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Re-presenting gender fluid identity in a contemporary arts practice

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Re-presenting Gender Fluid Identity in a Contemporary Arts Practice

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Bachelor of Visual Art (Hons)

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USE OF THESIS

The Use of Thesis statement is not included in this version of the thesis.

Abstract

This dissertation addresses the paucity of representation of gender fluid identity within contemporary imagery. An examination of historical and socio-political structures inherent in modern Western society serves as a foundational position for a broader exploration of differently gendered communities globally. The case is made for contemporary art to be encouraged as a tool for the emancipation of subjugated gender fluid identities. Examples of contemporary gender fluid visual art and artists are presented to illustrate the ability of art to enable agency within the broader gender fluid community. Finally, a commentary on my own artwork is presented and discussed in relation to the research and conclusions advanced within this dissertation.

Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not, to the best of my knowledge and belief

- I. incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education;*
- II. contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text; or*
- III. contain any defamatory material.*

Matthew Meredith Jackson

Dated: 16/06/2011

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Introduction

This dissertation seeks to accomplish four distinct but concurrent goals; firstly, I endeavour to present a broad, but detailed overview of gender identity from a historical, theoretical and geographical perspective. Secondly I offer a perspective on Western modern gender identity from a number of voices, from both academic and lifeworld positions. Thirdly, I present an alternative perspective in the form of non Western gender fluid narratives. Finally I examine how each of these preceding aspects of my research has reflexively influenced the series of paintings I have produced in correlation with this dissertation.

It is important at the outset to clarify two major points when approaching this dissertation; one is the use of the term 'gender fluid' in reference to many of the individuals and groups discussed within this text. The other is the argument for relevance and privileging of lifeworld voices within this dissertation.

Use of the term 'gender fluid'

Throughout this dissertation I refer to the gender fluid individual, and I am aware that this infers a concept of a classifiable sub culture with a community, be it local or global. It is necessary at this point to clarify this terminology as I do not wish to impose a set of cultural presuppositions on the cultural groups or individuals I will be discussing in following chapters. The term 'gender fluidity' has been chosen as an umbrella classification to encompass all realms of non hetero-normative, gender variant identity. This classification therefore acts as a convenient terminology, inclusive of all gender identity that sits outside of traditional paradigmatic expressions of dimorphic gender. This is not to suggest that any of the individuals it refers to actively refer to, or think of their selves, as gender fluid. Most, if not

all of the groups discussed in this chapter have an established set of cultural beliefs and an already actualised gender identity and it is not my intention to infer otherwise. Many of the people and cultural groups discussed in this dissertation do not necessarily identify as either male or female in the Western hegemonic sense.

In support of my argument and in an attempt to avoid a colonial perspective on gender identity I present a digest of non-Western perspectives on gender identity that in many instances is polemic and runs contrary to dominant Western hegemonic positions. In later chapters I present an overview of the lifeworlds, myths and representations of gender variant communities including India, Thailand and Indigenous North America. Along with this digest I will anecdotally discuss my own experiences with these cultures from a pan global research journey undertaken in late 2009. All this is in support of contextualising my practice.

I shall argue that gender and gender identity are not limited to the binary of masculine and feminine as is traditionally accepted, but are far more ambiguous in their nature. With this in mind I discuss Jacques Derrida's theories of deconstruction in correlation to the topic of gender (Derrida, 1997). To further substantiate my argument I draw upon contemporary scientific and psychological research which posits that at least one in five hundred people is born 'differently gendered' chromosomally (Edwards, 2006). I also review the effects of previously accepted modes of dealing with gender identity by the surgical and psychological professions, by first presenting the position of psychologist Dr. John Money (1972) and then discussing the long term consequences of the surgical and hormonal interventions he routinely prescribed. I examine the introduction of gender dysphoria clinics in the Western world and, drawing upon the writings of Sandy Stone, (Epstein, 1991) discuss the lack of agency for transgendered people within the hetero-normative structures of the health industry.

Most importantly to this dissertation, I assert the need to amend the discourse on gender identity to include those of the third gender, who I refer to as gender fluid throughout this text. From my position as a visual artist I have come to realise that the lack of gender fluid representation in visual art is surprisingly apparent. I introduce the proposition that the representation of the gender fluid identity may inevitably help to generate acknowledgement and eventually lead to a greater understanding of gender fluid ontology within the broader community. I conclude that the necessary course of action is to create a visual language for gender fluidity that acknowledges the inherent ambiguity of its subject matter.

To achieve this goal I both present discussions from queer and feminist theorists, such as Nayland Blake (1995) and Malcolm Miles, (1997) and suggest the appropriation of their methods in order to recode a visual vocabulary for the use in gender fluid representation. Throughout this dissertation I use psychological and sociological writings and theories to position the concept of gender within the context of a broader Western society. I examine early representations of gender identity, in order to understand the foundations of gender perception. Drawing upon the theories of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, discussed by Storr (1989) and Julia Kristeva as discussed by Chanter (2006) I examine how psychological theorists suggest human beings come to acknowledge their own gender identities. I then present the disciplining influence of Western modernity on gender identity leading inevitably into contemporary theories of gender identity from a number of personal accounts and lifeworld voices. By discussing Michel Foucault's theories on power and the disciplining of the modern body, I demonstrate how industrialisation has demanded a codification of gender for the agenda of increasing economic productivity. Foucault's theories of power and punishment help to present the discourse on gender that has been responsible for the moral, legal and psychological positions that have policed contemporary gender identity. Further to

this I discuss the concept of gender as a floating signifier using the semiotic theories of Stuart Hall, which explain to some extent why gender fluidity is marginalised. Some of these marginalised voices are also heard in the form of practical narratives sourced from within the gender fluid community. Texts from many gender fluid and gender variant theorists are used to privilege and give agency to the concept of contemporary gender fluid ontology. Throughout I also include an ongoing reflexive account of my own gender fluid lifeworld which significantly influences my position amidst any discourse on the representation of gender fluidity. My aim is that my practical narrative will serve to frame my intentions regarding gender fluid representation more clearly and offer a consolidating narrative to the many disparate texts I have presented; with the purpose of clearly positioning myself within this research as a gender fluid creative practitioner and enriching my reflexive arts practice. In an effort to understand the signifying language of gender fluid identity, in Chapter Five, I will briefly illustrate how gender 'difference' has been represented in art throughout history. By using the writings and observations of art theorists such as Bourriaud (1998), Miles (1997), Ajootian (1997) and Queer theorist and artist Nayland Blake (cited in Rinder, 1995), I create a historical foundation on which to build or at least refresh a signifying language through which to represent the ambiguity of the gender fluid identity. In Chapter five, I also examine the practices of several gender fluid artists including Maori gender bending artist Rich Kereopa and Dan Taulapapa McMullen, a Los Angeles based Fa'afafine artist. Each artist explores aspects of their gender fluidity within both their arts practices and in their diverse cultural spectrum and are pivotal to this dissertation in that they demonstrate an increased level of praxis within their artwork. They also add a rich thread to the tapestry of personal stories presented in this dissertation.

Finally in Chapter Six, I will engage in a critically reflexive analysis of my own visual arts practice, which in direct correlation with this text, as discussed earlier, is informed by the concepts I have raised in this dissertation. The practical component of my doctorate is encapsulated by three individual, though co-related, bodies of artwork. Entitled 'Us', 'Them' and 'Me', each of these bodies of artwork individually presents the viewer with an aspect of the representative perspective of gender fluid identity. 'Us' focuses on the inclusive nature of the gender fluid, presenting 'us' (gender fluid individuals) as we are, as contemporary members of our individual societies. The body of work entitled 'Them' refers to the exclusion and alienation of gender fluid identity. Drawing upon the negative stereotypes and misunderstanding that have littered gender variant history, this series of work shows how gender fluid individuals have long been made the 'other', deridable, matter out of place, robbed of personal agency. The final body of work 'Me' is a practical narrative concerning my perception of gender fluid identity and the experiences and social attitudes that have informed it. These bodies of work will be exhibited concurrently in a public exhibition at the Oats Factory Gallery, in Carlisle, Western Australia, at the culmination of my doctoral research and are also included as colour plates in Chapter Six along with a commentary on the individual artworks.

The importance of the lifeworld and praxis

A key element to my research is the continual revisiting of the lifeworld position. Edmund Husserl introduced the concept of the lifeworld in his 1936 text, *Crisis of European Sciences* (Husserl, 1970). Its basic premise is that everyone exists in a world that is always taken for granted, pre-given and unquestioned. This lifeworld is formed by societal, familial and individual experiences and it generally remains unquestioned. In the same way that a bird does not question the wind currents that it flies upon, the lifeworld is overlooked because it is

the essence of experiential normality. When considering any discourse it is pertinent to reflect upon the inter-subjective or lifeworld position of those engaged in it as “[t]he interactions woven into the fabric of every communicative practice constitute the medium through which culture, society, and person get reproduced“ (Habermas, 1985, p.138). In the case of this dissertation the lifeworld position, for example, of a privileged Western academic, such as myself, may be vastly different to that of gender fluid spiritual devotees such as the Hijras in India. The differences within these unique lifeworlds cannot help but influence our individual perceptions of a broader global discourse on gender identity. However, there is an inherent authenticity to approaching discourse from a reflexive cultural position, as Habermas describes in *The Theory of Communicative Action* (1985):

A narrator is already constrained grammatically, through the form of narrative presentation. When we tell stories we cannot avoid also saying indirectly how the subjects involved in them are faring, and what fate the collectivity they belong to is experiencing. (Habermas, 1985, p.137)

Habermas is suggesting that it is implausible for a cultural commentator not to form some level of presumptive opinion about cultures being discussed: as Habermas explains, all cultural knowledge is formed this way: through the reinterpretation and recoding of culture through the understanding of its participants:

Under the functional aspect of mutual understanding, communicative action serves to transmit and renew cultural knowledge; under the aspect of coordinating action, it serves social integration and the establishment of solidarity; finally, under the aspect of socialization, communicative action serves the formation of personal identities. (Habermas, 1985, p.137)

An issue that is integral to my specific research into the lifeworld of gender fluid identity is that of the relationship between equity and agency. For, although each of us has a lifeworld of which we are more or less aware, those lifeworlds are not inherently considered equal by broader societal standards. In the context of the contemporary late modern period, the dominant social paradigm is one of hetero-normative capitalism. Along with this consumer

culture, contemporary Australia (whilst positioning itself as multi-cultural) is still very much hetero-normative. This monotheist, capitalist, ideology dominates the lifeworlds of its citizens (Foucault, 1977). As I will explore later in Chapter Two, using the writings of Hall (1997) and Giddens (1991), one of the key aspects of maintaining ontological security is the rejection and dismissal of any polemic ideologies. Gender fluid identity, with all its inherent ambiguities, is one of those polemic ontologies and as such any individual whose lifeworld incorporates gender fluidity will most likely fall foul of the dominant hegemonic position. In a contemporary Western context, the gender fluid lifeworld is not considered equal to the dominant hetero-normative lifeworld and is therefore subjugated (Feinberg, 1996). This is not to suggest that gender fluidity is ignored or dismissed out of hand, but through a process of systemic colonisation of gender fluid narratives, gender fluidity is processed, repackaged and redistributed by contemporary mass media in a format that best suits the dominant paradigm. As I discuss in Chapter Five, a plethora of parodical representations of gender fluidity have been created in the form of movies, ranging from autobiographical narratives to comedic slapstick. Each of these movies has represented gender fluidity and each plays upon the stereotype of the gender fluid person as the 'other', inherently different, and more than often, weaker, more ridiculous and more pathetic than their hetero-normative counterpart. This interpretation of gender fluid identity by the mass media for the consumption and entertainment of a predominantly hetero-normative audience alters the balance of equity within lifeworlds; it denies agency to gender fluid people over their own representation. This inequity is pivotal to the aim of my research, in that it demonstrates there is a necessity for gender fluid people, such as myself as a creative practitioner, to regain agency for our community by reasserting our ownership over how we are represented and also to highlight how we have been misrepresented. As Berger and Luckmann suggest: "reality is socially

constructed and the sociology of knowledge must analyze the processes in which this occurs” (Berger and Luckmann cited in Habermas, 1985, p.139).

As will become apparent, throughout this text I present descriptive and objective information from various peer-reviewed sources. However, I also derive meaning from those sources from an entirely subjective position. It is impossible for me not to read this information from my lifeworld position. Seemingly problematic, this course of action is, however, vital to the core of my research and findings. Inherent in the broader concept that I am exploring is the importance and authenticity of inter-subjective ambiguity, both in anatomical gender and even more importantly in gender identity. Firstly, this ambiguity or inter-subjectivity rests securely in the lifeworld of the individuals I am discussing and as such cannot be readily classified in any objective manner. Secondly, my personal lifeworld crucially informs my perception of any discourse on the representation of gender, as I position myself as a Western gender fluid creative practitioner.

In an attempt to fully understand the issues and concepts surrounding my research, I approach and present existing established theories in a descriptive manner and then I attempt to reflexively ‘unpack’ them, re-codify them and re-present them in a way that is useful from a gender fluid lifeworld position. In the same way, I approach non-Western lifeworlds and examine how the experiences and cultures may vary from my own. This awareness of inter-subjective difference has innately influenced both my textual and creative practice, hence the use of my personal travel journal to illustrate my own practical narrative when encountering non-Western gender fluid lifeworlds.

One of the key strategies I employ in this dissertation is the concept of praxis and critical reflexivity. Praxis “refers to the process of applying theory through practice to develop more informed theory and practice, specifically as it relates to social change” (Doherty, 2008

p.109). As a creative practitioner of two decades, primarily working as a painter, it has become essential that my arts practice not only be led by my research, but also that my research be influenced by my arts practice. Indeed the justification of this research and creative project in its entirety is to critically reflect upon the importance of the visual image of gender fluidity and the role it has and does play in the ongoing perception and treatment of gender fluid people like myself. For me, the importance of this project is directly related to education about, and the equitable emancipation of, gender fluid individuals. I hope that my research, artwork and conclusions may somehow help other gender fluid people realise that there are many others out there 'like them' and they are not alone.

