a man. Motorcycle racing, flying airplanes. It was all to cover up my not liking the 'normal boy things'.

I went into the Army as an aircraft mechanic to see if it would make me more manly. It worked for some time but when I got out I was a little lost as to purpose of life. I have come so close to hanging many times over the past years.

I dressed when all were gone from home. When [my wife] Randi went to see her girl friends or was at Oakway Spa for three hours at a time three days a week. I'd draw the curtains closed because I was always afraid the neighbours would see me. Got caught in garb and there was a big bang and I cast out the garments. But I got them again some time later and on and on and on.

Now I have the clothing in my part of the closet and my wife is putting up with it. It has built to where she will even help me look OK."

Ilvy Njiokiktjien: *To Be Us*

Raising children to become happy, emotionally intelligent, empathetic grown-ups can be hard work. For widowers, whose children have lost their mother, the challenges are even greater. Does one have to become both the father and the mother in one person? How do fathers in this role exhibit their feminine side? Their masculine side? In this series Ilvy Njiokiktjien photographs widowers and their children in the hope of shedding light on both the challenges these families face, and also the new bond that forms between the fathers and their children.



© Ilvy Njiokiktjien, *Father Almar*, from the series *To Be Us*, 2017-2019



© Ilvy Njiokiktjien, *Father Nick*, from the series *To Be Us*, 2017-2019



© Ilvy Njiokiktjien, *Father Wouter*, from the series *To Be Us*, 2017-2019

Nichole Sobecki: *afriMAN*

“*afriMAN* is an exploration of evolving understandings of manhood on the African continent, and how traditional expectations are being subverted by individuals. Conceived in collaboration with artists Fitsum Berhe Woldelibanos and Zelalem Mulat Teklewold these portraits are our interpretation of Africa’s modern-day chiefs—men defining their own sense of identity beyond gender essentialism. The interviews that accompany the portraits are an essential part of this project, preceding the making of images that were then conceptualised together with our subjects. The men here reflect the emergence of a fresh, unhindered image of gender that rejects the dominant masculine ideals of aggression, dominance and a closed emotional state. Their masculinity is not imposed on them by the outer world. It’s not the masculinity of their fathers. It’s not even a fixed state. ‘Being a man,’ explains writer Kevin Mwachiro, ‘is just simply being comfortable in your own skin.’ This is the *afriMAN*.”



© Nichole Sobecki, *Zelalem*, from the series *afriMAN*, 2018

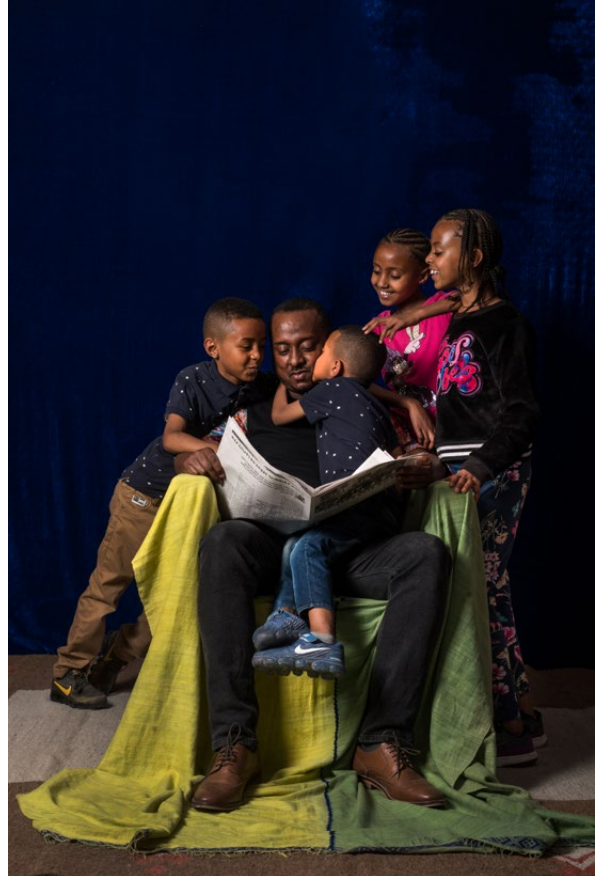
Testimony from Zelalem: “To man up; it’s an old-school notion. Sometimes I think that being macho is just a way of covering up for one’s insecurities. Being kind, and thoughtful, and loving; those are things I’m constantly working on within myself. I’ve thought far more about being alive, about existence, than about being a man. If I had to define it, though, I think manhood is really just to live with generosity, and to give what is asked of you. If you’re in a relationship, how do you support your wife or girlfriend emotionally. Or as a father, or a son. That’s a practice worth mastering. That’s life, and coexistence.”



