

# DISRUPTIVE PERSPECTIVES

Museum of Contemporary Photography

October 12–December 22

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## Education Guide



**Zackery Drucker and Rhys Ernst, *Relationship #23 (The Longest Day of the Year)*, 2011**

This guide serves as a viewer's supplement to the exhibition Disruptive Perspectives and contains information about the works on view, questions for looking and discussion, and suggested readings. You may download this guide from the museum's website at [mocp.org/education/resources-for-educators.php](http://mocp.org/education/resources-for-educators.php).

To schedule a free docent-led tour, please complete the form here.  
[mocp.org/education/tours-and-print-viewings.php](http://mocp.org/education/tours-and-print-viewings.php).

Barbara Davatz

Zackary Drucker and  
Rhys Ernst

Jess T. Dugan

Alexandre Haefeli

Laurence Rasti

Leonard Suryajaya

Lorenzo Tribago

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# Introduction

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By its very nature, photography is a medium of exclusion. Bound by four edges, photographs crop out portions of the world, and reduce the boundless complexity of lived experience to a two-dimensional illusion. For marginalized populations, exclusion from the omnipresence of visual culture is not merely defined by what appears in one photograph or another. An abundance of exclusion—an existence that is largely outside of the frame—has the power to delegitimize one's identity in the public sphere and have a profound impact on their lived experience.

Until recently, gender and sexuality resided in the popular consciousness as stable, binary concepts. Beginning in the late 1960s, a marked uptick in public expressions that craft alternative narratives to mainstream visualizations coalesced around activist communities. Artists including Eleanor Antin, Joan E. Biren (JEB), Nan Goldin, Gran Fury, Peter Hujar, Zoe Leonard, Robert Mapplethorpe, and Catherine Opie created artworks, as well as billboards, leaflets, and postcards that forcefully inserted new visualizations of identity, sexuality, and human rights into public discourse. Set against a body of imagery found in visual culture that overwhelmingly reinforced prevailing social norms, the works made by these artists aggressively countered ideologies enshrined in the existing visual record.

A new generation of photographers, many of whom are represented in the exhibition *Disruptive Perspectives* continue to carve out new ways of envisioning gender, identity, relationships, and selfhood, bringing further nuance to the groundwork laid by their predecessors. Using a medium that is resolutely still, they paradoxically find strategies to explore the idea that identity and often gender itself do not exist as biologically fixed realities, but are rather adaptable expressions negotiated over time and along a spectrum of possibilities. Combating narrow-minded presentations, their works engage critically with the power of photography to render the intricacies of identity, as they challenge the ways audiences—both individuals and groups—imagine individuality and intimacy.

Working in a moment of complexity—when the spectrum of identities is broadening, becoming more visible and accepted, yet equal rights for all remains elusive in experience—these artists are navigating a space between validity and obscurity with pronounced sensitivity. Their works lay bare aspects of their private lives and those of their subjects, and in that willingness, invite our empathic attention. At turns triumphant and at other moments sorrowful or distressing, the artworks included present gender and sexuality as a panoply of possible variations—which for each of us reflect the ongoing complex influences of self, other, and image.



**Lorenzo Triburgo, *For Sidney*, 2015**

*Disruptive Perspectives* was curated collaboratively by Allison Grant, Assistant Professor in the Art and Art History Department, University of Alabama and former Assistant Curator of Exhibitions and Education at the Museum of Contemporary Photography, Columbia College Chicago, and Nadine Wietlisbach, Director at Photoforum Pasquart in Biel, Switzerland. The participating artists represent perspectives from across the globe, with a particular focus on American and Swiss photographers who are coming together through a cooperative cultural exchange. The exhibition is being presented simultaneously at both curators' home institutions in Fall 2017. An accompanying catalogue will include contributions by authors Geneva Moser and Meredith Talusan.

## West Gallery - Lorenzo Triburgo

The series *Policing Gender* by **Lorenzo Triburgo** examines mass incarceration from a metaphorical and queer perspective. Today in the United States, LGBTQ people are often victims of discriminatory statements, as well as violence and persecution. Recent studies show that of all homeless youth in the United State, 40% of the individuals identify as LGBTQ.<sup>1</sup> As such, these individuals are more likely to be approached by police officers and another study found that 22% of transgender people reported police harassment, 6% reported physical assault, and 2% reported sexual assault by an officer.<sup>2</sup> If convicted, LGBTQ people are reported to receive longer prison sentences than their cisgender and heterosexual counterparts. This disparity is all the more glaring in the case of LGBTQ persons of color. Triburgo's rendering of fabrics calls to mind Renaissance portraits of nobility in which sumptuous backdrops testify to the wealth and importance of a sitter. These images are installed next to stark aerial landscape images that resemble surveillance photography, making the absence of human subjects in his photographs all the more striking. The artist intends this absence: by being incarcerated, LGBTQ persons disappear from history and society.

