

*Seeing Ourselves:*  
Autonomous Trans Representations  
Pre- and Post- 2000

a curated exhibition by Patrick O'Farrell



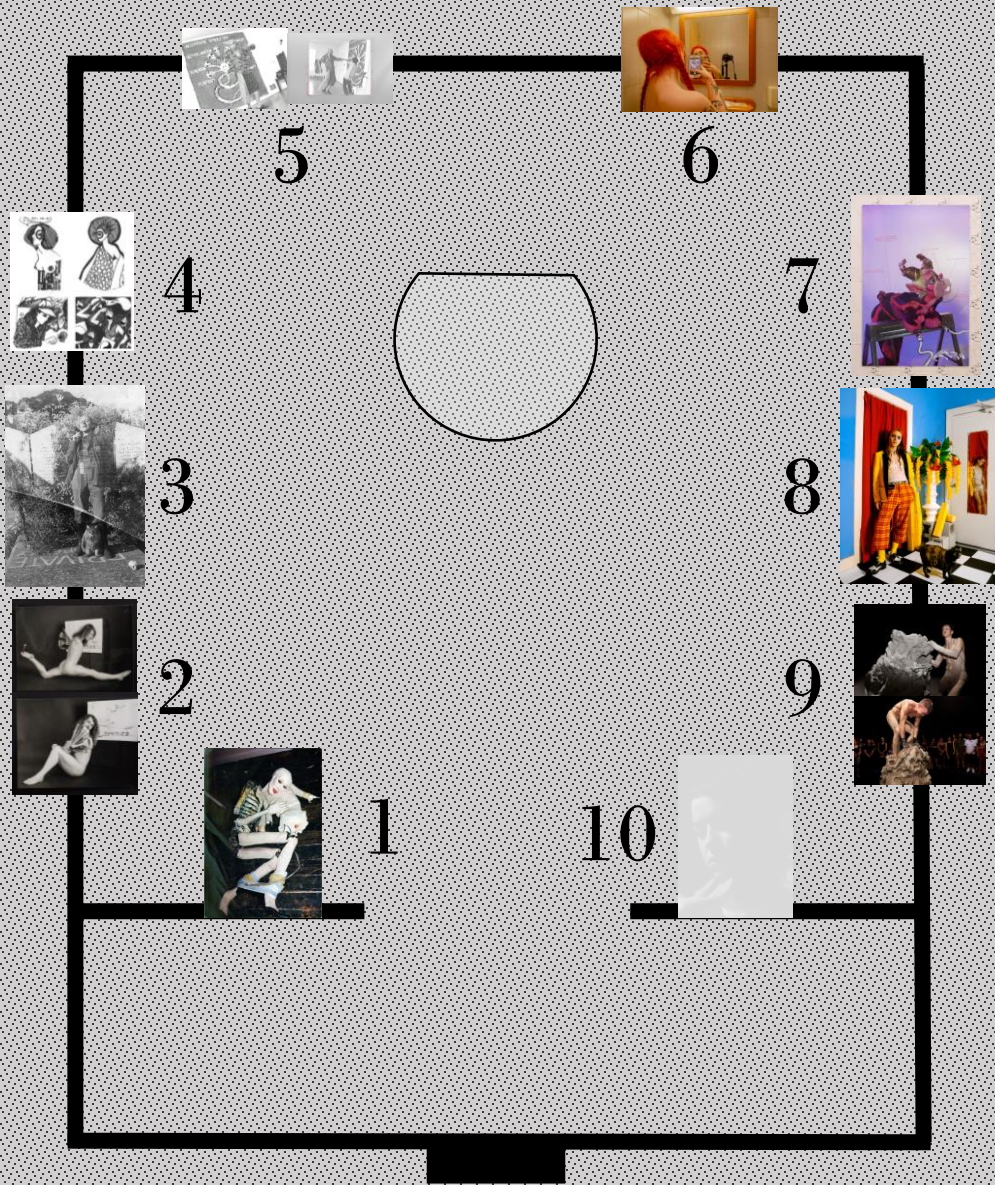
# The Orí Gallery



The Orí Gallery, owned by Black and gender non-conforming Maya Vivas and Leila Haile, is a small space located in Portland, Oregon on the historic and bustling Mississippi Avenue that deliberately hosts exhibitions of trans and queer artists and activists of color. In addition, the gallery is involved in direct engagement with the community through classes and workshops.