© Nichole Sobecki, *Joel*, from the series *afriMAN*, 2018

Testimony from Joel: “I grew up in a slum here in Nairobi, in a one-room shed with my mom, my grandmother, my sisters. I never knew my father but I used to see my uncles with their wives. They would come into the house, sit down, and ask: ‘Where is my food? Did someone collect the water?’ That was masculinity back then. So when I first started dancing people really didn’t understand. They told me I was stupid to give all of my time to something that would never go anywhere. But this is something that I can do that most people can’t. It’s like you’re a superhero. And that’s where my sense of masculinity comes from. If I feel bad, I can channel that into this other side of my life. It’s taught me about myself. In a ballet class, the choreographer doesn’t care about your gender. He’ll give you both masculine and feminine moves. And to be a great dancer you have to be in touch with both sides of yourself.”

Testimony from Nahom: “Growing up the communication was limited between my father and I. It was about respect more than anything else. You fear and respect your elders. Men are the shield, the protection from the world. When I got married, I began to change, though. I work, and my wife works too. We raise our children together so those traditional differences became less. Now, when I see my kids talking with my father I’m shocked. Their ease of communication is astounding; they talk as if they were friends. They tell him ‘Come on, listen to me!’ He is almost 80 years old and when he was raising me we wouldn’t dream of talking to him that way. I’ll often wait to see if they will get in trouble with him, but instead they just laugh and have discussions.”



© Nichole Sobecki, *Nahom*, from the series *afriMAN*, 2018

Maggie Steber: *Men Born from Blossoms*

"I grew up without a father or any male influence and so men have been a mystery to me in some ways. I've had plenty of boyfriends and one 30-year relationship and lots of male friends but I still find them mysterious in ways that I hope they find women mysterious. I want to present men in ways that are unexpected and something they themselves do not expect or think about so I began photographing men with flowers. The flowers do not speak to or about any gender issues or designations or choices. The men I photograph are straight or gay or older or younger... I just choose the men according to how they move me or because I think there is something special about them and because I think they are beautiful people. I try to select a type of flower that seems to be like them or remind me about some quality they have."



© Maggie Steber, *Gio with Purple Roses*, Miami, Florida, 2018



© Maggie Steber, *Man Born from Blossoms, Georgetown, Malaysia*, 2018

Sara Terry: *(Re)Thinking the Male Gaze*

“I’m engaging with some of the most famous paintings in art history, featuring nude women painted by men; in each recreation, nude women will be replaced by nude men. But that is only the starting point. I am researching each painting carefully, reading about its cultural context, feminist critique, place in art history, etc. And then I am responding by reconsidering the image in contemporary terms as a way to reflect on current debates about gender and power. The first photograph in this series is *(Re)Thinking Manet’s Déjeuner sur l’herbe*, photographed in ‘plein air,’ as an acknowledgment of the role Manet’s painting played as a key transitional work of art to the Impressionists. I’ve also chosen my own modern, feminist representations of the items included in the painting (the picnic, the nude’s clothes, the frog in the foreground, etc.). I was drawn to this painting as the first in my series because the three main figures are all engaged in some act of communication (gesture, glance, etc.), but none of them are talking to each other. That’s what I feel has happened in the first stages of the #metoo debate. It’s critically important that women tell their stories and are heard. But I don’t feel we as women are at the point yet of truly engaging, or ‘hearing’ others, whether it’s other women, or men. The most significant change I’ve made in restaging the painting is to turn the main nude subject from a direct, almost bemused confrontation with the viewer to a downward gaze, a reflection both of traditional representations of female ‘modesty’ (a decidedly unmasculine trait) and the fact that in this contemporary conversation, men have been chastened, and rightly asked to let women lead the way.”



© Sara Terry, *(Re)Thinking Manet’s Déjeuner sur l’herbe*, 2017



© Sara Terry, *(Re)Thinking The Birth of Venus*, 2017

“The Birth of Venus—the Roman goddess of love—is a creation story that begins with a most brutal act of violence. According to mythology, Cronus—the son of Uranus—cut off his father’s testicles with a stone sickle and threw his genitals into the sea. They caused the sea to foam—and out of that foam, Venus was born.