Chapter one is a personal account of my lifeworld in order to clearly position myself in regards to the topic of gender identity. In chapter two, I explore the institutional foundations of what we now consider as modern gender and in chapter three I present some of the disparities between positions held by Western medicine and an increasingly vocal and political gender fluid community. As a balance to these generally Eurocentric viewpoints I examine some non Western gender fluid perspectives in Chapter Four and discuss once again my subjective perception of existing traditional gender fluid communities globally. In chapter five I look at how art has been used as an emancipatory tool in previously subjugated communities and I discuss the possibility of a correlatory course of action for gender fluid empowerment. Finally, in chapter six I present my own arts practice in direct relation to the research and conclusions in this dissertation. The culmination of three years research and its influence on my painting practice is discussed, in order to clarify and critically engage with the concept of creative praxis invigorating gender fluid agency.

Chapter One - A personal overview of gender fluidity

This chapter is divided into three parts, where I establish the nature of my lifeworld experiences and relate them to a broader visual and gender context by examining representations of gender from a modernist perspective. Through this chapter I present many of the pertinent concepts that I will discuss throughout this dissertation; such as the necessity to privilege lifeworld narrative, the importance of praxis in a communicative practice and the polemic yet paradoxically essential nature of rationalism versus reflexivity in correlation to issues of gender identity.

A lifeworld perspective.

Gender awareness has played a large role in my life; it is a concept that has influenced many of the decisions I have made regarding my identity and my arts practice. From a very young age I became aware that I was not like the other boys that I played with at school. It was not simply that I did not want to play their rough and tumble games or discuss the pros and cons of particular models of cars or football clubs; I quickly became aware that I seemed to lack the capacity to understand the visual and cultural codes inherent in their communications. This misunderstanding of cultural cues in the school yard resulted in many hours of time spent alone and a sense of alienation and confused failure. It gradually dawned on me (if only at a subconscious level), after many failed attempts at male friendship, that masculinity was a trait that, although one I did not possess, I could perform as a kind of act. I was able to

assume the superficial attributes of masculinity, if still unable to understand the full psychology of the concept. Throughout my youth I affected the confident swagger and the lowering of the voice, to mimic the popular boys for whom masculine attributes seemed to come so effortlessly. Unfortunately, for all the painstaking performative study I put in, my ruse was always uncovered a few minutes into any conversation. The subtle rejection coming in the form of a slow steady gaze and a questioning silence in reply to whichever cultural faux pas I may have committed; not knowing what an 'engine block' was or being too enthusiastic about a popular subject I obviously knew too little about. Sometimes I would not even know what mistake I had made, but was all too aware of that look that would harden the other boys' faces and put an end to yet another attempt at easy camaraderie.

It was only much later that I would recognise that look as the one men would give to a female acquaintance when she had apparently overstepped an invisible cultural boundary and was waxing lyrically about a subject they considered 'men's territory'; cars, sport, beer, etc. A slow cold gaze and a polite non-committal silence signalling a conversational strategy of non-engagement (Birdsall, 1980).

Eventually, after several years of rebuttal from the much longed for masculine tribe, in my teenage years I fell in with the Gay community and for a short while felt I had finally found 'my people' and a place where I could be myself; whatever that was. The benefit of being part of the Gay and Lesbian community was the broad and deep history of all things queer. I was surrounded by Gay lay historians and was regaled with tales of homosexuality and unwritten rules on how to be a proper Gay man, from sexual colour hanky codes, to how to tell a 'butch' from a 'femme'. I felt a bond within the community which faced the common enemy of homophobia and later AIDS. This sense of unity and belonging was what I was

never able to achieve in my dealings with straight males and I spent several heady and happy years identifying as a Gay man, successfully quashing the annoying interior dialogue which constantly questioned my newly forged identity; can I be truly Gay when I'm still sexually attracted to women? Is this 'Gay' persona I've developed any more real than the identity I adopted for the boys in school?

Not long into my life on the Gay scene, I became enamoured by the female impersonators and drag queens that would perform nightly and lip-synch their way through Barbara Streisand and Liza Minnelli numbers. These performances affected me in an almost visceral way and I would sit in rapt attention as they sashayed and shimmered on stage in all their gaudy, parodying glory. I saw these performances as empowering, a total dismantling of all that made these men masculine, through the confident donning of an outrageous parody of a female alter-ego in pancake make-up, wig and heels. It was only later when I befriended some of these drag queens that I started to learn about the concept of Trans-sexuality and Trans-gender and the associated politesse. I was taught that a drag queen is a man performing a parody of femininity for entertainment purposes, whereas male to female Transsexuals were women who were born anatomically male.

It was only much later that I became aware of female to male Transsexuals and in my youth I had very little to do with them. Frankly any move towards masculinity had become an anathema to me. Many of my new friends were living fulltime as women and were working towards their gender reassignment surgery. It was commonplace in the mid 1980's in Perth that many of these Trans-women were working in the sex industry to earn the money for their surgeries, as it was one of the few professions that welcomed gender fluid workers. Most other career avenues were closed to Trans-women as the government refused to allow gender details to be changed on birth certificates, so supplying official documents to new employers

amounted to outing oneself (WA Gender Project, 2010). Initially, my introduction to this idea that one can surgically change one's anatomical sex was confronting and difficult to comprehend and I viewed my friends who were going through the process with a mixture of admiration and freakish curiosity. I would eagerly listen to tales of hormone therapy and breast augmentation, told to me by my Trans friends. It was around this time I started considering my own gender identity history and began contemplating the idea of whether I actually identified as male at all.

I retain no romantic illusions as to my reasons for finally approaching a clinical psychologist at Osborne Park Hospital seeking gender reassignment counselling. No small part was due to the long held conclusion that I did not fit the masculine mould set out for me by society; therefore I reasoned, surely I must be female. However, I am equally as certain, in hindsight, that I also desperately wanted to fit within the rarefied, exclusive and supportive Trans community into which I had found myself.

After several meetings with my counsellor at Osborne Park Hospital, it was agreed that I would live as a woman and undergo hormone treatment, further counselling and after a year I would have the option to have gender reassignment surgery, should I wish to after that point. I started the very gradual process of change from male to female and very quickly learnt it was not going to be an easy road to travel. Initially I limited my female life to the confines and security of my family's suburban home, the idea of leaving the house in my newly 'feminised' persona was terrifying; a far cry from the confident strutting of the female impersonators I so admired. During my time identifying as a gay man I had been physically assaulted several times because of my open homosexuality and I had no doubt the penalty for being Trans would only be harsher. At least as a Gay man, I could 'butch it up' if things got scary; as a Trans-woman I was visually vulnerable. Eventually I gathered enough courage to

go to friends' parties and gatherings as a woman, with varying levels of comfort and success. Unfortunately I never got used to dealing with the general public and the ridicule, aggression and physical danger of being a 'non-passing' Trans-woman in day-to-day life.

It was only a few months into my first year that I decided that I would discontinue my physical Transgender journey. In all honesty, fear was a huge catalyst for my decision. I knew that I would never 'pass' as a woman, regardless of hormones and surgery and I was not prepared to live my life on display to the public; an object of ridicule and further alienation. What had initially appeared to be the answer to all my identity problems had only caused me to be even more of a social pariah. The effect of my decision to become 'Trans' had caused irreparable damage to the relationship I had with my parents and many of my friends. I was now more isolated than ever before.

What I had discovered by going through this process was invaluable, however, as it was a catalyst for me to come to the realisation that I did not 'fit' any particular socially acceptable gender mould. I identified as neither male, nor female, but as some unexplainable chimera; an oddity without a community, as far as I could tell. As I had already damaged my communal relationships, I now felt free to *use* the performative qualities of my gender identity to navigate through life, 'being' gay when it suited, 'being' straight when the situation called for it. I was also consciously playing with the performance of masculinity and femininity in daily life in a fluid way, as one regulates water temperature by turning on the hot and cold taps.

With practice I performed the daily roles of both father and mother to my children, husband and wife to my partners. For some time I decided to adopt and maintain a hyper-male appearance for the benefit of my pre-operative Transgendered partner Rachelle, as she felt that my appearance of heightened masculinity would serve to make her appear more feminine to the general public. I worked out at the gym, grew facial hair and adopted the biker fashion

of black leather jacket and boots. I was pleased with the effect and felt fortunate that at least my masculine anatomy responded appropriately to exercise and allowed me to finally adopt a convincing 'man-drag' persona. It still amuses me how even people who know me are comfortable with my hyper masculine identity, even though I have always seen it as a complete parody of masculinity, no more or less fake than the drag shows I enjoyed so much in my youth.

Even after Rachelle succumbed to complications caused by AIDS in 1995, I continued my masculine performance; it had by this time become second nature and to a point was a successful ruse in that it permitted me solitude from the general public. The added benefit of performing such extreme masculinity was the distance it allowed from the exposing conversations I had come to expect from general masculine company. I imagined my reticence to enter into conversation with other men may have been read as an anti-social aloofness rather than the fear of being 'outed' as something other than masculine.

My perception of my gender identity became the subject of my personal investigation whilst engaging in my Bachelor of Visual Arts Degree at Edith Cowan University, where I was introduced to the concept of identity positioning and critical reflexivity through theorists such as Anthony Giddens (1991) and Michel Foucault (1978). It had been impressed upon me that a level of 'reflexivity', or critical self awareness, was necessary in creating relevant art and I realised the most authentic and least explored issue for me was that of gender identity. It became apparent to me that what I lacked growing up were role models for 'people like me'. There were so few representations of ambiguity in contemporary life; everything was geared toward a binary understanding; gay-straight, man-woman, right-wrong. Because of my lived experience, I was painfully aware of the disempowering nature of not belonging and could

see that the lack of visual representation of ‘people like me’ has played a key role in that disempowerment. As Mitchell suggests in *Picture Theory*;

The common wisdom has it that spectators are easily manipulated by images, that a clever use of images can deaden them to political horrors and condition them to accept racism, sexism, and deepening class distinctions as natural, necessary conditions of existence. (1994, p.2)

Hence, my lived experience is the reason my research addresses the paucity of gender anomalous representation in the visual arts, as I feel there is a need to balance the scales for other gender fluid people who, like me, feel that they are alone in their communities. My aim is that this dissertation may become a step towards a better understanding and broadening of knowledge concerning gender fluid ontology.

A lifeworld context: representations of gender

My lifeworld is embedded in the visual and there is a broad and generous representation of traditional binary gender representation in the arts: from Palaeolithic fertility statues, such as the Venus of Willendorf, and Ancient Greek cults of masculinity to contemporary representations of masculinity and femininity in all areas of the visual arts (Kleiner, 2001). In contemporary mass media there is an abundance of binary gender signifiers, such as representations of hyper-masculine sports stars and extreme versions of femininity such as supermodels and other sexualised feminine representations. One only has to open any magazine or visit an art gallery to be afforded a thorough education in traditional representations of gender identity. The same cannot be said, however, for representations of gender ambiguity. These are few and far between in Western Australia and certainly not afforded the mainstream publicity that is granted to images of hetero-normativity. The traditional roles of masculinity and femininity have been depicted by artists for many

centuries under the patronage of monarchy, church and state, which in themselves afford some clue to the artist's choice of subject matter. Contemporary artists, however, have not been deterred from tackling contentious sociological subjects via visual representation, from issues of politics, class, race and sexuality.

This then begs the question; where are the images of gender fluidity in art? Where are the Transgendered, the Transvestite, the ambiguous and the intersex people? Why has their history not been told in the representational arts? As a gender fluid identifier myself, I am forced to ask "Where are my people?"

Issues such as children's sexuality, feminist issues, spirituality, and issues of race, ethnicity and class have widely been represented, often because of the controversial nature of the imagery and ensuing political issues that are subsequently raised. As I have already suggested, the status quo in visual art is constantly being tried, tested and subverted by contemporary artists.

In my opinion the scarcity of representation of the gender fluid individual in art initially seems to stem from an absence of interest or a simple ignorance on the part of the broader arts community. If society is unaware of gender identity ambiguity, it stands to reason there would be no expectation of creating or investigating images of gender ambiguous individuals. It is important to note at this point that many well-received movies have been made about Transgendered identity; however these are also problematic when one considers issues of the personal agency of gender fluid characters and the gender dimorphic actors who they are generally played by. This issue will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 5.

When approaching the concept of gender identity fluidity it might initially seem logical to relate it to other forms of social variance, such as Homosexuality and Lesbianism. Indeed, it

would seem the Gay community shares many similar positions with gender fluidity within its identity base, such as in the performative aspect of cross gender impersonation, the feminisation of the masculine and vice-versa (Nardi, 1998). Gay men and Lesbians could be considered similar to gender fluid individuals in that they are perceived as outside heteronormative identity parameters and often portray a level of gender role non-conformity. However it would be inaccurate to assume that gender fluidity can automatically be positioned in the same cultural arena as Homosexuality, Lesbianism or Pan-sexuality, as gender identity fluidity should not be automatically linked to sexual identity.

Someone who is gender fluid does not necessarily identify as Homosexual, just as Homosexuals do not automatically perceive themselves as gender fluid. A Gay man may still identify as a man, whereas a gender fluid individual may well be comfortable with the heteronormative sexuality assigned to their apparent physical gender, regardless of how they perceive their psychological gender identity. Put in more simple terms; an individual born anatomically male may have heterosexual tendencies, but psychologically identify as something other than male (including, but not necessarily, female) (Califia, 1994). This is in contrast to the common perception of the Trans-sexual individual who generally identifies as the binary opposite of the anatomical gender they were born with, and often seeks to rectify their anatomy through gender reassignment surgery and hormone treatments (Money, 1972). However, being Transgender does not automatically preclude gender fluid identity.