1 Lambda Legal, "Protected and Served? Survey of LGBT/HIV Contact with Police, Prisons, Courts and Schools" (2014).

2 Jaime M. Grant, Lisa A. Mottet, and Justin Tanis, "Injustice at Every Turn: A Report of the National Transgender Discrimination Survey" (Washington: National Center for Transgender Equality and National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, 2011).



**Lorenzo Triburgo**, *For Tre*, 2015



Hans Holbein the Younger's *Venus and Cupid*, 1524

### Questions for Looking

- Triburgo references drapery in Renaissance paintings, such as Hans Holbein the Younger's *Venus and Cupid*, pictured left. Why does the artist choose to not include people in his portraits? What do you imagine the absent subjects' faces and clothing look like?
- How do the audio recordings of trans inmates alter your experience? Would the work be as powerful without the audio?
- Can students sense the impact of the inmate's own experiences in the work, in the audio? How?
- Ask students to compare the aerial images for the same issue. Is one viewpoint more successful than the other? Why?

## West Gallery - Zackery Drucker and Rhys Ernst

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“I think the relationship was the most important story for us when we saw the pictures. It’s the same way we approach trans-ness in a lot of our storytelling as well: it’s there but it doesn’t have to be the thing that’s hitting you over the head” – Rhys Ernst

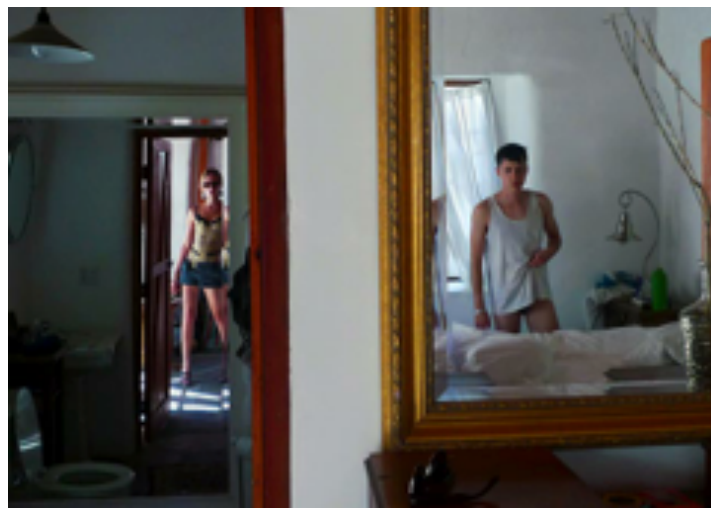
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**Zackery Drucker and Rhys Ernst, *Relationship #11***  
(Palindromes), 2008

The series *Relationship* can be approached in several ways. First, it is a documentation of the romantic relationship between artists **Zackery Drucker** and **Rhys Ernst**, which lasted from 2008 to 2014. The pair’s photographs were not originally intended for exhibition or publication; they are snapshots of their daily routine and mementos of their life as a couple. *Relationship* also documents the numerous physical changes that occurred as the couple simultaneously realigned from one gender to another. Drucker is today a trans woman and Ernst a trans man. In their photographs, the artists capture the successive stages of their respective processes of gender realignment. *Relationship* therefore assumes a third level of meaning, since it also refers to the relationship of an individual with their body.

- Give students a few minutes to look at all the images. What themes do they notice? Do the students think they are displayed in chronological order or organized a different way? Why? Point out examples.
- In her groundbreaking book *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler states that “Masculine and feminine roles are not biologically fixed but socially constructed.” The work in *Relationship* takes the viewers on a journey through not only their romantic relationship but also their simultaneous transitions and challenges the binary notion of gender along the way. Do the students think the work discusses the fluidity of gender? How?
- In what ways do these images seem to defy social expectations of gender? In what ways do they seem to conform?