A man’s creation story of woman. The goddess of beauty and love born from sexual violence.

I respond the only way I know how—by telling a story of my own. With *(Re)Thinking The Birth of Venus*, I have appropriated this creation story on every level as a woman, including placing myself in the photo as the god(ess) in the painting. In an era of angry men, I choose to create man from love—and rather than hold a cloak to hide his nakedness, as in Botticelli’s painting, I hold a mirror, inviting him to see himself without artifice, to know that bereft of power or prestige or brute strength, he is man. And this is enough for him to be. I want him to know that he is loved, that he comes from the nurturing earth, not an angry sea, and that he must in turn give back that love.

Mythology says that roses first bloomed when Venus was born. I surround the man in my creation story with sweet peas—inspired by Faith Salie’s essay in *Time*, on 1 December 2017, as the #metoo movement was rising. It’s titled *How to Raise a Sweet Son in an Era of Angry Men*.

She wrote: ‘Hours after I gave birth to my first child, my husband cradled all five pounds of our boy and said, gently, “Hi, Sweetpea.” Not “Buddy” or “Little Man.” Sweetpea. The word filled me with unanticipated comfort... I was witnessing my husband’s commitment to raising a sweet boy. Because this is what the world needs now, urgently: sweet boys and people who grow them.’”

Nicola Genovese: *A Novanta* (90 Degrees)

Performance: 27.2.2020 at 18.30

"Ninety degrees is the first output of my creative work Ph.D. on white Italian masculinity in crisis through the frame of visual and performance art.

Ninety degrees is a solo performance that breaks down and looks at a series of gestures known in Italy as 'a novanta'. These patterns of actions and facial expressions are usually performed by a man who imitates intercourse in the doggy style. In the performance, I examine how different types of subjugation and violence, as well as fragility and instability, are inscribed in gestures normalised among many Italian males, in order to question certain narratives of masculinity. 'A novanta' is often used by lower-middle-class Italian men to claim that they have successfully accomplished intercourse in the doggy style position, or that they are planning to have sex in this position with a woman. This set of gestures can also be used to emasculate another man by showing him that he has failed, for instance, that his girlfriend is cheating on him, or that the boss has no respect for him. *A novanta* explores several specific aspects of traditional Italian masculinity, in particular how Italian men deal with performance anxiety, how they adjust their need for control over women, and how nationalistic rhetoric is intertwined with sexual performance in the context of so-called white masculinity in crisis. As a result of the #metoo episode, this gesture is rarely used in public because it is considered gross, but it survives in private situations and is still widespread. The expression 'a novanta' is found on social media under the definition of 'Hate Speech'."



Nicola Genovese, *A Novanta*

Parallel Exhibitions

At the beginning of 2020, three museums and art spaces in Biel are exploring themes related to gender and representation in the fields of photography, contemporary art and history. The three institutions have exchanged views, but also some of the content that circulates from one exhibition to the next.

Me Man. You Woman

NMB New Museum Biel

21.09.2019 – 29.03.2020

The interdisciplinary exhibition *Me Man. You Woman* at the NMB New Museum Biel challenges the roles often attributed to men and women throughout history. By decompartmentalising representations of the past, it deconstructs an androcentric reading of it. In the light of archaeological facts, it reveals an unexpected diversity of roles and social models across the millennia of prehistory, in order to provide a better understanding of our contemporary society. Alongside archaeological objects, the works of contemporary artists offer their perspectives on the construction of historical narrative and the definition of gender.

<https://www.nmbiel.ch/>

Nicola Genovese

espace libre, Bienne

19.2. – 8.3.2020

Residency and exhibition by artist Nicola Genovese

<https://www.espacelibre.art/>

Useful Information

Exhibition	Her Take. Rethinking Masculinity
Public opening	Saturday 1 February at 17.00
Art Talk with Sara Terry	Sunday 2 February at 11.30
Performance	Thursday 27 February at 18.30
Dates	2.2.-5.4.2020
Hours	Wednesday 12.00-18.00 Thursday 12.00-20.00 Friday 12.00-18.00 Sunday/Saturday 11.00-18.00 Monday/Tuesday closed
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