

## **Beyond the Binary**

### **How People Have Taken Control Over Their Identity Through a Rejection of Sex/Gender Binaries**

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Visualizing Gender, Performing Identity

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A recurring topic which has been discussed in this course, through both writing and art, is that of sex and gender binaries. More than just theoreticals, the current sex and gender binaries present within our society pose real questions and real harm. Binary sex/gender narratives push people into believing that one can only ever exist as one or the other, deviations from the norm are quickly rectified through forceful means, and identities are forced upon us based on our phenotype.<sup>1</sup> These are all topics and issues which continue to be tackled to this day. In efforts to reclaim agency over their lives and identities, sex/gender minorities have continually pushed against the binaries which have restrained them. Sex/gender are fluid constructs which reach beyond the physical nature of a person leading to an interesting manifestation of the non-binary, of someone who is a form of gender superposition in which they can be any gender or none at all. This idea of the non-binary is largely overlooked in discussions of identity<sup>2</sup> yet continues to rapidly become a defining identity for many people. In an attempt to capture this fluidity, this state of existence outside of the binary, I created a series of paintings capturing the non-conforming essence of some non-binary individuals and showcasing how people can exist outside of gender.

My paintings are portraits, they are what I see when I look beyond my subjects and take the form of blind contour drawings. Never lifting my pen from the page, one continuous stroke, I look at my subject and not at my canvas. I observe their features, their style, their attitude. The result is a depiction of their essence, a tumultuous array of interweaving lines who somewhat take the form of a person. Free from gender and free from imposed identity, the portrait depictions are just as much real as the person themselves. It's just that our reflections aren't

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<sup>1</sup>Chase, Cheryl. "Hermaphrodites With Attitude: Mapping the Emergence of Intersex Political Activism." In *GLQ a Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 4, no. 2 (1998): 190. <https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-4-2-189>.

<sup>2</sup>Christina Richards, Walter Pierre Bouman, and Meg-John Barker, *Genderqueer and Non-Binary Genders*, Palgrave Macmillan UK eBooks, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-51053-2>.

always true. The portraits are done on foil rather than directly onto the canvas. The bumpy texture and hazy reflection of the foil serves as another layer of ambiguity and turmoil. No one can impose an identity unto you. Only you know your true identity.

These feelings of non-conformity, despair, not knowing who you are, or isolation are not unique to non-binary individuals. They exist, and have existed, within sex/gender minorities for decades, particularly within the transgender and hermaphrodite community as Cheryl Chase personally anecdotes.<sup>3</sup> While the non-binary identity may be new in name, the struggles of fitting into the binary and of wanting to escape it have always existed.<sup>45</sup> Perhaps, non-binary individuals may have been more prevalent had society not demonized gender and its exploration.<sup>6</sup>

Despite these struggles, the non-binary identity has become relevant and important within both academic research and artistic expression. Of note, Cassils' 2022 performative work *Human Measure* encapsulates the feeling and ideas surrounding non-binary identity. In it, five trans and non-binary performers engage in an intricate dance of identity and belonging. A bombardment of flashing lights, droning music, colored screens, and nude bodies, *Human Measure* is intentionally disorienting. The performance makes it difficult to contribute any form of identity to the performers through the distortion of our senses and of the performer's bodies. Through such a work, Cassils brings to light an underrepresented identity within an already underrepresented community.

There is an ongoing conversation of gender non-conformity and struggle for self-determination and visibility within our society. Gender is not a fixed essence but rather a

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<sup>3</sup> Chase, "Hermaphrodites With Attitude," 194-195

<sup>4</sup> Richards, Christina, Walter Pierre Bouman, Leighton Seal, Meg John Barker, Timo O. Nieder, and Guy T'Sjoen. "Non-binary or genderqueer genders." *International Review of Psychiatry* 28, no. 1 (2016): 98-100. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3109/09540261.2015.1106446>.

<sup>5</sup> Smithers, Gregory D. "Cherokee 'Two Spirits': Gender, Ritual, and Spirituality in the Native South." *Early American Studies* 12, no. 3 (2014): 626-51. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24474873>.

<sup>6</sup> Butler, Judith, "Introduction: Gender Ideology and the Fear of Destruction." *Who's Afraid of Gender?*, 4-5, Great Britain: Allen Lane, 2024.

fluid identity which can disrupt and redefine societal norms.<sup>7</sup> The non-binary, and nonconforming sex/gender identity as a whole, exemplify the importance of bodily autonomy and the right to self-identify.<sup>8</sup> Much like the sex/gender challengers who came before them, the non-binary seeks to break away from the restriction of the binary into a space entirely outside of it. My artwork contributes to this discussion through a distortion of the human figure and removal of any characteristics associated with gender. My paintings seek to acknowledge those who seek to redefine themselves as being outside of the normative binary. My work challenges viewers to reflect upon the societal structures which shape gender and identity. Ultimately, my art aims to create a space for reflection and the celebration of diverse identities, whether they fall into a binary or not.

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<sup>7</sup> Butler, *Who's Afraid of Gender?*,

<sup>8</sup> Chase, "Hermaphrodites With Attitude"

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## Artwork Images