**Zackery Drucker and Rhys Ernst, *Relationship #33***, 2010

## East Gallery (North)- Alexandre Haefeli

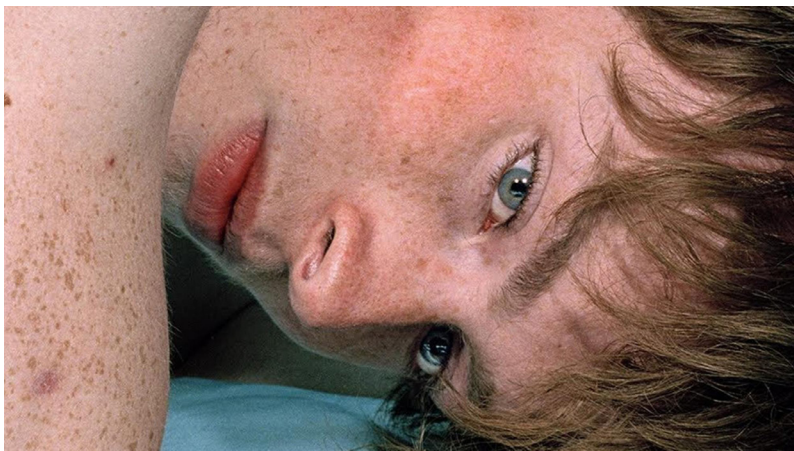
**Haefeli's** *The Company of Men* explores the male gaze from a point of view not usually seen in photography. Haefeli seeks out a more vulnerable side of the male body, exposing the complexities of male identity and the exploration of sexuality.

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"Torn between romanticism and open sexuality, between suggestion and revelation, the spectator is invited to look, to imagine and to desire"-Alexandre Haefeli

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*The Company of Men* by **Alexandre Haefeli** is a series centered on the male figure and the representation of sensuality. While the theme of voluptuousness is often portrayed via female nudes, erotic portraits of naked men are far less common. Particularly interested in the young adult male, Haefeli humorously overturns the codes of masculine imagery: the men appearing in *The Company of Men* seem delicate, mischievous and sensitive—qualities typically considered feminine. This series thus reminds us that it is possible to live and to express one's identity as a man outside the clichés generally associated with virility.



**Alexandre Haefeli**, *Untitled*, 2015



**Alexandre Haefeli**, *Untitled*, 2015

- Ask students to begin by describing the color, composition, and scale of the artworks around them. What comes to mind when they look at individual works? How about when looking at the entire room?
- Students may notice the bodies of subjects are fragmented, faces are obscured, and many images employ unconventional or imperfect camera techniques. Why might the artist be using photography in this way?
- Haefeli's installation is an associative visualization of vibrant images, placed at different levels and at different scales. Does this type of installation add to or take away from the message of the work? Why?
- How does Haefeli use the body and other props to represent sexuality, youth, and eroticism?
- How do these images challenge conventional ideas of masculinity and femininity? How are they reinforced?
- What photographic strategies has Haefeli used in his attempts to transcend mere representation in these works? Do students think those strategies are effective? How do they react emotionally when seeing these works?

## East Gallery (South)- Barbara Davatz

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“I have always thought of them fondly, as my ‘photographic family,’ and I have always been very curious to see what kind of people they brought into the new series (into the family!) each time.” - Barbara Davatz

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**Barbara Davatz, Franz Matthias 1982**

**Barbara Davatz** has photographed pairs—lovers, friends, siblings or parents—over a period of more than thirty years. The inspiration for *As Time Goes By* goes back to the early 1980s, when the photographer met an androgynous couple named Nicola and Kurt. Davatz went on to make portraits of twelve couples, and then repeatedly photographed them over intervals of several years. During that time span some couples separated, some moved on to other relationships, and some established families. This long-term project takes an extended look at the diversity of the subjects and at their self-presentation in front of the camera. Davatz’s rigorous formal language serves to underline the subtle changes wrought by time, and the same neutral grey background provides a foil to faces and clothes, revealing nuances within each person’s identity.

- How do the subject’s presentation of themselves change over the years – in clothing choice, posture and energy?
- How does the dynamic within the pairs shift? How does posture and body language affect how you read their relationships? Does their relationship matter for the viewer, are they seen as individuals or only pairs?
- If a couple separates, what does that look like, and what is the ripple effect? Find examples of this in the photographs.
- How do you transition out of youth and what does getting older mean? How is aging visualized in the work?