Because of this, albeit, tenuous link to the Gay community, one might expect a level of visual representation of gender fluidity within Gay and Lesbian visual art. The apparent absence of gender fluid imagery by Gay and Lesbian artists might initially be considered an oversight. However I would argue that it may have been marginalised because of a reticence of artists from all backgrounds, not simply from the Gay, Lesbian, Bi-sexual and Trans-sexual (GLBT)

movement. If the GLBT community accounts for only a small percentage of society, how few then are those within the broader community who do not identify predominantly as Gay, Straight, Bisexual or Transgender in identity? Furthermore, how many of those individuals coherently identify as being gender fluid, bearing in mind the very concept of gender fluidity in the Western world is still relatively obscure?

It is clear that the very ambiguity of individual gender identity fluidity defies quantifying as it is by its nature ambiguous and changing. If an artist were to approach each gender identity on an individual basis, the task of presenting a coherent standardised fluid identity, or a stereotype, would be a mammoth and essentially futile task. Therefore, ~~a~~-classifying ~~of~~ gender fluid identity is problematic in that individuals establish their own identity parameters; one gender fluid identity may not only differ greatly from another, but may also be variable over time and circumstance. This is made apparent when reading the many anthologies that have been published by gender fluid writers. Books such as *Genderqueer* (Nestle, 2002) and *Public Sex* (Califia, 1994) present the viewer with a dizzying array of uniquely gendered voices and lifeworlds.

I believe it is the lack of awareness of this paradoxical ontology that therefore filters through to the broader arts community. Visual art is a discipline that relies heavily on signification and there is a necessity for signs to be read and understood by the viewing public. Unlike other media such as film or literature, the visual artist does not have the luxury of a lengthily explained personal narrative to inform the viewer of the subject's identity positioning. Visual artists must rely entirely on recognisable signifiers which can be read by their audience.

When representing the Gay community, there is a strong reference point, a history of traditions, cultural stories and mythologies that can be accessed by artists. The gay community is a global community that has an easily recognisable representational presence.

Artists such as Robert Mapplethorpe (Marshall, 1988), Catherine Opie (Samaras, 1993) and Tom of Finland (Lahti, 1998), and television programs like *Queer as folk* (DeCarlo, 2000) and *The L word* (Chaiken, 2004) cover a vast array of GLBT issues. The gay community also has a vast history of writers, among them: Sappho (Lefkowitz, 2011), Oscar Wilde (Sinfield, 1994), Gertrude Stein (Bridgman, 1971) and Quentin Crisp (1997). Artists can find ample means of expressing themselves visually in regards to Gay identity. The simple counterpoint of depicting two men or two women embracing can easily be used to pictorially signify homosexuality. In contrast, similar devices are problematic when dealing with the subject of gender fluidity as the gender fluid individual may not physically appear different to any member of the hetero-normative general public and as suggested earlier, their cultural difference is not linked exclusively to sexuality. Unlike the gender fluid individual, the gay community has the benefit of a plethora of easily recognisable visual signifiers.

The same can be said for the feminist movement, ethnic communities, and even (though to a lesser degree) the transgender community. Trans-sexuality, though a relative newcomer to the awareness of the broader society, has definite quantifiable attributes, which can be referenced both through sexual politics and an intentional reversal of traditional gender binaries. The masculine and feminine binaries although reversed are still comfortably present; thus creating a relatively understandable reference point. There are reasonably common examples of transgender identity in popular culture, in movies such as *Trans-America* (Tucker, 2005), *The Adventures of Priscilla, queen of the desert* (Elliott, 1994) and *Boys don't cry* (Peirce, 1999). However, even with these examples, issues arise concerning how trans people are represented, stereotyped and how their stories are presented as entertainment for a mass market. This will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Five.

Western gender identity fluidity has few of these attributes, as it has so little traditional knowledge, mythology and recognisable representational signifiers. It has no cultural tropes, other than those already inherent in other communities. Gender identity fluidity is virtually undiscussed in mainstream culture, outside of a small handful of academic researchers, including Raewyn Connell a renowned Australian sociologist and author of *Gender* (2002), and Judith Butler (2006) and Tina Chanter (2006) whose research in the field, in my opinion, is by far the most progressive amongst their peers. It appears that research surrounding gender identity predominantly focuses on the traditional binaries of male and female, even whilst exploring trans-sexuality. Researchers discuss the subversion of gender roles within Transgender individuals by suggesting that the individual must eventually identify as either male or female, as proposed by psychologist Dr. John Money (1972). Little emphasis is given to the liminal, medial or tangential areas between or beyond the binary of masculine and feminine identities.

I argue, however, that gender identity is not fixed as has been generally accepted by Western culture, but is in a constant state of flux. Self-identity has long been acknowledged by theorists such as Anthony Giddens in *Modernity and Self Identity* (1991) as a social construct that can be altered through environmental, socio-political, cultural and psychological perceptions of the individual. There should be no reason to assume the same theoretical conditions do not apply to gender identity.

By exploring institutional Western views on gender, focusing on the accepted gender binaries such as masculinity and femininity and the views held by conservative elements in society such as religious authorities and health professionals, I shall highlight some of the reasons behind the lack of gender anomalous representation in visual art. It has been necessary to

frame the changes in perception of the role of the individual in early modernity, which plays an intrinsic part in historical perceptions of gender identity.

Modern gender fluid identity

Late modernity has undoubtedly influenced the perception of gender identity and the mass media has played an undeniable role in forming both traditional and niche identities (Giddens, 1991). The technological advancements of modernity have alternatively both empowered and disempowered the gender fluid individual. The advent of gender reassignment surgery, hormone replacement therapy and the global identity conditioning of the mass media have played monumental roles in the formation of contemporary gender identity, both in Western cultures and, as importantly, on a global scale (Feinberg, 1996).

The advancement of the communications industry, significantly the Internet, has opened arenas of discussion never before encountered (Pullen, 2010). The ability for Western gender fluid communities to communicate in a relatively safe and anonymous virtual environment has played a key role in creating vocabulary and political standards specific to the gender fluid community (See suggested reading, viewing and online resources, page 156). Indeed, in the relatively brief period of three years, in which it has taken to write this dissertation, I have personally seen the online presence of Trans and gender fluid people and their issues increase dramatically. One example is the discussion of gender-neutral pronouns and concepts such as ‘gender queer’; advocating the deconstruction of gender/sexual specific signifiers (Danet, 1998). There is a definite need to encourage a congregational point for gender fluid community, either virtual or in actuality, even if only with an anthropological agenda in mind. Indeed, my own art practice mirrors this goal by being a representative point of

reference, a body of artwork that acknowledges gender fluidity as a part of everyday life and not as mere sensationalist entertainment for the masses that is offered up by Hollywood blockbuster movies.

There are many examples of gender identity fluidity in both Western and non-Western societies, including the *Fa'afafini* in Samoa (Croall, 1999), the *Hijra* in India (Herdt, 2003), and the *Kathoeys* in Thailand (Matzner, n.d.), *Two Spirits* in Indigenous American culture (Medicine, 2002) and Australia's Tiwi Island *Sister-Girls* plus the *Whakawahine* of New Zealand (Kereopa, 2010). All are members of cultures, who traditionally condone gender anomalous or gender non-specific lives. Their stories and mythologies could ultimately enlighten, empower and create a foundation for a global gender fluid community and in the process create a rich semiotic heritage for visual representation. A key component of my research is the aim to examine cultural narratives other than wholly Eurocentric perspectives on gender identity. My primary decision to focus upon the Fa'afafine, Kathoeys, Hijra and Two Spirit people in my research was that they were the non-Western cultural groups I first became aware of when researching this dissertation that had the greatest online presence.

In this dissertation I pose a series of theoretical and practical questions on gender fluid identity and endeavour to present theorists whose texts go some way to answer the issues raised such as; what are the key differences, if any, to the perception and acceptance of gender identity ambiguity between Westernised cultures and the rest of the world? To answer this I examine ideologies behind aforementioned gender variant communities from outside the Western realm. I include in this exploration my own experiences from a research trip I undertook in late 2009 to early 2010; in order to better understand the lifeworld of non Western gender fluid peoples. My observations and experiences are recorded in anecdotal form in Chapter Four.

I draw upon the theories presented by Foucault (1978), Hall (1997) and Chanter (2006), along with Kant (1784), Giddens (1991), and Connell (2002). I draw upon voices from the gender fluid lifeworld through the writings and observations of and by gender variant individuals such as writers Boots Potential (n.d.), Queen and Schimel (1997), amongst others. The works of these writers be discussed in depth in Chapter Three, as oppositional theories to the position of dominant hegemonic health professionals.

In order to frame the changing perception of identity politics I approach their theories in a chronological order. The chronology of theoretical discourse becomes pertinent when one considers that, historically, academic theories on gender are presented by the elite; predominantly by privileged white males such as Kant, (1784) Foucault (1977) and Money, (1972) who, understandably, write from their hegemonically dominant lifeworld positions, from within accepted institutional frameworks. In contrast, contemporary texts are presented not necessarily from positions of power, but often from the lifeworld of gender fluid individuals finding a voice in a possibly more permissive and less censored mass media. Contemporary writers have access to new and moderately more democratic media such as the Internet. Within this dissertation I will be including texts from voices outside of traditional academic discourses. These voices are essential for this discourse, as historically such voices have been missing from peer reviewed research of this type. The majority of privileged voices in academic discourses have come from within the institutional hegemony, from learned theorists and philosophers. Although essential to this dissertation, these writers have been forged in the fires of a fundamentally phallogentric and elitist traditions of academia which encourage positions that risk being short sighted and dangerously flawed in their exclusivity. I could even include my own dissertation amongst those privileged by institutional parameters and it is certainly pertinent to consider the polemic nature of writing

from this position. Having said this, however, Tina Chanter in *Gender – Key concepts in philosophy* discusses the problems associated with opposing this traditional ‘phallogocentric’ stance. She writes of:

... a general problem with critiques of ‘phallogocentrism’ , [that] is, with feminist theories that tend to construct an overarching narrative of masculine biased accounts of subjectivity and experience, posited as negatively determining and limiting any expression of female authenticity. In so far as such accounts generalize patriarchal thought as if it formed a monolithic bloc, and continue to see all meaning as emanating from a hegemonic ‘symbolic’, they fail to eschew what Nietzsche regarded as reactive thinking. By blaming the enemy – men in general, or the patriarchal way of thinking, or the phallogocentric system of meaning – feminism is in danger of occupying a negative position, one that mimics the resentful, bitter recrimination of the Judaeo-Christian mindset, denigrating this worldly life as one of suffering, producing guilt, and occupying a position of bad conscience. ... Instead of aligning itself with reactive or oppositional thinking, feminism should commit itself to creating new sites of meaning, inventing new ways of thinking, and producing innovative concepts. It should be life affirming, rather than reactionary. (2006, pp.111-112)

Chanter’s suggestion encourages the inclusion of theoretical discourse from all walks of life, negating the limitations of privileging one voice over another based on subjective value systems. Therefore, a democratic inclusion of voices from both the gender fluid lifeworld and the stalwart academy is fundamental to this dissertation. The inclusion of gender fluid practical narratives will replace those absent from current discourses into gender identity. This re-inclusion offers an authenticity that is inherent in lived experience and subjective identity positioning. It is the ontological authenticity of these voices that lends such lifeworld discourse validity. My inclusion of these practical narratives is intended to invest relevance and authenticity to a discourse that at times risks being institutionally standardised.

Finally, along with institutional and lifeworld voices it is necessary to explore visual representations of gender fluidity in art and the accompanying theories behind them. Because of my primary position as a visual artist, producing paintings concerning gender fluidity I address the practical concern of whether it is possible to create a visual signifying language

for gender fluid individuals. Practically, I explore whether traditional gender dimorphic signifiers can be used to create a viable visual representation of gender identity fluidity. In order to confront these concerns, I examine the current epistemology surrounding gender theory. For the purposes of this dissertation, some of the questions that essentially require answering are: is gender identity a floating signifier? To answer this question I will not only look at the theories put forward by Hall (1997) and Derrida (1997) but also prominent psychologist John Money (1972) who takes an oppositional stance against such fluidity in his dealings with intersex patients.

Chapter Two, foundations and history of gender

In this chapter I address the social foundations inherent in gender education; the ‘intractable’ structures (Connell, 2001, p.82) that are manifest in contemporary Western society. I present a brief synopsis of historical theory concerning gender and discuss the unwillingness of society to redress contemporary discourse on both physical and psychological gender knowledge.

Kant in his essay “Answering the question: What is Enlightenment?” (1784) discusses the need to the individual to reflexively act upon their own knowledge or in his words “Sapere aude! Have the courage to use your own understanding!”(p.58). Kant’s theories on the Enlightenment underpin many modernist tropes. However rather than acting in a typically modernist manner and being an obstacle to gender fluid theory, Kant’s writing ultimately empowers fluidity by encouraging the deconstruction of the inherently binary modernist stance through the use of dialectic and critical reflexivity (Bennett, 1974). Kant outlines the necessity for emancipation from the individual’s own apathy, positioning this passive state as the reason for society’s blind acceptance of outdated and misinformed ideologies:

Laziness and Cowardice are the reasons why such a great part of mankind, long after nature has set them free from the guidance of others (*naturaliter maiorennnes*), still gladly remain immature for life and why it is so easy for others to set themselves up as their guardians. It is so convenient to be immature! If I have a book that has understanding for me, a pastor to have a conscience for me, a doctor who judges my diet for me, and so forth, surely I do not need to trouble myself. I have no need to think, if only I can pay; others will take over the tedious business for me. (Kant, 1784, p.58)

Kant goes on to suggest that those who do achieve enlightenment through knowledge still face difficulties, as ‘immaturity’ has become second nature to them, as he notes, “rules and formulas, those mechanical instruments for rational use (or rather misuse) of his[sic] natural gifts, are the fetters of an everlasting immaturity” (p.59). He also asserts that there will

always be those amongst the ‘guardians’ who will become critically reflexive and as such “will spread among the herd the spirit of rational assessment of individual worth and the vocation of each man[sic] to think for himself” (Ibid, p.59).

