FLOWERING FOLLOWING ON THE HEELS OF THE CENTER FOR EXPLORATORY AND PERCEPTUAL ART’S (CEPA) GROUNDBREAKING 2004 EXHIBITION “DEVIANT BODIES 1.0,” WHICH EXPLORED NOT ART BY GAY MEN, NOT ART ABOUT GAY MEN, BUT RATHER THE GAY MALE AESTHETIC IN VISUAL ART/MEDIA, “DEVIANT BODIES 2.0” FOCUSES ON WORK BY, ABOUT, AND FROM WITHIN THE TRANSGENDERED COMMUNITY.


LIND UNDERHILL OF LISLE, NEW YORK, IN A SERIES OF TWENTY ELEGANT SELF-PORTRAITS TITLED “NO MAN’S LAND” (1999–2000), EXPLORES MALE PRIVILEGE AND ITS GLAMOUR. REFERENCING THE WORK OF GAY MALE PHOTOGRAPHER GEORGE PLATT LYNES IN THE 1930S THROUGH 1950S, UNDERHILL TRANSPORTS HIMSELF, AND US, TO A TIME PERIOD THAT MAY HAVE LOOKED MARVELOUS, BUT IN RETROSPECT WAS DANGEROUS AND FRIGHTENING TO EVERYONE OTHER THAN WEALTHY, WHITE, HETEROSEXUAL MALES. IN THESE EVOCATIVE 11- x 14-INCH SILVER GELATIN PHOTOS, THE ARTIST DEPICTS HIMSELF IN CLOTHING RANGING FROM PERIOD SUITS TO INFORMAL ATTIRE TO FORMAL EVENING WEAR. THE SHEER VARIETY OF CLOTHING FROM THE PERIOD GIVES NEW MEANING TO THE PHRASE “OUT OF THE CLOSET AND INTO THE STREET,” AND A NATTY CLOSET IT IS. THE POSES, OFTEN WITH LEGS SPREAD AKIMBO, A JACKET OR SUIT COAT THROWN CASUALLY OVER A SHOULDER, A HOMBERG HAT PLACED SQUARELY ON THE HEAD OR AT A JAUNTY ANGLE, SPEAK VOLUMES ABOUT THE DOMINANT ROLE PLAYED BY MEN IN SOCIETY OF THAT PERIOD BUT QUESTION THAT VERY PRIVILEGE WHEN THE GENDER OF THE MODEL IS UNSPECIFIC.

that gender is both real and illusory, natural and constructed.”
And that is certainly true among the people photographed here.
They range from Matt, a bearded FTM posed with his child Blake
(“I had been a man for six years when I conceived my son”); to
Ken, age twenty nine, who remarks, “[b]eing a man differs greatly
between Chinese and American cultures”; to the lovely Nori, who
states that “[b]eing a woman means my looks are important,” a
hard, often unpleasant truism. The presentation of this multi-
panel work bears more similarity to an expository display than to
an artwork. Hence, the visages and the accompanying testimonials
carry meaning, rather than the medium itself. This direct approach
is installed, appropriately, in a special ground floor gallery space that
is accessible to the general public at all times.

Also available to the public around the clock is “One Night in New
York” (2006) by Jaishi Abichandani of New York City and Bombay,
India, installed in CEPA’s Window on Main Street. This multimedia
installation, incorporating video, sound, kinetic light boxes, and still
photography, features personal portraits of Muslim drag queens,
with specific references to Indian art and culture.

In addition to photographs, this large exhibition includes videos
by several artists, two sculptural installations, and monoprints on
handmade paper. The monoprints and one installation are by
Emmett Ramstad of Minneapolis. The paper, which incorporates
gauze, is in mottled hues of browns and pinks, the varying colors of
drying blood. The prints, with figures stitched into the paper, outline
a human body seen from the front, rear, side, or as a hand holding a
penis. The monoprints are suspended away from the wall, allowing
both sides to be visible.

Accompanying the monoprints is Ramstad’s 12-x1 foot installation
of a series of wood shelves, each surmounted by a brown pillow of
rich fabric with an embroidered outline of a hand or pair of hands.
Atop the pillows are twenty-two small round cases (with clear tops)
that contain gauze and small bits—described in explanatory material
for the exhibition as “surgical remains.” This work concerns the
surgery necessary to transform the body; stitches can both heal a
wound and simultaneously outline for emphasis or clarity.

Perhaps the most popular (and rightfully so) piece in “Deviant
Bodies 2.0” is Trapped (1999) by Austin, Texas-based Sandy
Stone. It is a small (17 inches long) fully functional maquette for a
proposed human-scale work. What appears to be a human figure
is completely wrapped in dirty cloth, banded with ropes, lying on
a bed of ashes. The figure moves intermittently (mechanized from
beneath) and appears to be struggling to escape its bindings, with
audible sounds of struggle as it does so. Because the movement and
audio is sporadic, it is both surprising to the casual viewer and all
the more convincing. This is a stunning piece.

In “Deviant Bodies 2.0,” videos by several artists play in four
separate booths. Mirha-Soleil Ross, a Quebec-based videographer
and performance artist, presents Tremblement de Chair (2001),
an abstracted work involving body parts in unusual colors. Jay
Sennett, from Ypsilanti, Michigan, shares Phallocy (2000), an
autobiographical, double-exposed, sepia-toned video on the
struggles of a FTM, which includes the memorable note “I’ll
never be able to ejaculate.” Operation Invert (2003), a video by Tara
Mateik of New York, compares Botox-related plastic surgery and
gender reassignment surgery. Mateik reveals the often paradoxical
medical regulations that permit physical alteration through plastic
surgery while they are much more restrictive concerning gender
reassignment surgery. Plastic surgery is generally used to heighten
or enhance gender differences and can take place under casual
circumstances such as “Botox house parties” where doctors make
house calls to administer injections to groups of friends. At the same
time, gender reassignment surgery requires a recommendation from
a therapist. This double standard becomes particularly clear if we
consider that plastic surgery is often “elective” and is just a cosmetic
enhancement; gender reassignment surgery is, by comparison,
radically transformative of self and to those individuals who pursue
it, vitally necessary.

Phillipe Lonestar, of Oakland, California, exhibited three videos
about childhood and gender difference. Often employing bright,
kitschy colors and adults reenacting varying childhood experiences
ranging from the chaos of Something Wonderful to Say (2004) to the
troubled tableaux of Secret Picnic (2004) to the celebratory Gender
Play! (2004), these videos are both entertaining and scary.

Michela Ledwidge, a London-based artist, allows us to assist in
the creation of her work, T*M (2004). Using a keyboard, the viewer
creates their own version of this multimedia piece, remixing one
Web installation and three videos. The clips include those of a
civil wedding, a figure skating in an urban environment, a solo
performance, and very fast moving shots of passport and other
official identification cards that identify gender. The juxtapositions
and soundtracks are enthralling and just plain entertaining.

“Deviant Bodies 2.0” brings together a wide range of media and
approaches in a significant body of work. The perspective of this
community is that of a marginalized group of individuals who are
at worst discriminated against, and at best much put upon. Yet the
exhibition is remarkably liberating. With so many ways of being in
the world, individual gender or sexual presentations of the self can
be, and are, fluid for all of us. For viewers, it becomes clear that our
choices are broad in terms of what we feel, think, and experience
and how we choose or are compelled to present them to others.
In this exhibition, CEPA successfully presents a broad spectrum of
photography-based artwork concerning the gender variant
experience and, once again, demonstrates its ability to present
pioneering, important new work.

Reine Hauser is an arts administrator and critic.