**Barbara Davatz, Sonnhild Matthias 2014**

## North Gallery- Leonard Suryajaya



Leonard Suryajaya, *Red Initiation*, 2017

**Leonard Suryajaya** is inspired by the complex history of his roots: he grew up as an Indonesian citizen of Buddhist faith and Chinese origin in a predominantly Muslim country. Working from this composite cultural context, the queer artist explores fundamental questions about notions of intimacy, self-representation, and the sense of dislocation—of feeling alien to one's surroundings. His high-density, performative compositions include his family and partner staged in colorful tableaux vivants. Suryajaya's photographs and installations communicate a vision of daily life in which a multitude of cultural codes co-exist and betray tensions between personal identity and the expectations of family and society.

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"It is my ambition to use my own confusing background in work that expands the viewer's understanding of identity—both their own, and others. And in the process, I hope to challenge conflicting conceptions of personal and cultural identities, intimacy, physical boundaries, gender roles, sexuality, queerness and freedom."- Leonard Suryajaya

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Leonard Suryajaya, *Bikini Boy*, 2017

- How do students react to being in the installation rather than viewing photographs hung on the wall? What is Suryajaya attempting to emote in creating this space?
- Suryajaya was raised in Indonesia (a primarily Muslim nation) by Chinese Buddhist parents, was sent to Christian schools, and is now a practicing artist in the US. How do students think his background influences the type of work he makes?
- How does the installation suggest that gender identity and expression is influenced by family, ethnicity, religion, and place?
- Ask students to consider their own family, ethnicity, religion, and location. Does the work challenge them to think about the ways these things have influenced their personal experiences with gender identity and expression?

## Mezzanine- Jess T. Dugan

**Jess T. Dugan** is interested in representations of identity, particularly as they apply to LGBTQ communities. Commenced in 2013, *To Survive on this Shore* started from the recognition that, in representations of transgender and gender-nonconforming people in the media and the arts, older people feature very rarely in comparison with younger individuals. Dugan seeks to remedy this absence by photographing trans people aged fifty or older. She has produced over eighty works for the series in collaboration with Dr. Vanessa Fabbre, assistant professor at the Brown School of Social Work at Washington University in St. Louis, who conducted interviews of Dugan's subjects. The paths of their subjects range widely and reveal the complexities of living a gender that doesn't suit one's identity. Dugan and Fabbre's project underlines the fact that these older individuals paved the way for today's greater tolerance toward transgender people, as well as those who identify outside the male/female binary.



**Jess T. Dugan**, *SueZie, 51 and Cheryl 55, Valrico, FL, 2015*



**Jess T. Dugan**, *Sukie, 59, New York, NY, 2016*

- How can a portrait communicate information about the subject's identity and place in society?
- All of the individuals in Dugan's *To Survive on this Shore* (2013-Present) are over 50 years old. How does aging change one's perceptions of identity? How does identity evolve as we age?
- Ask students to look at the portraits. What themes do they notice. How do they think the photographs were made?
- Each portrait has a companion interview. Have students choose one interview to discuss in depth. How do image and text change how the work is seen?

An empathetic response is perhaps most powerfully elicited in this exhibition from the video *Letter to My Father* (2017). In it, **Jess T. Dugan** recounts the difficulties that have accompanied her personal search for authenticity. The piece chronicles her gender non-conforming presentation from an early age and its toll on her relationship with her now-estranged father. In an open letter to him, she meanders through her personal coming-of-age story—one marked by her inclination toward masculine styling, and her father's discomfort with her budding confidence to embrace a gender presentation that did not conform to his ideals. As she matured, Dugan's queer identity took root, and has remained a continuous point of tension in their relationship. A scrolling album of personal photos powerfully illustrates Dugan's written words and makes visible the role of the symbolism of gender in her struggle to be seen and acknowledged as her true self. This is a story familiar to many in the larger LGBTQIA community. Acceptance by family, friends, teachers, or peers is sadly not a given, and almost no one who is queer or gender non-conforming, and chooses to live openly and proudly, is spared the difficulties of public scrutiny. For young people in particular, parental support in the face of societal pressure can be a critical point of strength. A lack thereof is usually immensely psychologically crushing. Dugan's work asserts, clearly, that all children long for the approval, support, and love of their parents even after they enter adulthood. For gender non-conforming individuals, that most basic relationship is too often pitted against another essential need—that of living an authentic life.