Kant’s text, although peppered with archaic and patriarchal prose, is nevertheless foundational to my dissertation. His assertions strongly encourage a departure from institutional dogma and an active pursuit of rational enquiry and engagement into self actualisation (Maslow, 1999).¹ In regards to the subject of gender identity fluidity, I regard Kant’s call to action as the necessity to review, examine and ultimately dismantle the questionable knowledge surrounding accepted views of gender identity (Bennett, 1974). It is only through such critical engagement that the gender fluid individual can achieve a level of emancipation from the existing restrictive traditional paradigm. I encourage the reader to see beyond hegemonically accepted modes of sedentary gender discourse and to re-evaluate those ‘truths’ about gender that have generally been taken for granted. I embrace the exploration of the importance of ambiguity, which has been established as a productive strategy in technological development (Garud & Karnoe, 2001), both in creativity and also in the personal lifeworld.

An early attempt to ratify ideas of modern sexuality, identity and gender came in the form of the psychoanalytical theories of Sigmund Freud, which were later reinterpreted and elaborated upon by Jacques Lacan as discussed by Storr (1989). Freud suggests that in early childhood the boy forms a sexual interest for his mother and harbours resentment and hostility to its father over a jealousy stemming from father’s attachment to the mother.

¹ Self-actualisation was a concept first introduced by psychologist Abraham Maslow to describe the ongoing process of fully developing an individual’s personal potential. (Maslow, 1999)

However the boy fears that the father will retaliate at the boy's hostility which will result in the boy's castration, as Storr asserts:

Confronted by what he perceives as a horrifying threat to the most precious part of his body, the small boy unconsciously abandons his hopes of sexual union with his mother, identifies himself with his potentially aggressive father, and finally turns his attention towards securing sexual satisfaction from other feminine sources. (Storr, 1989, pp.33 – 34)

Lacan loosely uses Freud's Oedipus complex to illustrate his theory on the "Mirror Phase", in which he describes how at an early age a child, when confronted by his mirror image becomes aware of himself as something 'other' than that which he previously thought he was. Lacan suggests that until this event the child perceives himself to be part of the mother (Lacan, 1977). The child now sees himself as 'whole' and as such is empowered. However with this perception also comes a fear that he will once again return to 'bits and pieces' as the mirror 'misrepresents' him and does not reflect his emotions and betrays the sense of independence the child prematurely perceives.

In regards to gender fluidity, I do not interpret Freud's and Lacan's psychological theories on identity literally; rather, I see them as an allegory for identity positioning. These theories illustrate that from early childhood individuals identify with those closest to them; their primary care giver(s). The means of constructing self identity are ever present in the behaviours and education of the child's loved one's and care-givers. How the child perceives the actions and identities of the child's family community will undoubtedly affect the choices it makes in its own quest for self identity (Lacan,1977). Familial relationships, naturally, are viewed and mimicked through repetition and the social conventions of reward and punishment (Zucker, 2002). Generally in Western cultures young boys are taught to be 'boyish' as little girls are conditioned to be 'girlish'. Through this social conditioning boys

become a copy of the masculine figures in their lives and girls follow in the identity performance of feminine figures.

As Kenneth Zucker suggests, dimorphic gender socialisation of children is commonplace in Western societies:

Sex and gender assignment at birth are believed to be the first of a cascade of events that fall under the rubric of *gender socialization* nowadays, with the development of techniques such as amniocentesis and ultrasound, parents can acquire information about fetal sex, which likely generates a variety of specific feelings and thoughts about their future child. Following these first events, whether they occur prenatally or after parturition, parents often select a name for their newborn that has a stereotypical masculine or feminine connotation. Many books are available to aid parents in these selections, the popular press routinely reports on the most common given names of boys and girls, and there are scholars who actually study the psychology and sociology of naming (Zucker, 2002, p.5).

This learnt identity offers an ontological security as long as it closely maintains the ‘normalcy’ of the community it is spawned from. Some early studies would indicate that even in earliest childhood the successful maintenance of a consistent ‘masculine for boys, feminine for girls’ gender performance is directly related to the level of emotional reward via paternal warmth and acceptance:

One corollary of these predictions is the degree of success with which a child of either sex has achieved the appropriate gender role should determine somewhat the satisfaction of the parents with his behaviour and the amount of warmth and acceptingness they express. Hence, one would expect that masculinised girls and feminized boys would have poorer self concepts than more adequately sex-typed children (Sears, 1970, p.270).

Later in the socialisation of children, the role of their peers at school becomes increasingly important with social status through popularity becoming a major focus. The need to fit in and be accepted by their class mates becomes of primary importance; the social mores become more rules than suggested guidelines, clearly defined by Adler:

The determinants of popularity vary greatly between boys and girls, with gender-appropriate models relevant to each. Embedded within these idealized models of masculinity and femininity are the gender images that children actively synthesize from the larger culture and apply to themselves and to each other. As they learn and direct them-selves [sic] to fit within these perceived parameters of popularity, they socialize themselves to gender roles. (Adler, 1992 p.170)

Once again the rewards for gender ‘appropriate’ behaviour is apparent and so too, unfortunately, are the consequences and punitive measures for not abiding by the unwritten gender laws.

In the school environment, boys and girls have divergent attitudes and behavioral patterns in their gender-role expectations and the methods they use to attain status, or popularity, among peers. ... In contrast, boys who demonstrated "effeminate" behavior were referred to by pejorative terms, such as "fag," "sissy," and "homo," and consequently lost status (Ibid p.174).

In much the same way many young adults currently use the term ‘gay’ as a pejorative term in Australia. As will be demonstrated throughout this dissertation, ‘straying from the path’ of hetero-normative gender identification can cause substantial psychological and sociological consequences for the individual, not only in impressionable infancy, but long into maturity.

Lacan consistently argued against traditional modes of psychoanalysis and questioned the validity of the concept of concrete self identity, for “if an ego is no more than an imaginary precipitate, how absurd it is for the proponents of ‘ego psychology’ to appoint themselves to the task of developing and stabilising that ghostly presence” (Bowie, 1987, p.106). I would argue that the modern psychologist’s aim was to standardise gender identity, not through any malicious intent, but simply to re-socialise aberrant individuals with a view to inclusion in supportive communities. However, the psychological attempt to force square pegs into round holes is as futile as it is myopic, regardless of the intent. Even the theorists who are generally accepted as the forebears of rational psychological discourse (Strawbridge, 2010) fail to acknowledge their patriarchal stance concerning childhood conditioning.

Jacques Derrida argues against the rigid binary parameters of existing knowledge. His theories on 'undecidability' relate to the idea of the undecidable or floating signifier, referred to later by Hall (1997), and he asserts that just because something cannot be explained or is paradoxical to paradigmatic thought does not necessarily mean it doesn't exist.

One of the objects of deconstruction is to undermine hierarchical structured binary oppositions within a text. This implies that a deconstructive strategy pays special attention to words or concepts that cannot be adopted into such a binary logic. They may be termed as *undecidables*, unsettled concepts. (n.d.)

In his text *Plato's Pharmacy*, Derrida illustrates 'undecidability' with the concept of the pharmakon (an ambiguous term meaning both cure and poison), which act as an aporia, or essential doubt, to institutionally accepted binaries. By co-opting Derrida's theories of undecidability, the attempt to divide gender identity into strict binaries, such as masculine and feminine, proves to be inherently flawed.

Psychological and scientific institutions recognise the existences of a hetero-normative masculine sexuality/anatomy and a hetero-normative feminine sexuality/anatomy; in other words that which is considered, by hegemonic institutions as, 'normal' physiology. There also exist documented instances of hermaphroditic or androgynous sexuality/anatomy such as those recorded by Dr. John Money (1972). Therefore it is plausible to suggest that accepted masculine and feminine identity structures have corresponding hermaphroditic/androgynous identities. I use the plural in this case because it would be presumptuous to assume there is only a singular androgynous identity as the very nature of androgyny is in itself protean or variable (Diamond, n.d.). In this discourse it is helpful to embrace concepts of ambiguity, liminality and tangentiality as a matter of course.

Debunking the myth of binary gender identity

So far, these ‘fluid’ identities have not been quantified and may not be open to quantification within existing paradigmatic standards; therefore they exist as undecidables; identities that are both inherently part of and distinctly apart from binary notions of masculinity and femininity. In other words, notions of gender fluidity both encompass and exist outside of binary gender constructs.

This prompts the question; if something is neither strictly one or the other but still essentially part of both, how then can it be rigidly quantified in a binary equation? The answer to this question is, of course, that it cannot. Anthony Giddens’ (1991) theories of identity are different to those of Derrida. As a sociologist Giddens is concerned more by how identity is constructed in society, than the concept of undecidability, though he examines tangentially why the ‘undecidables’ Derrida speaks of, are so problematic in a contemporary Western paradigm.

Separating the concepts of social construction and the self and maintaining self-actualised identity must be created by the individual Giddens posits:

In the reflexive project of the self, the narrative of self-identity is inherently fragile. The task of forging a distinct identity may be able to deliver distinct psychological gains, but it is clearly also a burden. A self-identity has to be created and more or less continually reordered against the backdrop of sifting experiences of day-to-day life and the fragmenting tendencies of modern institutions. Moreover the sustaining of such a narrative directly affects, and in some degree helps construct, the body as well as the self. ... (Giddens, 1991, p.185)

This acknowledgement of societal perception of the individual is useful in understanding how gender ambiguity might be ‘read’ within a Westernised culture “What other people appear to

do, and who they appear to be, is usually accepted as the same as what they are actually doing and who they actually are ...” (p.127). This suggests that if an individual appears to be male and is involved in traditionally masculine pursuits, then culturally that individual will be perceived to be male. A reasonable perception is formed, regardless of accuracy, because life experience has taught the hetero-normative viewer from birth that there are only two gender identities. This misconception is held primarily because two genders are predominantly performed, thus further reinforcing the status quo. (Butler, 2006).

This unquestioning perception of gender identity is entirely reasonable on the part of the viewer, as there has never broadly been any reason to question the status quo on this matter. Binary gender perception is part of the Western ‘lifeworld’ and as such forms a foundational element of the epistemology of society. These foundational elements lend the lifeworld a perceived air of security and stability (Giddens, 1991).

There is a reinforcement of the idea of a psychological need for stability, which can be found in the concept of standardisation, which is uniformly maintained by socialising agencies such as family, school and society. “The uneventful character of much of day-to-day life is the result of a skilled watchfulness that only long schooling produces, and is crucial to the protective cocoon which all regularised action presumes” (Giddens, 1991, p.127). Through this the suggestion is not only that defamiliarisation is unconsciously dissuaded in cases of gender identity reflexivity, it is actively guarded against through perpetual regularising actions such as rationalised education and institutional dogma.

Further to this there is an admonition that the avoidance of cognitive dissonance in the individual’s lifeworld provides a level of ontological security:

In some part the appropriation of mediated information follows pre-established habits and obeys the principle of the avoidance of cognitive

dissonance. That is to say, the plethora of available information is reduced via routinised attitudes which exclude, or reinterpret, potentially disturbing knowledge. From a negative point of view, such closure might be regarded as prejudice, the refusal seriously to entertain views and ideas divergent from those the individual already holds; yet, from another angle, avoidance of dissonance forms part of the protective cocoon which helps maintain ontological security. For even the most prejudiced or narrow minded person, the regularised contact with mediated information inherent in day-to-day life today is a positive appropriation: a mode of interpreting within the routines of daily life. Obviously there are wide variations in terms of how open an individual is to new forms of knowledge, and how far that person is able to tolerate certain levels of dissonance. (Giddens, 1991, p.188)

Giddens' positive view of 'regularised contact with mediation' suggests that the individual's 'lifeworld' can be altered. This opens up possibilities for the emancipation of the, thus far, unaccepted gender fluid individual, in that they, through a sustained positive representation of gender ambiguity in the mass media, will in time become an accepted part of a broader hegemonic lifeworld.

Stuart Hall acknowledges that the late modern communications industry and mass media play a pivotal role in the construction of individual ideologies and his cultural studies on race as a floating signifier in *The spectacle of the other* (1997). Hall asserts that there are certain cultural constructs that have floating signifiers, which is to say that the way these constructs are read is entirely dependent upon the context given them by the viewer, and as such they are malleable and unfixed. These constructs include Race, Class, Age, Sexuality and Gender. Hall focuses predominantly on race in his writing, though his theories of floating signification can be applied to gender identity.

Hall suggests that "culture depends on giving things meaning by assigning them to different positions within a classificatory system" (Ibid, p.235). This dependence in the case of gender identity precludes the acceptance of any ontology other than hetero-normativity. Hall, much like Giddens, acknowledges that binary oppositions exist to maintain cultural stability:

Stable cultures require things to stay in their appointed place. Symbolic boundaries keep the categories 'pure', giving cultures their unique meaning and identity. What unsettles culture is 'matter out of place' – the breaking of our unwritten rules and codes. ... What we do with 'matter out of place' is to sweep it up, throw it out, restore the place to order, bring back the normal state of affairs. (Hall, 1997, p.236)

Hall also echoes the paradoxically restrictive nature of homogeneous culture, a theme discussed later in this dissertation in Foucault's writing:

Marking 'difference' leads us, symbolically, to close ranks, shore up culture and to stigmatize and expel anything which is defined as impure, abnormal. However, paradoxically, it also makes 'difference' powerful, strangely attractive precisely because it is forbidden, taboo, threatening to cultural order (Hall, 1997, p.237).

Perhaps this exotic 'difference' that is both so threatening and attractive may become a tool with which to produce visual representations of gender fluidity that are compelling and therefore intriguing to contemporary viewers. This inclusion of gender fluid representations in art and media may afford Western society a 'safe' route through which to experience ideologies from outside accepted gender parameters.