The Ori Gallery has two rooms. The front is a small entryway with shelves for retail goods. There are two white barrier walls with a space between them that delineate the second room as the gallery space. For the exhibition, the first thing a viewer will notice is a column of mirrors slightly back from the center of this second room. From the vantage point of the doorway a viewer will be able to see through the mirror column the pieces against the barrier walls as well as a few of the ones along the side wall (1, 2, 3, 8, 9, 10.) The remaining works (4, 5, 6, 7) will be visible already via the viewer's peripheral vision, but also through a second reflection on angled mirrors behind or near 1, 2, 9, and 10. This complex setup will make it possible for the viewer to see all of the works at once, underscoring the idea that a trans gaze is one that transcends time and space to find identification and community. On the column mirror directly facing the doorway will be the introductory wall text, overlaying the viewer's reflection. Each work will have a set of mirrors so that the viewer's reflection can be viewed simultaneously with the art, troubling the passive role of a viewer by creating a continuous reflexive gaze that is situated in direct dialogue with the work. The works on left side of the room will be pre-2000 and the right side will be post-2000 to acknowledge the split of the millennium and put the two sets of five in lateral conversation across the divide, with attention paid to how they pair up.





- 1) Greer Lankton, *Sissy In Pieces*,
- 2) Lorenza Bottner, *untitled*
- 3) Claude Cahun, *Self-portrait*
- 4) Suzun David, *untitled* (detail)
- 5) Vaginal Davis, *Voodoo Williamson:...*
- 6) Laurence Philomene, *Self-portrait...*
- 7) Juliana Huxtable, *COW 3*
- 8) Hobbes Ginsberg, *Self-portrait...*
- 9) Cassils, *Becoming an Image*
- 10) June T. Sanders, *Harpo*

## ***Introductory Mirror Text***

Collected here is a recuperative past and present historical gathering of trans and gender non-conforming artists that generates conversation across the divide of the new millennium and combats the longstanding historical trend of cis artists coopting the trans image. To your left is before and to your right is after.

Greer Lankton's *Sissy* shows us how we might make use of materials for a complexly subjectified bodily manifestation. Claude Cahun and Hobbes Ginsberg stare down their noses across the room at each other, resolutely resilient and exuding an aspirational confidence, even

if undercut by suffering and exhaustion. Suzun David, in her visionary work from the margins carries us beyond what we might assume to be the limits of our experience, while Juliana Huxtable frames those expansive imaginaries in an exploited history, but still manages to revel in it. Lorenza Bottner and Cassils grapple in their own ways with the limits of the body, Bottner seizing the self-determining power of the image in tandem with expansive and capacious bodily possibility, Cassils fighting off a gaze that hungers for visual mastery over the trans body. Vaginal Davis remains a sturdy rock, encouraging and nurturing her carriers-on in their struggle toward radically active transformation. Laurence Philomene vividly renders a trans

quotidian, beautifying the everyday and making ever more possible the embrace of our own dazzling selves, and June T. Sanders softly visions us outward and into our surroundings, rooting us in the potential of our communal exchange.

What constitutes a trans gaze? How does representation shift when trans people are the ones in control of the means of their own visual (re)production? What visual and conceptual vocabularies can be built out of this conversation? How do these works speak across time and space to each other? How are spaces carved out for flourishing and survivance, and what blossoms once it's given room?