Dugan also mediates on the prospect of becoming a parent. Now married, she and her partner hope to have children soon and envision a future where they will serve as a foundation for their offspring to use in building confidence and a sense of self. From her painful relationship with her father, Dugan imagines a different roadmap for parenthood, charted by unconditional love and acceptance. Her vision reverberates with the relationship she imagines she could have had with her father, but which he was never able to fully provide. Within her pain and personal growth, we find the great message of Dugan's work: the human need for love and acceptance is universal—especially between a parent and a child—as is the need to live as one's true self. Her work may be about her experiences and community, which have suffered immensely from marginalization and oppression, but the individuals depicted are, like us all, human beings. Dugan reminds us that we all seek to find community, connection, and affection as our authentic selves.



**Jess T. Dugan**, Still from *Letter to My Father*, 2017

# Print Study Room- Laurence Rasti

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"In this context of uncertainty where anonymity is the best protection, this series of photographs questions the fragile nature of identity and gender concepts. It tries to give back to those people a face that their country has temporarily stolen."- Laurence Rasti

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**Laurence Rasti, *Untitled*, 2014**

- Do you experience a duality between public and private life in your own culture? How? Do politics and religion affect your daily life?
- The identities of the individuals in Rasti's images are all obscured. Why did the artist choose to keep them anonymous?
- Think about your personal freedoms. How would living under an authoritative regime change your daily life and modes of expression?
- Do you think this form of photography can be an effective way to critique human rights issues? Does the work go far enough?

In 2007 the former Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad gave a speech at Columbia University in which he stated, "In Iran, we don't have homosexuals like in your country." His words echo in the title of **Laurence Rasti's** series *Il n'y a pas d'homosexuels en Iran* (*There are no Homosexuals in Iran*). Homosexuality does indeed exist in Iran, even if consensual relations between members of the same sex are punishable by death. Rasti captures sensitive portraits of gay Iranian refugees in the Turkish town of Denizli, through which they often travel as they exit their home country. Rasti obscures the faces of her subjects who prefer to remain anonymous, a reminder that their lives have been under threat. Yet they hide behind colorful objects and fabrics, through which the artist suggests a brighter future ahead: by leaving Iran, these individuals will soon be able to live their romantic relationships in broad daylight.



**Laurence Rasti, *Untitled*, 2014**

# LGBTQ Timeline

## 1952-Present

The arrest of Rosa Parks fuels a new wave of civil rights activism when she refuses to give up her seat on a public bus to a white man in Montgomery, Alabama. Echoing the origin of the first wave of feminism in the abolition movement of the Nineteenth Century, the modern civil rights movement for racial equality spurs the second wave of feminism to seek broader gender equality.

Transgender and gender nonconforming people are among those who resisted arrest in a routine bar raid by police on June 28 on the Stonewall Inn in New York City's Greenwich Village, thus helping to ignite the modern LGBT rights movement.

Title IX (Public Law 92-318) of the Education Amendments prohibits sex discrimination in all aspects of education programs that receive federal support.

Homosexual diagnosis removed entirely from the DSM-III-R (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders)

Cincinnati Contemporary Arts Center cancels Robert Mapplethorpe's "The Perfect Moment" after outcry from conservative groups from what they deemed "obscene" content triggering a rethinking of public arts funding across the U.S.

Catherine Opie's *Being and Having* series debuts

19  
52

Christine Jorgensen is the first American whose sex re-assignment surgery became public. Her surgery causes an international sensation, and for many, she is the first visible transsexual in the media.

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55

Betty Friedan publishes "The Feminine Mystique," a keystone of the modern women's rights movement.

19  
63

The Equal Pay Act is passed by Congress, promising equitable wages for the same work, regardless of the race, color, religion, national origin or sex of the worker.

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Kate Millett's book *Sexual Politics* was published

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78

Harvey Milk, gay San Francisco city supervisor and "Mayor of Castro Street," and Mayor George Moscone are murdered in City Hall by former city supervisor Dan White.

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86

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87

ACT UP (Aids Coalition to Unleash Power) is founded in New York City. The group's tactics rejuvenate lesbian and gay activism.

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89

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90

Judith Butler publishes *Gender Trouble* igniting a discussion on the performativity of gender and how society's influence shapes it.