New approaches to gender identity are gradually surfacing in an attempt to present theories that are at once engaging and aim to cast a more rational light to traditional debates on gender. In order to de-stigmatise gender difference, a more inclusive and down to earth approach to these issues is presented by Raewyn Connell. Connell is a prominent writer on issues of gender and was previously known as Robert Connell before undergoing male to female gender reassignment surgery. Connell's text *Gender* (2002) written whilst still living as a man, revisits and updates many of the concepts previously covered and Connell positioned himself as a supporter for change in global gender relations. *Gender* (2002) is intended as a tool with which to understand the complex concept of gender in contemporary life. The text introduces debates and research on gender and endeavours to dispel some of the

traditional myths and misinformation that surround the topic. Connell focuses on “the growing debate about gender in relation to imperialism, neo-colonialism, and contemporary globalization” (2002, preface). Connell argues that contrary to traditional beliefs, binary gender associations are becoming defunct and a greater number of people are beginning to distance themselves from parochial notions of gender identity, preferring instead to align themselves to the concept of a multiplicity of individual identities:

The trend has therefore been to speak of multiple gender and sexual identities. Some psychologists, for instance, have mapped out the stages of acquisition of a ‘Homosexual identity’ ... as among a number of possible sexual identities in modern society. But there is a significant shift of ground in moving from the concept of ‘identity’ to the concept of ‘gender identity’. With the categories seeming more and more complex, the concept of identity has increasingly been used to name claims made by individuals about who or what they are. (Connell, 2002, p.89)

Connell goes on to explain that there is a growth of identity politics and a greater acknowledgement of practical narratives, in part because of the changing emphasis on class based and socialist movements. Identities are now ‘claimed’ and one becomes a ‘member’ of a social movement, for instance ‘Black’ as a woman, or ‘Lesbian’. Connell posits however that an increased emphasis is now put on the individual’s uniqueness rather than their similarity to their shared community. In other words there is a privileging of individuals practical narratives. (Ibid, 2002) One of the pertinent aspects of Connell’s research in regards to my research are suggestions that gender roles are culturally constructed from early childhood; “Gender difference is not something that simply exists; it is something that happens, and must be made to happen; something, also, that can be unmade, altered, made less important” (2002, p.14). A point made more pertinent when one considers the emotive reward and punishment systems that are employed within the earliest childhood experiences

(Sears, 1970, & Adler 1992). This assertion has also been supported by Giddens (1991) and Hall (1997) in the previous texts.

Connell also touches upon the reason why perceptions of gender identity may have remained relatively unchanged for so long:

To weld one's personality into a united whole is to refuse internal diversity and openness. It may also be to refuse change. Major reform in gender relations may well require a de-structuring of the self, an experience of gender vertigo, as part of the process. (Connell, 2002, p. 91)

Judith Butler agrees with Connell's view of the difficulty for the individual in the task of 'de-structuring the self':

The anguish and terror of leaving a prescribed gender or of trespassing upon another gender territory testifies to the social constraints upon gender interpretation as well as to the necessity that there be an interpretation, i.e., to the essential at the origin of gender. ... That this terror is so well known gives the most credence to the notion that gender identity rests on the unstable bedrock of human invention. (Butler cited in Salih, 2004, p.27)

Both Butler and Connell agree that gender identity 're-invention' is a difficult and complicated course of action for the individual when navigating identity reflexivity. However this course of action is not impossible and is perhaps an essential step in regards to a broader acceptance of gender fluidity. This relates directly to the discursive silences mapped out by Foucault; regimes of paradigmatic power having been reliant upon the discretionary silencing of aberrant cultural voices. A Kantian remedy for such silence would rely on the gender fluid individual acting upon their own self knowledge and breaking imposed societal discretionary silences, and voluntarily facing the 'gender vertigo' that Connell refers to.

Disciplining gender

It is important at this stage to examine the aforementioned social structures that have led to a Western society that so strongly adheres to a binary view of masculine and feminine roles. Society's position, on face value, seems 'normal', and indeed has become the dominant Western ideology, though realistically it has foundations within a relatively modern ideology.

Jean Michel Foucault held the opinion that all cultural subjectivities are regulated by discursive regimes of power. In Foucault's *History of sexuality* (1978), he refutes the commonly accepted view that Victorian prudishness instituted repressive measures on sex and sexuality. Instead, Foucault argues, "Western man has become a confessing animal" (Ibid, p.59). The act of confession in fact was progressively demanded by church and state and entailed a greater detail and fuller discourse into sexuality. "There also appeared those systematic campaigns which, going beyond the traditional means – moral and religious exhortations, fiscal measures – tried to transform the sexual conduct of couples into a concerted economic and political behaviour" (1978, p.26).

Foucault contends that these discourses were ultimately informed by the discretionary silences within debates on sexuality; what was *not* spoken about was essentially as important as what *was* widely and openly discussed:

Silence itself – the things one declines to say, or is forbidden to name, the discretion that is required between different speakers – is less the absolute limit of discourse, the other side from which it is separated by a strict boundary, than an element that functions alongside the things said, with them and in relation to them within over-all strategies. There is no binary division to be made between what one says and what one does not say; ... There is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses (Foucault, 1978, p.27).

Open discourse, by which I mean the examination of sexuality in the public realm, subjected sex to moral, psychological and legal classifications and consequently led to penance and disciplinary measures.

Prohibitions bearing on sex were essentially of a juridical nature. The 'nature' on which they were based was still a kind of law. For a long time hermaphrodites were criminals, or crime's offspring, since their anatomical disposition, their very being, confounded the law that distinguishes the sexes and prescribed their union" (Foucault, 1978, p.38).

Foucault, in *Discipline and Punish - The birth of the prison* (1977) had previously described how these discourses had led to the control of the body, in order to create a more compliant and useful working class:

The historical moment of the disciplines was the moment when an art of the human body was born, which was directed not only at the growth of its skills, nor at the intensification of its subjection, but at the formulation of a relation that in the mechanism itself makes it more obedient as it becomes more useful, and conversely (Foucault, 1977, p.138).

Foucault's texts on sexuality focus primarily on how society has come to view sex; however they provide a basis for my research as they go some way in demonstrating how the cultural values inherent in early modernity have created a society that is inclined primarily toward productivity and rationality. Foucault's texts show that Western society over the past two hundred years has placed increasing importance on the necessity for a classifiable identity. Individuals are disciplined and made socially productive in order to maintain the status quo through procreation between heterosexual couples in order to benefit an economically sustainable society. Connell suggests that the emphasis in the late nineteenth century on the concept of personal identity became increasingly problematic due the shift in the perception of gender.

Men and women had traditionally been thought of as the same kind of being (though one a more perfect version than the other). Western culture increasingly rejected this view and defined men and women as different in nature, even opposites. ... Men and

women were irrevocably assigned to ‘separate spheres’ suited to their different natures. ... Thus Western bourgeois culture – now the dominant culture in the world – came to include a powerful ideology of innate differences between people. (Connell, 2002, p.86)

Through the socialising agency of this new Western ideology, other ‘aberrant’ individuals found themselves under the watchful and disciplinary gaze of schools, churches, psychologists and judiciary systems. The voices of variant identities were both coerced into confession and socially disciplined into silence for their seemingly unacceptable differences to ‘socially acceptable’ and productive members of their community.

Contemporary individuals continue to rigorously police their own identities and activities, aware that they are under surveillance from the socialising agencies that surround them, and in turn form an integral part of those socialising agencies through their silence. Their superficial adherence reinforces social norms and strengthens paradigmatic views of acceptable gender behaviour in the process (Stone, 1998).

Butler’s text *Gender trouble* (2006) is widely accepted as a seminal text on gender. Her discussions draw upon many of the theorists discussed in this dissertation including Foucault. Butler’s text asserts that previous debates on gender have reified and standardised gender into distinct binary categories. Butler argues against the concept of the anatomical gender automatically correlating with the gender identity:

If gender is the cultural meanings that the sexed body assumes, then a gender cannot be said to follow from a sex in any one way. Taken to its logical limit, the sex/gender distinction suggests a radical discontinuity between sexed bodies and culturally constructed genders. Assuming for the moment the stability of binary sex, it does not follow that the construction of “men” will accrue exclusively to the bodies of males or that “women” will interpret only female bodies. Further, even the sexes appear to be unproblematically binary in their morphology and constitution (which will become a question), there is no reason to assume that genders ought also to remain as two. The belief in a mimetic relation of gender to sex whereby gender mirrors sex or is otherwise restricted by it. When the constructed status of gender is theorized as

radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free floating artifice, with the consequence that *man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and *woman* and *feminine* a male body as easily as a female one. (Butler, 2006, p.9)

Although Butler's text is possibly the closest engagement with similar arguments to my own I find the recurrent reliance on concepts of masculinity/femininity problematic to my dissertation; though it does highlight the problematic lack of fluid terminology within gender identity discourse. The very terms 'masculinity' and 'femininity' presuppose concepts that are inherently partisan. Butler, fortunately, goes on to propose that gender is performative, in and of itself and not prescriptive as has been previously accepted: "There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that Identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (2006, p.34). Butler's statement suggests that the individual's gender identity is independent from 'what they are perceived to be', relying rather on 'how they express themselves'. This view strengthens my argument that gender identity is not something that can be enforced by societal dictates, but rather, can be a fluid and changeable perception of oneself when emancipated from binary paradigms.

In Sara Salih's text *The Judith Butler Reader* (2004), Butler acknowledges the encompassing strength of socialising agencies on gender identity, yet she suggests that these agencies, once acknowledged as being social constructions can be, and are, re-evaluated:

Becoming a gender is an impulsive yet mindful process of interpreting a cultural reality laden with sanctions, taboos, and prescriptions. The choice to assume a certain kind of body, to live or wear one's body a certain way, implies a world of already established corporeal styles. To choose a gender is to interpret received gender norms in a way that reproduces and organizes them anew. Less a radical act of creation, gender is a tacit project to renew a cultural history in one's own corporeal terms. This is not a prescriptive task we must endeavour to do, but one we have been endeavouring all along. (Butler cited in Salih, 2004, p.26)

Butler also acknowledges that the move from traditional perceptions of gender ‘performance’ is no easy task. The paradigmatic view of gender identity having been so entrenched as to become an essential part of how the individual experiences themselves and the world they live in. The realisation of a ‘freedom’ of gender identity is paralleled by a heightened awareness of previously axiomatic societal constraints:

The fall from established gender boundaries initiates a sense of radical dislocation which can assume a metaphysical significance. If human existence is always gendered experience, then to stray outside of established gender is in some sense to put one’s very existence into question. In these moments of gender dislocation in which we realise that it is hardly necessary that we be the genders we have become, we confront the burden of choice intrinsic to living as a man or a woman or some other gender identity, a freedom made burdensome through social constraint. (Salih, 2004, p.27)

In other words, the comfortable security of standardised gender identity, once stripped away, highlights the difficulty of identifying oneself in a society that continues to disavow gender difference. Gender ‘freedom’, therefore, comes at a price; that of an awareness of the insecurities and inherent instability of one’s own broader identity. Gender fluid awareness arrives hand in hand with a feeling of “cosmic aloneness” (Queen & Schimel, 1997, pp.21-22).

Another voice that discusses the problematic existence of gender fluid identity in contemporary society is that of Tina Chanter. She elaborates on the perceived necessity to ‘fit-in’ to traditional masculine and feminine roles. Chanter is Professor of philosophy at DePaul University in the USA. Her text *Gender- key concepts in philosophy* (2006) traverses a wide range of areas regarding contemporary views on gender, including postcolonial feminist theory and questions of power and ideology. Chanter writes extensively on Foucault’s theories of power as a disciplining force;

Foucault’s appeal to the Panopticon, in his investigation into the history of penitentiaries, makes it clear that, just like the prisoners who assume they are under

surveillance, and act accordingly, the subjects of modern society take over the role of policing themselves.(Chanter, 2006, p.57)

Viewing this concept in relation to gender identity the conclusion may be drawn that the individual ‘policies’ their gender identity in accordance to the hegemonic rules that they perceive around them. Societal ‘norms’ bind the individual to acceptable standards of dress and behaviour and ultimately inform a perception of which binary gender they belong to.

Power, then, resides in us, in our gestures, mannerisms, corporeal motility, in the ways we walk, dress and negotiate the world. ... Yet at the same time it is invested in the advertisements, films, magazine images, and billboards, in the disciplinary authorities (schools, families, peer groups) which insist on gendering girls and boys according to the conventional, received wisdom of heterosexual dimorphism (2006, p.60).

Hence, individuals who otherwise would be left to discover their own gender identity become audience to a myriad of stereotypical and binary aligned gender role models. The mass media and society become the parental role models from which the individual garners performative cues. Gender concepts that are entertained outside of these rigid parameters become problematic and unmanageable due to the lack of relatable models within hegemonic socialising agencies. Chanter discusses Julia Kristeva’s Lacanian based theories to illustrate how unmanageable information, (in the context of this dissertation; concepts of gender fluidity) are disposed of by the parcelling of manageable information:

Influenced by Klein’s notion of various ways of splitting up both consciousness and the world into good and bad, Julia Kristeva, for example, has explored a similar dynamic under the heading of abjection. At issue in abject processes is a preliminary attempt to separate oneself off from the other, paradigmatically the mother, who is not yet considered as conceptually different from the self. A provisional attempt at separation, even before that of consciousness and unconscious, or self and other, abjection is a way of territorializing the world, parcelling it out into pockets that are manageable, while disposing of that which falls outside the bounds of the manageable by discarding it as just so much waste. (Chanter, 2006, p.67)

These views are echoed by Stuart Hall (1997, p.236) when he suggests that ‘matter out of place’ unsettles culture. Chanter, using Kristeva, asserts that the individual’s identity ‘is accomplished in large part through our acquiescence to the law, our subjection to the taboos and prohibitions of the social/symbolic realm.’ (2006, pp.115-116)

Chanter’s texts go some way to exploring the difficulties in ‘performing’ a gender fluid identity, in that the prevailing knowledge on gender precludes a discussion of gender that is anything but aligned to either masculinity or femininity. Widely accepted signifiers for gender fluid individuals in Western society simply do not exist and when encountered are generally, at best, discarded as unmanageable.