## Greer Lankton, *Sissy In Pieces*, 1985, 35mm photograph, Greer Lankton Archives Museum

Greer Lankton started making dolls in the 70s and continued until her death at 38 in 1996. She became prominent in the East Village of New York during the 80s, collaborating with her fashion-designer husband Paul Monroe on elaborate window displays. Her dolls inhabit an especially slippery space between object and subject. All of her dolls are vividly expressive, not only in their construction but in the careful and deliberate way they pose. They elicit the sense that they themselves are autonomous, deciding how they want to pose for the camera. Greer, as a post-op transwoman, inhabited this space as well, utilizing dolls to conceptualize her own transition. Greer often posed in photographs with her work as if she and the dolls were close friends or family. Many of the dolls serve as self-portraiture, and Sissy played this role most of all. Here, Sissy is in the midst of an “operation”, the term Greer used to describe the process of reconstructing dolls, especially evocative in the context of Greer’s many encounters with the medical establishment. Sissy’s soft fabric exterior has been stripped away to reveal her wire skeleton. What looks like her underwear has been pulled down around her ankles, and her body is in disarray. One of her arms is broken apart and the other wraps up around her torso, feebly shielding herself.



# Lorenza Bottner, *untitled*, no date,

photographs mounted on cardboard, private collection

Lorenza Bottner was a transfeminine Chilean immigrant who lost her arms when she was electrocuted at eight-years-old. She resisted normalization, refusing prosthetic arms and instead entering a long legacy of mouth-and-foot performance artists. These two photographs by/of Bottner demonstrate the simultaneity and multivalence of her art practice. In the first, she is posed during the process of painting, actively using a paintbrush with her mouth, holding another between her toes, and with a fan of many other brushes fashioned to her side. She sprawls across the dark photographic space, utilizing her intensive training in ballet and other dance forms to carefully position herself both for the pose and the painting. She is in a tight, skin-toned leotard, making clearly visible her impressive musculature. She refused too the desexualization of the disabled body. Across her body of work she is lithe, erotic, carefree. In the next image she is turned toward the camera, peering coyly over her fan of paintbrushes directly into the camera and revealing that the painting she has just completed is in fact a self portrait of herself more-or-less as she was in the previous photo, the fan now visible as wings. Nearly all of her work is self-portraiture, and it is readily apparent that she was acutely aware of the power that could be gleaned by controlling one's own image.







## Claude Cahun, *Self-portrait*, 1947, monochrome print, Jersey Heritage Collection

Claude Cahun worked in France from the 1910s through to the 50s, primarily in photography. A large chunk of their work is associated with surrealism, but as is visible here, there is also space for a candid, reveling-in-the-joy-of-embodiment kind of quotidian. This photo is taken a few years after the end of the German occupation of their island home of Jersey, where Claude and their lover and collaborator Marcel Moore narrowly escaped the death penalty after being caught distributing counter-propaganda in an attempt to make German soldiers recognize they were being exploited and turn them to mutiny. Here we see Cahun, standing proudly in a graveyard, nestled in a shrubbery, on top of a massive plaque that reads “Private Property.” A cat who appears in many other photographs sits between Cahun’s feet, near a small skull, looking, like Cahun, into the camera. They are dressed in sturdy boots, sensible high-waisted trousers, a utilitarian jacket, altogether a powerfully self-assured masculinity. They hold their gloves in one hand and a cigarette in the other. They look down their nose at the camera, eyes lidded. The image is double exposed, and it is possible to make out the large gravestones through the foliage and Cahun’s body. Cahun seems comfortable and confident in the liminal.