19  
91

Transgender youth Brandon Teena is raped and murdered in Humboldt, Nebraska. This crime brings attention to transgender discrimination and violence and becomes the subject of the award-winning film, <i>Boys Don't Cry</i> .		
Senator Sam Nunn's "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy for the US military becomes law. The law includes the determination that "persons who demonstrate a propensity or intent to engage in homosexual acts" are an "unacceptable risk" for inclusion in the military.	1992	First International Conference on Transgender Law and Employment Policy. The conference in Houston was the first of six gatherings where activists, lawyers, from around the country met and laid the groundwork for the transgender movement. Speakers at the conference addressed legal issues related to health care, employment and military service, among other areas.
Jack Butler publishes article "Before Sexual Difference: The Art and Science of Genital Embryogenesis" regarding his research on embryological development of sex vs gender.	1993	
Phyllis Frye, called the grandmother of the movement, and Riki Anne Wilchins held the first transgender lobbying day in Washington. Ms. Wilchins created GenderPAC, an advocacy group based in Washington.	1994	Congress adopts the Gender Equity in Education Act to train teachers in gender equity, promote math and science learning by girls, counsel pregnant teens, and prevent sexual harassment.
	1995	-Matthew Shepard is tied to fence, beaten, and left to die by Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson outside Laramie, WY on October 7th . The incident gains national media attention and sparks vigils around the world. Shepard dies five days later. His death inspires the award-winning play The Laramie Project.
	1998	-The European Union passes the Human Rights Act, guaranteeing basic principles of life for everyone.
The first legal same-sex marriage in the United States takes place in Massachusetts.	2004	
	2012	The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission ruled that Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which made it illegal to discriminate based on sex, also protected transgender employees.
The Supreme Court's Obergefell v. Hodges decision grants marriage equality to same-sex couples nationwide.	2015	
	2017	District of Columbia residents can now choose a gender neutral option of their drivers license. DC residents become the first people in the United States to be able to choose X as their gender marker instead of male or female on driver's licenses and identification cards. Similar policies exist in Canada, India, Bangladesh, Australia, New Zealand, and Nepal.

# Questions for Looking and Discussion

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- How does color work in this exhibition? What purpose do you feel it serves, or does it make any difference?
- How does this show interact with issues of gender and sexuality? In your opinion, does it clarify or complicate these issues?
- Can you think of other ways to photographically explore the show's themes apart from portraiture, as Lorenzo Triburgo has in his aerial photographs? Are portraits the vector best-suited to explore these themes?

# Terms and Definitions

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The language around gender identity and sexuality is fluid and ever-changing. Below are select terms to help guide viewers in understanding the complexities of language around this issue.

- **Heteronormative**– denoting or relating to a worldview that promotes heterosexuality as the normal or preferred sexual orientation.
- **Queer**– originally pejorative for gay, now being reclaimed by some gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgendered persons as a self-affirming umbrella term. Caution, still extremely offensive when used as an epithet.
- **Intersectionality**– the interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, class, and gender as they apply to a given individual or group, regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage.
- **Androgynous**- Identifying and/or presenting as neither distinguishably masculine nor feminine.
- **Biological Sex**- a label that you're given at birth based on medical factors, including your hormones, chromosomes, and genitals. Most people are assigned male or female, and this is what's put on their birth certificates.
- **Cisgender**- A term used to describe a person whose gender identity aligns with those typically associated with the sex assigned to them at birth.
- **Gender dysphoria**- Clinically significant distress caused when a person's assigned birth gender is not the same as the one with which they identify. According to the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), the term - which replaces Gender Identity Disorder - "is intended to better characterize the experiences of affected children, adolescents, and adults."
- **Gender-fluid**- According to the Oxford English Dictionary, a person who does not identify with a single fixed gender; of or relating to a person having or expressing a fluid or unfixed gender identity.
- **Gender identity**- One's innermost concept of self as male, female, a blend of both or neither – how individuals perceive themselves and what they call themselves. One's gender identity can be the same or different from their sex assigned at birth.
- **Gender Politics**- The assumptions underlying expectations regarding gender difference in a society; (also with singular concord) an ideology based on such assumptions.
- **LGBTQIA**- An acronym for "lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex and ally."
- **Transgender**- An umbrella term for people whose gender identity and/or expression is different from cultural expectations based on the sex they were assigned at birth. Being transgender does not imply any specific sexual orientation. Therefore, transgender people may identify as straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual, etc.

## Extended Resources

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- Butler, Judith. 1990. *Gender trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity*. New York: Routledge.
- “Queer Art: 1960s to the Present.” Art History Teaching Resources. <http://arthistoryteachingresources.org/lessons/queer-art-1960s-to-the-present/>.
- Leslie Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art - Research. <https://www.leslielohman.org/research.html>.