As Foucault proposed:

If you are not like everybody else, then you are abnormal, if you are abnormal, then you are sick. These three categories, not being like everybody else, not being normal and being sick are in fact very different but have been reduced to the same thing. (Foucault, 2004)

This erroneous categorisation of difference that Foucault alludes to superficially appears innocuous; however it has had far reaching and often tragic consequences for gender fluid individuals who throughout history have found themselves on the wrong side of religious, judicial, psychological and physiological paradigms. The power invested in church, state and science throughout the industrial revolution, which led to the ‘conditioning of the body’ that Foucault described (1977), has inevitably alienated and segregated any form of gender non conformity. The prescription of difference led unerringly to edicts of abnormality, immorality and illegality. Many of the consequences, or penalties, (dependant on your view point) of differences of gender are discussed in further detail in the next chapter.

Inherently societal perception of gender difference, as with any perceived ‘abnormality’, has been mirrored by its representations in mainstream media throughout the ages.

Representations act as a codified social compass, perhaps unwittingly designed to cement cultural stereotypes. Mainstream depictions of gender fluidity throughout history range from the exotic ‘other’ to cruel depictions of ridicule; parodies that leave the viewer no uncertainty as to the undesirability of ‘abnormality’. The concept of gender ‘otherness’ has been the subject of artists throughout art history, and depictions of gender fluid individuals cast an interesting light on social perceptions of their times.

Amara Ajoatian in her text *The only happy couple: Hermaphrodites and gender* (1997) discusses early representations of hermaphrodites. She explains that the earliest depictions of gender fluidity in art come in the form of statues of Hermaphroditos in ancient Greece:

The observer encounters a nude, sleeping woman from behind; moving around her to see more, male genitals are obvious, carved in relief on the plinth. While the sleeping type is the best known hermaphrodite in ancient art, it is not the only one, nor is the addition of male genitals to a clearly female body the earliest, or most widespread, tradition of hermaphroditic iconography. The origins of this intriguing personage in Greek art and culture can be traced back at least as far as the 4th century BCE, appearing first, from the surviving evidence, in Attica and Athens (Ajoatian, 1997, p.220).



Figure 1: Bernini's *Sleeping Hermaphroditus* (Source: <http://ruby.colorado.edu>, n.d.)

Ajootian goes on to say that fragments of earlier standing statues of Hermaphrodites have been found in the '*anasyromenos*' tradition, which translated means 'revealing':

Characteristically, hermaphrodites *anasyromenoi*, represented chiefly by small scale versions in terracotta or marble, stand frontally, their female breasts clearly defined beneath drapery, or partly revealed. ... They raise the skirts of their long garments revealing male genitals, the small phallus occasionally erect (Ajootian, 1997, p.221).

Far from being deemed an outcast in ancient Greece, Hermaphroditos was considered divine and held a position amongst the higher Grecian gods of the time. "The archaeological record and the literary evidence suggest that hermaphrodites, embodying both male and female elements, was considered not a monstrous aberration, but a higher, more powerful form, male and female combining to create a third, transcendent gender." (1997, p.228) This positive and glorified position in Greece was not apparent in ancient Rome however:

While religious activity involving the divinity hermaphrodites appears to have developed in Greece at least by the early 4th century BCE, in Rome humans possessing physical traits of both sexes constituted a state threat. There, from the later third to the early first centuries BCE, actual occurrences of infants with ambiguous sexual characteristics were considered dangerous portents. ... Diodorus Siculus reports that early in the first century BCE a woman in Athens possessing male and female sexual features was burned alive (Ajootian, 1997, p.221).

In 1512 an apothecary by the name of Lucca Landucci wrote of a monster born in Ravenna, Italy. It was likely that this monster was probably an unfortunate child born with a genetic disorder. Landucci described the monster as being armless, having a single horn on its head, with a single eye set in its knee. The monster was also hermaphroditic and was said to have an eagle's talons instead of a foot on its one leg (Porter, 2006, p.527). Apparently it was reported that the Pope at the time, Pope Julius the second, ordered that the child be starved to death. Many images of the Monster of Ravenna were widely circulated and Landucci viewed them as "pictorial proof of nature's horrors and God's impending wrath" (Ibid, 2006).



Figure 2: *The Monster of Ravenna* (Source: thehumanmarvels.com, n.d.)

Naturally with the broad dissemination of the images and the tale of the monster, the attributes and context of the monster's disfigurements became more bizarre; "... its wings were either batlike or angelic. Sometimes the monster was a Saint, and at other times The Devil itself" (Pednaud, n.d). It becomes apparent that representations of ambiguity and 'otherness' are often met with a diverse range of subjective reactions. For example; the history of gender fluidity is scattered with individuals who are at once venerated and abased depending on the subjective context of the observer. Legendary personalities such as the cross dressing Joan of Arc are lauded for their triumphs and yet cannot escape their inevitable fiery demise at the hands of the church on the charge of consorting with faeries (Feinberg, 1996, p.78).



Figure 3: Lenepveu's *Joan of Arc at Orleans* (Source: Powell History, n.d.)

The churches stance on gender fluidity in history is often unusually perplexing in that the obvious punishment for gender transgressors such as Joan of Arc is balanced by their tolerance and even canonisation of other gender fluid individuals. The church has roundly denounced cross-gender behaviour; however there is evidence of the canonisation of over twenty cross dressed female to male saints, including Saint Marinus depicted (figure 4.). Indeed, legend suggests in the thirteenth century a cross dressed Pope, 'Pope Joan', headed the church and ruled under the name John Anglicus (Feinberg, 2006, p.68).



Figure 4: *Saint Marinus* (Source: Matthew Jackson, 2009)

Moving forward in time and approaching visual art from modern era, it becomes apparent that gender ambiguity became lost amongst the patriarchal modern art movement. Griselda Pollock in her lecture *Avant-Garde gambits 1888 – 1893* (1992) illustrates how visual art had become an almost entirely patriarchal bastion. “... [M]odernism was an enunciation of masculine sexuality signalled both literally and symbolically through the relations of ‘man the artist’ to ‘women *in, and of, the city*’ as both sexual prey and artistic cipher” (Pollock, p.7). Pollock’s text also suggests a reason why representations of gender ambiguity may have been absent amongst modernist representations of gender:

Art history appears to repress the questions of gender, sexuality and sexual difference while collaborating with patriarchal versions of all three through its uncritical celebration of great masters and its vicarious identification with the sexualities of the art and artists it canonizes in the pantheon of Post-Impressionism (Pollock, 1992, p.8).

It is understandable then, if the early Modernist art movement was still years away from entertaining viable feminist ideologies, the likelihood of representations of its altogether more ambiguous sibling, gender fluidity, was also improbable.

More recent artists such as Robert Mapplethorpe (Marshall, 1988) and Catherine Opie (Samaras, 1993) have since begun to fill the void of representations of gender and sexually variant subjects and have opened doors for contemporary visual artists to further explore what is ostensibly a rich creative vein. Artists such as Del la Grace Volcano, Dan Taulapapa McMullen and Rich Kereopa, have all drawn upon their gender fluid lifeworlds within their creative practices. I will discuss them in greater detail in Chapter Five along with the significance of gender fluid representation within the discourse surrounding gender fluid politics. In Chapter Six I will elaborate on how I have tackled the issue of gender fluid identity in my own creative practice.

Chapter Three

Health professionals and their relationship to the Gender Fluid lifeworld

“All of reality in late capitalist culture lusts to become an image for its own security” - Donna Haraway (cited in Stone, 1991, p.284).

This chapter explores texts from the Transgender and gender queer lifeworld and examines some of the day to day consequences of being differently gendered in contemporary Western culture. The presence of gender fluid people has not gone unnoticed by the medical fraternity and has led to problematic and often inflammatory relationships between the gender fluid community and health authorities. This chapter endeavours to give a balanced overview of the disparate positions of both groups and the ongoing discourse pertaining to the psychological health and physical interventions of gender fluid individuals. It does this by examining the polemic stance between gender queer theorists and the relatively conservative institutions who maintain control over the authorities dealing with gender fluid physiology.

Firstly, because of the gender ambiguous nature of many of the authors I have drawn from the gender fluid lifeworld it becomes necessary to introduce gender fluid pronouns. Many of these writers may not necessarily identify with the traditional binary signifiers of male and female and out of respect to them binary pro-nouns are replaced with the increasingly popular gender ambiguous pronouns *Ze*, instead of She/He and the term *hir* will replace his/her.² This decision both negates the assumption of the reader that the text is written from a particular gender’s viewpoint and releases myself as researcher from the impossible task of guessing the varied gender identity pronouns of the writers I am discussing. Naturally the forming of gender neutral pronouns has its own political agenda and can be equated to other examples of

² *This terminology, whilst new is becoming more widely used amongst online gender fluid communities such as the private discussion groups Gender Queer on Livejournal.com and other similar web-based communities.*

emancipatory identity politics, such as the terminology employed by the African - American community. In December 1988 a news conference was held at Chicago's Hyatt regency O'Hare Hotel, where leaders of seventy-five black groups met to discuss a new national black agenda, Jesse Jackson stated "To be called Black is baseless. . . To be called African-American has cultural integrity" (Ebony 1989). If it is accepted that the accurate naming of a cultural group gives it power, then in turn, it follows that neglecting to name a cultural group, or to misname it, disempowers it. I would argue that the descriptive role of personal pronouns is vital for gender identity empowerment.

Throughout my experience in the gender fluid community I have observed that many reflexively gender fluid people share no identification with the pronouns of 'he or she', and the lack of a gender appropriate pronoun becomes an issue in even the most pedestrian of conversations. For many of the people I have spoken to in chat rooms and in person, the inappropriate use of the terms 'he or she', 'him and her' for gender fluid identifying individuals is an unassailable reminder of the exclusionary politics of paradigmatic gender identity. Therefore it would seem both rational and beneficial that an appropriate alternate term must be coined. This term should not only be non-gender specific, but also phatically pronounceable for its eventual inclusion in a colloquial vocabulary.

On the members only LiveJournal.com online community *Gender Queer* there is much discussion about gender anomalous friendly alternatives to the standard accepted heteronormative gender pronouns. The suggested inclusion is Ze as the alternative pronoun possessive or objective could become Hir; a mix of both 'Her' and 'Him'. There is the suggestion that these alternatives would replace the traditional gender exclusive pronouns (He/She and his/hers), in conversation when referring to a gender fluid person; for example "Ze goes to work" or Ze'll pick up hir coat."

This simple inclusion to colloquial vocabulary would negate inadequate hetero-normative labelling of gender fluid individuals, thus empowering them to emancipate themselves (at least on a personal level) from centuries of binary stereotyping. Unfortunately, awareness of the contemporary gender fluid community and our issues is so lacking within the broader hetero-normative culture that the institution of such seemingly simple changes to gender neutral indicative phraseology are still likely to be problematic. Society, by which I mean a broader Westernised society, although unlikely to acquiesce easily to such a vocabulary change, may make change if offered a pre-formulated and accepted sub-cultural colloquial alternative, such as those suggested (in the manner of the inclusion of text message speak in daily Western life). I posit that these changes to vocabulary, as with the re-presentation of gender fluidity in daily imagery, can only help to rectify the inequities that gender fluid people experience through their invisibility and societal incomprehension. The inclusion of 'Ze' or a similar pronoun into everyday vocabulary would undoubtedly indicate a greater awareness and acceptance of gender fluid ontology.

Boots Potential's text, *Monster Trans*, is a short essay published in Morty Diamond's anthology *From the Inside Out: Radical Gender Transformation, FTM and Beyond* (2004). Hir text is written from the lifeworld of gender variance and as such is without the restrictions imposed by academia or other institutional agencies. Ze discusses the problem of not 'fitting in' with gender binary categories in the lifeworld.

I will never make claim to a coherent gender narrative. I could tell you a story about my childhood that would surely predict a queer adulthood: crushes on teenage girl camp counselors, tomboy androgyny and jock identity, Transformers and Tonka trucks, and stealing boys' Underoos from friends' dresser drawers. Similarly, and just as truthfully, I could order my childhood into a perfect predictor of heterosexual and gender-normative fulfillment: cute boyfriends who I thought were hot, a darling collection of stuffed animals and Pretty Ponies, and a subscription to Seventeen

magazine. (Potential cited in Diamond, 2004)

Boots introduces the metaphor of ‘the monster’ into hir gender identity positioning, suggesting that the ‘otherness’ of ‘the monster’ struck a chord because of the ambiguous sexual/gendered nature of these fictional creatures.

To this end, I will never say that my early fascination with monsters was all about my being a queer genderfreak transboygirl fagdyke. I will say, though, that there has always been something compelling to me and to many other monster-lovers about a living (or undead) thing that can freak the shit out of someone just by merit of their very existence in the world. Especially when, in doing so, it forces us to question the boundaries of the things we once thought were neat, well-defined, and impermeable (human, animal, inanimate object, living, dead, etc). (Potential cited in Diamond, 2004)

Ze goes on to discuss the reticence to comply with the pressures to conform to the stereotypical ‘trans’ identity; that of someone transitioning from one binary gender to the other. “I didn't (and still don't) buy the story that there is something fundamentally dichotomous about gender, and that there are inherent or "genetic" characteristics that lead to expressions of femininity or masculinity (whatever those mean)” (Potential cited in Diamond, 2004). Potential introduces a pertinent concept by suggesting that femininity and masculinity are ideas that are entirely subjective, but are traditional meta-narratives and as such have remained unquestioned. Potential acknowledges the use of the monster metaphor is not without problems:

The monster identity, however, is an imperfect model. I do not necessarily want to associate myself with viciousness, irrational violence, and pathological insanity (although mainstream culture has already associated these with queers and trannies, so perhaps it's not so far a stretch). Nevertheless, there is something very promising about a monster culture that might revel in itself, that might deliberately position itself as monstrous in the sense that it deviates, threatens, and within this, challenges. As in the case of gender freaks (trans, genderqueer, FTM, MTF, multigendered, and so on), it is only the common experience of transgression that defines monsters and arranges

them together as a group. Frankenstein[sic], Vampira, and the Creature from the Black Lagoon have nothing in common but their "abnormalities." (Ibid, 2004)³

This is an empowering position for gender fluid identities, as it clearly recognises, and revels in, the monster as 'matter out of place' (Hall, 1997), embracing difference and creating agency for the 'monstrous' individual. The onus of acceptance is shifted from the individual to the broader society. This assumed monstrosity embraces ambiguity and reinforces its difference to the traditional, acceptable binary based gender identities of male and female.