These four illustrations come from the two newsletters distributed by TAO, the Transsexual Action Organization, *Moonshadow* and *Mirage*. TAO was an intersectional, coalition-based, multi-chapter group founded in L.A. and then operated out of Miami that centered the abolition of police and prisons and mutual aid for precarious transwomen of color. *Moonshadow* and *Mirage* pushed far beyond the frame of trans activism in the present-day, capturing what was then a fairly widespread set of interests for transsexuals. The two illustrations on the right elicit the pervasive psychedelia and occultism within radical trans circles at the time. The lower left drawing shows a UFO above the subject, pointing toward other illustrations and texts that appear in *Moonshadow* that strongly ally transsexuals with extraterrestrials, potential collaborators in the fight for liberation. The subject also looks down to the butterfly perched on her finger, perhaps alluding to the drive towards interspecies communication. The upper left captures the fascination/identification with expanding technological possibilities and their potential for bodily integration. This work predates Eva Hayward's *Cyborg Manifesto* by a decade. The figure's breasts, grafted to a circuit board, seem somehow mechanical. The text, "You, too, can be a robot...." serves as an offer and an invitation to what could be. It must be acknowledged that Suzun David here speaks for the countless trans artists who have been lost to the archive. At the moment, nothing else seems to be known about her.

Suzun David, *untitled*  
(detail), 1974-75, illustrations,  
Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Historical Society





## Vaginal Davis, *Voodoo Williamson: The Dona of Dance*, 1995, projected video, Adams and Ollman

Vaginal Davis is one of very few widely known trans artists who have been making art since before the turn of the millennium and are still active. Davis has been working since the 70s in a huge variety of formats; performance, film and video, music, painting, sculpture, zine-making, and writing. She has exhibited internationally and her critiques of racialization and passing were formative in the developments of trans theoretics in the 90s, especially in Jose Esteban Munoz's *"The White to Be Angry": Vaginal Davis's Terrorist Drag*. In *Voodoo Williamson*, Davis plays the titular main character, the leader of a shambling dance troupe of precariously positioned people. As a coach she is demanding and firm, pushing the members toward more passionate and intense expression. At the same time, she remains nurturing and encouraging, despite the group's struggles. She pulls each of them to the front, vigorously lecturing on dance as a means of alternative queer action and everyday survivance. This work displays some of the hallmarks of her practice: A steadfast dedication to earnest satirical humor, a powerful denial of visual pleasure and assimilation, and a deep-set conviviality that invites the viewer into the action. *Voodoo Williamson* brings us toward a communal support structure that holds its members in a critical and caring embrace.





This photograph is part of an ongoing self-portrait series, *Puberty*, in which Philomene documents the day to day experience of constant evolution through testosterone transition. The project serves many functions. It works against the mass media visual regime of trans representation that continues to reduce subjects to dismal, simplified spectacles and deny them autonomy. These photos are grounded in a mundane quotidian, showing the nuance and complexity of non-binary transition as it manifests in breakfast routines and injection rituals. It offers an alternative representation that is entirely controlled by the artist and serves as a document not just for Philomene but for other burgeoning trans people who likely don't have access to information about what the daily life of transness might look like. It is also firmly situated in 21st century North American life, rooted in smartphones and social media. *Self-portrait in My Hotel Bathroom* captures this many-angled subjectivity, showing Philomene as framed by their DSLR, as framed by the mirror, as framed by their iPhone, as well as transparently depicting the means of image production, including the cameras within the frame to make a closed loop of image control. It demonstrates a radical vulnerability by inviting the viewer into photographic and personal processes.



Laurence Philomene, *Self-portrait in My Hotel Bathroom*, Paris, April 2019, digital photograph, Laurence Philomena

# Juliana Huxtable, *COW 3*, 2019, Inkjet mounted on Dibond, Reena Spaulings Fine Art

Incisively conscious of the present-day politics of visibility, Juliana Huxtable knows that her work wouldn't be in the Guggenheim if there weren't a wealthy collector interested in buying and donating it. She knows also that the work she does that doesn't offer up her othered body to a white sexualizing gaze won't sell. So here, in her most recent solo exhibition *Interfertility Industrial Complex: Snatch the Calf Back and the Pursuit of Desire*, Huxtable leans into her own sexualization and uses it as a bridge to connect a vast network of oppressive systems. She continues the work of Suzun David, finding commonality between herself as a black trans woman and the countless animals exploited for the massive agriculture industry. *COW 3* blends the self-portrait photograph of Huxtable bent over a metal sawhorse in fluorescent make-up and horned hairstyling with digital augmentations to add cow ears and huge breasts being pumped for milk. Huxtable's eyes are closed, and her expression is pained in surrender, but layered again is a pinback button over her mouth, replacing it with one of a drooling cartoon cow's. There is a revelatory reappropriation of ancient suffering towards an embodied radicalism that refuses wearable, changeable politics in favor of an impassioned dedication to an ideal way of being.