This problematic relation to identity positioning is reinforced by Queen and Schimel in their anthology *Pomosexuals* (1997), which discusses a post-modern understanding of sexuality and gender:

The problem with ascribed and adopted identity is not what it includes, but what it leaves out. Indeed, there are so very many ways to live in the world, countless sources of affinity, that our sexualities and gender/identities only go so far in describing, constructing and supporting us. To combat the "cosmic aloneness" that is integral to being human, that aching awareness that no one can truly share your experience ... , we form communities and subcommunities grouped around shared history and interests, links of family and ethnicity, religion and sexuality, anything which makes us feel more connected to others and less alone. (Queen & Schimel, 1997, pp 21-22)

This need for community; an acceptance of peers and family, whilst entirely human may also be the cause of much of the alienation and individual gender identity angst. As I've shown in earlier chapters, certain social mores must be observed by community members, lest they be rejected or suffer punitive measures from the broader community. Unfortunately the adherence to the social mores of gender identity preclude gender fluid individuals from leading an open and authentic life.

³³ In fact, the monster fits comfortably within the classifications of Derrida's undecidables (1997) and Hall's floating signifiers (1997) as it is neither real nor fictional, good or evil, it is sexless, genderless, existing in the liminal.

Pat Califia is another writer who suggests that the ability to form a stable and secure gender fluid identity is inherently difficult. This is especially the case in a society that seems intent on its goal of psychological hetero-normativity. Using its assumed authoritative status, hetero-normative Western society, through the use of surgical and psychological ‘experts’ implement invasive gender assignment surgery and hormonal treatments to achieve its homogenising goals. Califia’s book *Public sex: The culture of radical sex* (1994) discusses topics as varied as radical sex, anti-pornography and feminist perspectives on gender. In his Chapter *Gender-bending: playing with roles and reversals* (p.175) Ze questions the theories of John Money, et al, and the practice of gender assignment surgery on intersex children.

Ideally, they say, infants are clearly male or female at birth. Infants with ambiguous genitalia should be assigned to one sex or the other (preferably by a medical authority) and raised that way with no ambivalence or qualms on the part of their parents. Little boys should grow up to be masculine, heterosexual with penises, and little girls should grow up to be feminine, heterosexual women with babies. Adults who deviate from this norm (transvestites, Transgenders, masculine women, feminine men, Homosexuals, hermaphrodites) should be “fixed” by whatever means necessary, including surgery, artificial hormones, behavioural therapy, and voice lessons. Despite their “if – it – doesn’t – fit – then – cut – it – off” attitude, these guys permanently shook my firm belief in the reality of biological sex, in the natural and inevitable existence of only two genders. (Califia, 1994, pp.177 – 178)

As I have discussed earlier in this text, many of the questions Califia asks are answered by Foucault’s theories of socialising agencies (1978) and Hall’s example of ‘matter out of place’ (1997). Foucault and Hall have asserted that society has framed discourses in such a way, that the existence of any individual that does not fit the rigid parameters of binary ontology will be ‘normalised’. Those individuals who appear to fall outside useful, hetero-normative procreative genders are assessed by experts, coerced to ‘fit in’ and, failing that, purged from ‘normal’ society.

Califia, questioning the motives behind these surgeries, voices hir disbelief that supposedly rational thinking health professionals could believe this practice was still ethically acceptable at the end of the twentieth century.

That knocked me out. Why does our society allow only two genders and keep them polarized? Why don't we have a social role for hermaphrodites? Berdaches?[sic] Why do Transgenders have to become "real women" or "real men" instead of just being Transgenders? After all, aren't there some advantages to being a man with a vagina or a woman with a penis, if only because of the unique perspective it would give? And why can't people go back and forth if they want to? (Califia, 1994, p.178)

... Those of us who work for a world without gender privilege need to ask ourselves how we want to accomplish this, do we want a society where the similarities between men and women are emphasized, and people are discouraged from expressing or eroticizing their differences? Or do we want a society of pluralistic gender where people can mix and match the components of their sexual identities? I personally would rather live in a world where every man could be a woman or might have been one yesterday – and vice versa. (Califia, 1994, p.182)

Califia's questions echo my own research and inform my aim to find an emancipatory solution to an archaic and prescriptive hegemonic perception of gender identity, an aim I hope to achieve through the representational tool of imagery in my creative practice, which I discuss in greater detail in Chapters Five and Six.

Along with Califia, one of the most notable lifeworld voices concerning the issue of gender fluidity is that of writer Kate Bornstein, who herself identifies as a gender fluid individual. Born apparently anatomically male, Bornstein transitioned via gender reassignment surgery and hormone therapy to a feminine anatomy. In hir book *Gender Outlaw* (1994) Ze explains hir identity position:

I identify as neither male nor female, and now that my lover is going through his gender change, it turns out I'm neither straight nor Gay. What I've found as a result of this borderline life is that the more fluid my identity has become, and the less demanding my own need to belong to the camps of male, female, Gay or straight, the more playful and less dictatorial my fashion has become – as well as my style of self expression. (Bornstein, 1994, p.4)

Bornstein writes extensively and thoroughly about gender fluid ontology and holds very clear opinions on the short-comings of hetero-normative ideologies concerning gender identity:

I know I'm not a man – about that much I'm very clear, and I've come to the conclusion that I'm probably not a woman either, at least not according to a lot of people's rules on this sort of thing. The trouble is, we're living in a world that insists we be one thing or the other – a world that doesn't bother to tell us exactly what one or the other *is*. (Bornstein, 1994, p.8)

I read Bornstein's 'world' to imply the broader views of hetero-normative Western culture. Bornstein's theories on gender positioning relate strongly to those of Giddens (1991) and Butler (2006) in that Ze sees gender identity not merely linked to physiology, but also to the performative nature of identity; the idea that the identity of the individual is what they *do* and how what they do is perceived by others:

Gender roles are collections of factors which answer the question, "How do I need to function so that society perceives me as belonging to a specific gender?" Some people would include appearance, sexual orientation, and methods of communication under the term, but I think it makes more sense to think in terms of things like jobs, economic roles, chores, hobbies; in other words, positions and actions specific to a given gender as defined by a culture. Gender roles, when followed, send signals of membership in a given gender. (Bornstein, 1994, p.26)

The social structures and socialising agencies that Foucault (1977-78) wrote about are also alluded to by Bornstein when ze discusses the 'rules' by which gender identity is enforced. Bornstein offers an alternative solution to these rules to individuals who perceive themselves as other than the binary gender roles. Ze acknowledges there are rules to gender but subversively calls for them to be broken. Bornstein actively encourages transgression from hir readers suggesting pertinent changes in behaviour from subverting dress codes, through to full surgical transformation. Ze proposes the acknowledgement that gender identity needs not have imposed restrictions:

And then I found out that gender can have fluidity, which is quite different from ambiguity. If ambiguity is a refusal to fall within a prescribed gender code, then fluidity is the refusal to remain one gender or another. Gender fluidity is the ability to freely and knowingly become one or many limitless number of genders, for any length of time, at any rate of change. Gender fluidity recognizes no borders or rules of gender (Bornstein, 1994, pp 51 – 52).

Bornstein's text recognises the inherent fluidity of gender and highlights the flawed archaic rigidity of traditionally held ideologies toward gender identity. Hir writings offer an alternative and emancipatory voice to a community that has traditionally been viewed as unclassifiable by the broader populace.

Transgender lifeworld

Before any in-depth exploration of gender fluid identity can be achieved in this text, it is necessary to first examine the Transgender lifeworld. Gender fluid identity is more closely aligned in identity to Transsexuality and Transgender identity, falling as it does so closely to the midpoint between the two paradigmatic boundaries of masculinity and femininity. However there are obvious political differences between the traditional Transgender and the individual who identifies as gender fluid. These differences will be discussed later in this chapter.

The traditional decision made by a Transgender, as suggested by the term, is to transition from one anatomical gender to the opposite binary gender. Individuals will transition from male to female (MTF) or female to male (FTM). This transition in many cases will necessitate psychological counselling, ongoing hormonal therapy and, in many cases, gender reassignment surgery (GRS). This surgery for MTFs involves a choice of the surgical alteration of the existing male genitals and the surgical augmentation of breasts. Commonly in the case of FTMs, the decision to have genital surgery is made more difficult by the financial restriction of the expensive phalloplastic surgery. Though, many FTMs also decide not to have GRS because of the possibility of the loss of sexual sensation caused by the extensive surgery itself (Factor & Rothblum, 2008).

Much has been written about Transgender life politics by writers such as Sandy Stone and Kate Bornstein and one of the common themes in both these Trans-identifying writers' texts

is the societal necessity for Transgenders to ‘pass’ as the gender they have transitioned to. Sandy Stone discusses the paradoxical ontology of this ontology in *The Post-Transgender Manifesto*:

The most critical thing a Transgender can do, the thing that constitutes success, is to “pass.” Passing means to live successfully in the gender of choice, to be accepted as a “natural” member of that gender. Passing means the denial of mixture (Stone cited in Epstein, 1991, p.296).

The pressure to ‘pass’ comes both from medical/psychiatric authorities, but also from peers within the broader Trans community. Further to this Stone states:

The highest purpose of the Transgender is to erase him/herself, to fade into the ‘normal’ population as soon as possible. Part of this process is known as *constructing a plausible history* – learning to lie effectively about one’s past. What is gained is acceptability in society. ... authentic experience is replaced by a particular kind of story, one that supports the old constructed positions. This is expensive and profoundly disempowering. (Stone cited in Epstein, 1991, p.295)

As Stone suggests, this pressure to pass creates a dualistic problem, firstly the individual is forced to discard and hide the larger part of their pre-lived experience. The Trans individual must reinvent their history and life stories. For instance, passing MTFs cannot discuss their childhood experiences as a young boy and the young girl’s experiences must be hidden in the case of the FTM individual. Trans people are encouraged to fabricate their histories, thus negating the authentic lived experience, creating instead a hybrid of real and imagined identity through which general society will experience them. The other difficulty for the ‘passing’ Transgender is that they cannot be openly proud of their transition or their Transgender identity. By being openly Transgender the individual automatically negates the ability to pass and their cover is blown. Which is interesting as it shows rigidity in the form of Transgender stereotypes and socially enforced norms. Sandy Stone, herself an openly Transgender woman, argues against the cultural attitudes to ‘passing’ when she states:

Transgenders who pass seem to be able to ignore the fact that by creating totalized, monistic identities, forgoing physical and subjective intertextuality, they have foreclosed the possibility of authentic relationships. Under the principle of passing, denying the destabilising power of being “read,” relationships begin as lies – and passing, of course, is not an activity restricted to Transgenders. This is familiar to the person of color whose skin is light enough to pass as white, or to the closet Gay or Lesbian ... or to anyone who has chosen invisibility as an imperfect solution to personal dissonance (Stone cited in Epstein, 1991 p. 298).

Stone suggests the inherent problem concerning perceptions of trans-sexuality is based firmly in the ideologies within the arena of the ‘health professional’ within the gender dysphoria

clinic. Stone posits “The foundational idea for gender dysphoria clinics was first, to study an interesting and potentially fundable human aberration; second, to provide help, as they understood the term, for a “correctable problem”” (cited in Epstein, 1991, p. 290). She further asserts:

Bodies are screens on which we see projected the momentary settlements that emerge from ongoing struggles over beliefs and practices within the academic and medical communities. These struggles play themselves out in arenas far removed from the body. Each is an attempt to gain high ground which is profoundly moral in character, to make a authoritative and final explanation for the ways things are and consequently for the way they must continue to be. In other words, each of these accounts is culture speaking with the voice of an individual. The people who have no voice in this theorizing are the Transgenders themselves. As with males theorizing about women from the beginning of time, theorists of gender have seen Transgenders as possessing something less than agency (Stone cited in Epstein, 1991, p.294).

This lack of agency on the part of some Trans individuals is due in no small part to the overall nature of attempting to ‘fit in’ to a culturally prescribed gender role and identity. As Connell discusses in *Gender*: “Gender configurations, being patterns of activity, are not static.” (2002, p.81) However Connell also acknowledges the “creation of gender projects makes it possible to acknowledge both the agency of the learner and the intractability of gender structures.” (2002, p.82) It can be argued that the constraints of these ‘intractable gender structures’ are still as pertinent to contemporary Trans identifying individuals as they were in Stone’s era in the 1970’s.

It is plausible to suggest that to find oneself as a societal construct with a falsified history would be destabilising enough to dissuade most individuals from attempting to wrest agency from a seemingly monolithic psychological fraternity.

Indeed, as Stone suggests of the Trans self perception, whilst discussing early Trans autobiographies: “They go from being unambiguous men, albeit unhappy men, to unambiguous women. There is no territory between” (cited in Epstein, 1991, p.286). Without agency, the Trans individual has little political purchase within the hallowed halls of the health professionals. The very right to become one’s desired gender is firmly controlled by institutions who perceive that desire as an aberration, a sickness to be examined, and if possible, cured. I question the plausibility of achieving authentic agency within a paradigmatic institution that actually encourages duplicity in order for the Trans individual to be

successfully acceptable to society. From personal experience and from the narratives of Trans' friends, there is an inherent truth in Stone's assertions, as I too felt pressured to 'pass' and in a more extreme case a Trans friend in the 1980's had been subjected to measures as barbaric as genital electro aversion therapy to ensure their compliance to a hetero-normative stereotype of femininity.