Hobbes Ginsberg, *Self-portrait at 25*  
(*After Dorothea Tanning*), 2018,  
digital photograph, Hobbes Ginsberg

At this point, Hobbes Ginsberg is moving past the limiting frame of being constantly read through the lens of trans-ness. This self-portrait comes from her solo show/book *still alive*, a collection of selfies that loosely track a resilient and constantly shifting self. This is the final image in the collection, and the title makes the connection to surrealist painter Dorothea Tanning's 1942 self-portrait, *Birthday*. Hobbes stands powerfully in chunky oxfords, hyper-saturated yellow socks and matching blazer, plaid pants held up by a studded belt, and a lace camisole. A calico cat stands in front of her, quizzical, against a backdrop of cinderblocks stacked to support painted yellow 4x4s and a sculptural white vase gushing with vivid artificial foliage. Hobbes seems to lean against a blood red curtain hung across a doorway, staring deadpan into the camera, lips parted. She looks through tired eyes and deep blue eyeshadow, exhausted, exasperated, but still softly confrontational. In the reflection of the mirror on the adjacent door we can see her looking down, in camisole and briefs, revealing a complex play between interior and exterior, and how the photograph is performed. The image exudes a vulnerable stability, commemorating and celebrating Hobbes continuing queer survival.





# Cassils, *Becoming an Image*

## *Performance Stills, 2012-present,*

C-print, Ronald Feldman Gallery

These two images are from an ongoing performance by transmasculine Cassils, *Becoming an Image*. Originally staged for the ONE Archives in LA, the work consists of Cassils boxing a 2000-pound block of clay in a totally dark room. The performance itself is violent. Cassils is in brutal dialogue with the clay, the two of them ferociously trying to shape something in an empty archive. The audience is lined against the walls, periodically blinded by the flash from the photographer. These flashes deny the audience and the camera the visual mastery of documentation. The tension of sharing space with only the physical and auditory experience of the intense performance snaps with the flash. The audience collectively winces as a momentary image is seared into their eyes and gradually fades out of sync with the action. Focusing specifically on the photographs, it is obvious that Cassils is interrogating the violence of trans representation, the harm generated by capturing the image. But underneath this is the idea that in order for a muscle to grow, it has to break. By pushing the physical limits of his body and the political limitations of the trans image, Cassils breaks through to open up into the possibility for new growth.





# June T. Sanders, *Harpo*, 2018,

photograph, June T. Sanders

June T. Sanders is a photographer deeply concerned with the specificities and potentialities of place. Her most recent body of work, *someplace not yet here*, is simultaneously rooted in the experience of the rural Inland Northwest and is collaboratively bringing into being an ephemeral landscape that manifests a constantly shifting queer subjectivity. June's process is vulnerable and convivial, deliberately creating intimate moments between herself and her subjects. She is intensely aware of the radical power of this exchange and utilizes the interaction to build a self-determining and interdependent communal imaginary. The image that results serves then as an artifact apprehended from this collective past-present-future fantasy. Like Cassils, *Harpo* denies the viewer any visual mastery over the subject, but less confrontationally. It could so easily fade into the wall and be missed. But barely visible is Harpo, calmly caught in a monochromatic liminality. Her face is relaxed, but not deadpan. A hand extends towards her gently, open. The suspended temporality of the photograph refuses any directional movement of fading *in* or *out*, and instead sits comfortably in its indeterminacy. The image, in its sparseness, is rich with potential but demands very little. It is precisely itself, in this tiny captured moment, moving softly toward someplace.



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