Gender 'normalising' through surgical intervention

The importance of paradigmatic binary gender differences underpin the theories of Dr. John Money (1972), who like many of his contemporaries in the field of psychology sought to enforce hetero-normativity within society. I will demonstrate that his goal of normalising gender anomalous individuals was at best short-sighted and in extreme cases proved to be detrimental to his patients. Money was a psychologist and sexologist at John Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland. Renowned for his research into gender and sexual identity Money's theories concerning gender identity were widely accepted in Western psychology, but have since been the subject of controversy because of his prescribed methods of dealing with children with intersex conditions. Money strongly believed in, and widely advocated, gender assignment surgery for patients with ambiguous gender characteristics. He also maintained that the psychological wellbeing of gender anomalous children was reliant on raising the child as gender-unambiguously as possible. Money recommended to parents a rigorous compliance to stereotypical gender roles for growing intersex children:

It is absolutely prerequisite that the parents have no doubt or ambiguity as to whether they are raising a son or daughter. Uncertainty, if it exists at the time of birth, must be resolved in such a way that the parents follow the same train of reasoning as the experts who guide them. They then reach the same decision, instead of having to accept an instruction on faith, with no guarantee whether it is correct or in error (Money, 1972, p.159).

Money also demanded an invasive regime of surgery and ongoing hormonal medications to ensure the anatomy of the patient conformed to the gender considered appropriate to them by the 'experts':

At the usual age of puberty, and in accordance with statural growth, the gender-appropriate sex hormones should be administered; estrogen for the girl, and androgen for the boy. Girls with breasts too small can have them enlarged with a silicone implant, and boys without testes can have silicone prosthetic testes implanted. (Money, 1972, p.159)

It appears that Money decided the best course of action was not to wait and allow the individual child to mature and decide for themselves which course of action should be taken, if any. Rather, through his perceived need for societal acceptance, the parents and the child are coerced into decisions that have proven to be psychologically damaging in many cases. There are publicised instances where Money's theories, having been put into action, have led to severe psychological trauma. A case in point is that of John/Joan where "an XY individual [anatomically male] had his penis accidentally ablated [burnt off during circumcision] and was subsequently raised as a female" (Diamond & Sigmundson, 1997). They continue:

Considering this case follow-up, and as far as an extensive literature review can attest, there is no known case where a 46 chromosome, XY male, unequivocally so at birth, has ever easily and fully accepted an imposed life as an androphilic female regardless of the physical and medical intervention. True, surgical reconstruction of traumatized male or ambiguous genitalia to that of a female and attendant sex reassignment of males is mechanically easier than constructing a penis but there might be an unacceptable psychic price to pay (Diamond & Sigmundson, 1997).

Money's theories and practice highlight the restrictive nature of Western philosophy in regards to gender variance and act as an example of the results of socialising discourses, which will be discussed later in this dissertation, using Foucault (1978), where he asserts that the human body became disciplined to better serve the newly industrialised society. It is important to note that psychologists, like John Money, who advocate hetero-normativity for intersex individuals, do so with the goal of social acceptance and well being for the patient.

However, it is this philanthropic, though inherently myopic, wish to physically ‘normalise’ the individual that is at the core of the cultural intolerance of gender fluid identity. Rather than normalising intersex condition in society, Money and his peers endeavour to homogenise the individual to fit a hetero-normative mould.

This becomes more pertinent when one considers that studies conducted by various research bodies, globally, have discovered that anatomically there are not simply XX and XY chromosomes determining gender, as previously accepted, but a far greater range of gender influencing chromosomes. XXX, XXY and XO chromosomes scientifically dispel the myth of binary chromosomal gender ontology (Thomas, 2006). The existence of hermaphroditism, intersex children and AIS (Androgen insensitivity syndrome) also reinforce the view that multiple genders do exist naturally in humankind. Research from the Intersex Society of North America (ISNA) corroborates with Thomas’ findings:

... there is broad variability, as huge as nature itself. There are kids born with micropenises, and others with enlarged or protruding clitorises and a group in the Dominican Republic called “guevedoches” that have male genitalia that doesn’t descend until they’re twelve.

There’s also Klinefelter’s syndrome (XXY chromosomes, sterility, small testes, incomplete masculinization, with breast tissue development) and a plethora of other chromosomal combinations and syndromes”(cited in Hyena, 1999).

However, in the perception of health professionals such as Dr. Money, differences such as these are relegated to mere abnormalities and illnesses to be cured or managed. Parents of intersex children are actively coerced into conforming to the social ‘norm’ where it comes to their child’s gender physicality and the fear of societal non-acceptance is often used as the reason behind their choice. Leslie Feinberg counters this albeit understandable fear by suggesting:

The right to physical ambiguity and contradiction are surgically and hormonally denied to newborn intersexual infants who fall between the “poles” of male and female. If doctors refrained from immediately “fixing” infants who don’t fit the clear-cut categories of male and female, we would be spared the most commonly asked question: “what a beautiful baby! Is it a boy or a girl?”

And imagine what a difference it would make if parents replied, “We don’t know, our child hasn’t told us yet”. (Feinberg, 1996 p.103)

The non-invasive approach is a goal shared by Dr. Howard Devore who works as a board member of the Intersex Society of North America (ISNA). The ISNA is an organisation that actively engages with the welfare of intersex people:

The specific goals of the ISNA are to end cosmetic surgery on infant genitalia; to encourage obstetricians, gynaecologists and parents to accept the idea that a healthy intersex child has been born; and to persuade the medical establishment to use the intersex community as a resource center that can provide advice and community to future intersexuals. (Hyena, 1999)

As Devore discussed in his interview in SFGate.com; “... Since the 1950s, doctors have used plastic surgery to create masculine or feminine genitalia, but the surgeries often create scarring. They damage the patients for life because they end up deprived of functioning, good-feeling genitalia” (Devore cited in Hyena, 1999). Not to mention the risk of psychological trauma if, as is so often the case, the original gender identity chosen by ‘the experts’ turns out to be wholly incorrect (Lareau, 2003-2004, pp. 129 – 156).

Optimistically, the ISNA have made positive inroads into changing the practice of standardised intersex gender assignment; in August 2006 a new standard of care was published in *Pediatrics!*, the official journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics. The paper sets out to destigmatize intersex conditions and addresses issues from patient advocacy, psychosocial issues, diagnosis and surgical procedures. (Lee et al, 2006) These changes in attitude appear to infer, if not acceptance of fluidity, at least a more engaged willingness to acknowledge gender fluidity.

It is important to point out that even within the ranks of contemporary gender theorists the concept of gender fluidity is not automatically accepted. As with all socio-political and therefore subjective concepts, there are those who disagree with an idea of a gender in flux. One of those opposing voices is Raewyn Connell. Although Connell is comfortable with the positioning of transgendered identity, she admits to difficulty in the idea of gender fluidity:

Post structuralist approaches have lead many to the idea that gender is “fluid”, that it is somehow always in flux, that gendered subjectivities are fragile or ephemeral. It is this implication that I have always found hard to swallow; and that has made me wary of the post-structuralist approach generally. There is a lot of evidence that gender patterns, though unquestionably social, are by no means fluid and easy to change (Connell, 2009, p.21).

It appears many of Connell’s concerns about the promotion of the concept of gender fluidity stem from a sociological desire for responsible governance:

One of the fundamental problems with a performative concept of gender, and with post-structuralist approaches to subjectivity in general, is that they offer brilliant insights into the way actions are, so to speak, sculpted in the moment, but give little grip on the down-stream consequences of those actions. Post-structuralism therefore has difficulty understanding the building of institutions, the shape of a social order, or the large-scale dynamics of social change. ... Trying to steer that dynamic of change – including trying to resist change – is what politics is all about. Because our actions – including resisting change – have down-stream consequences, we have responsibility (Connell, 2009, p.22).

Although I share Connell’s hope for a responsible sociological future, I would pose the questions; to whom are we being responsible, if not to all members of society, including gender fluid people? And what are the innate consequences of denying a post structuralist Although the Western world has not fully accepted transgendered identity, it has made far greater inroads towards tolerance towards transgendered people than to gender fluid or intersex people. This is not to suggest transgendered life in the Western world is in any means a bed of roses, but it is significantly more socially acceptable than many other forms of gender variance. For example; gender reassignment surgery is often seen as a positive choice for transgendered people, where it is often quite the opposite for intersexed infants who, because of the consequence of age, are not afforded a choice (Hyena, 1999). My issue with Connell’s position is not the championing of the cause for Transgendered identity, but the apparent ‘closing of the door’ on further social change for gender fluid people.

On the opposing team, as it were, there are those who radically oppose all identity positions that adhere to traditional gender identity constructs, as Riki Wilchins discusses:

Some feminist theorists have questioned the queerness and radical-ness of any sort of gender that doesn’t do just that: leave norms behind. They consider transsexuals, butch/femmes, and drag queens as not only not genderqueer but actually gender conforming, because they partake of binary stereotypes. For them, the only “radical” choice is adopting more androgynous genders that fall totally off the binary map (Wilchins, 2002, p.29).

The problem here is that both groups of people staunchly defending their ideologies on gender are adhering to a fundamentalist view of gender politics; that there is only one truth, one authentic and therefore valid way to look at gender. Throughout my research, I have found theorists and lifeworld voices that have been embattled by a history cluttered with myopic, damaging and prejudiced dogma and, whilst well intentioned, they are still fiercely and doggedly defending singularist gender ideologies.

Riki Wilchins, whilst writing about the idea of universal truths, makes a pertinent point in respect to Western belief systems:

Some cultures accommodate, even exalt, difference. Yet in the West we pursue unity, we believe in singularity, we worship not only our God, but final Truths. If it's not true somewhere, then it's not really true. There is no room for what is private or unique. To seek the Truth – always capital T – is to seek what is universal and perfect. ... [T]here are lots of little truths ... They are among our most intimate experiences of ourselves in the world. And they are precisely what is lost when we propound and pursue singular and monolithic Truths about bodies, gender, and desire (Wilchins, 2002, p.39).

Whilst Wilchins is discussing the seeming short sightedness of Western society, the point is no less pertinent to the way gender discourse has been conducted from within the ranks of the gender variant community.

There is a definite need to reassess the tools through which we as a gender fluid 'community' communicate. As an eclectic mix of individuals, bound only by our subjective ambiguities, surely there needs to be a level of acceptance of ambiguity within our political discourse. Traditional hetero-normative methods of rationalist discourse are designed to maintain academic and intellectual power bases and are, in many ways, deeply flawed when they are employed to discuss any form of empowering subjective ambiguity.

I argue that radical social change is a valid and institutionally responsible course, that all the various gender ideologies are true and authentic, in that they exist within the practical narratives of individuals. In my opinion the rational approach to gender discourse is to empower the declassification of gender identity ambiguity. It is impractical to attempt to classify, standardise and homogenise gender identity, which is by its very nature individualistic. As Lyotard suggested, the project of Modernity with all of its standardising rationalism, technology and globalising homogeneity was intended to benefit all humanity.

Lyotard also concluded that the project of modernity has failed (Lyotard, 1992, pp.90 - 99). In the case of gender fluid identity, this is true, as the strictures of binary classification hinder rather than help gender fluid individuals. It is essential that a new way of approaching equanimity must be found. It is with this resolve that I approach my creative practice with its inherent communicative function. Visual representation has a significant role to play in challenging hetero-normative paradigms and bringing to light the concept that there are very real gender fluid lifeworlds being affected by this discourse.

Chapter Four, Non Western Lifeworlds

“All thirdness is not alike” (Reddy, 2005).

Introduction

The previous chapters have outlined the principal discourses in the contemporary gender fluid lifeworld. During my research into historical precedents of gender fluid identity the glaring omissions from Western history were immediately overshadowed by the wealth of gender fluid existence in the histories of other cultures. Apart from cementing my conclusions that gender difference had been disciplined by modernity and industrialisation, I was confronted by the realisation that my initial foray into my research had been almost entirely Eurocentric in its scope. Once again, I was reminded of the myopic nature of my lifeworld, in that I initially didn't even consider the worth of non-Western discourse on gender fluidity. The research I embarked upon from this revelatory point led to an extensive global journey and has quite easily been the most rewarding personal experience of all the research undertaken in my doctoral studies. Apart from the aspect of personal growth in regard to my own gender

fluid identity, the wealth of firsthand experience and related conversations with non-Western gender fluid individuals has afforded my research a far greater depth than I had anticipated.

In this chapter I examine and discuss a number of the gender fluid communities globally and will present an overview of how they are perceived culturally within their societies and how they perceive themselves. Through this exploration I present the representations, mythologies and cultural stories of these traditional communities, which I argue are less abundant in the narrative practices of Eurocentric gender fluid individuals and communities. This historical surety of identity in the non-Western realm is an affirmation that still remains largely out of reach for gender fluid individuals in the Western world. The cultural discourse I have entered into in this chapter strongly informs my creative practice, and has resulted in a number of inter-subjective portraits of non-Western gender fluid individuals who were so generous with their time and company.⁴

When approaching the topic of non-Western gender fluid lifeworlds it becomes apparent that many problematic issues arise. Firstly, the cultural position of the author as Eurocentric, is called into play, along with a myriad of other distinctions, such as ethnicity, spirituality, gender and cultural status. Each of these individuations plays a role in the author's perception of the 'other'. As I have already outlined in the introduction of this dissertation, an individual's narrative practice is inherently linked to the broader societal lifeworld they are accustomed to.

As Iben Jensen discusses in his text *'The Practice of Intercultural Communication'* (1997) the joint understanding of communication between people of different cultures relies heavily upon the cultural presuppositions and cultural self perceptions held by both parties. As Jensen

⁴ These portraits can be viewed as illustrative plates in chapter six.

suggests in his paper, authors tend to inherently regard their own culture as the ideal and can be non-reflexive about their own lifeworld, leading to a set of cultural presuppositions about any culture other than their own. This concept is entirely relevant in regards to this dissertation, as it is essential that an overview of both the cultures being discussed, and the culture of those discussing, must initially be (at least partially) understood given my western positioning (Shah, 2004, pp 549-575). For example, it is pertinent to reflect upon the importance of spirituality in India if one is to comprehend the cultural role of spiritual devotees such as India's third gender Hijras. Without reflexively examining the researcher position it is not possible to re-position oneself in the cultural space of others and so understand how they are constituted as autonomous agents (Bishop & Glynn, 1999, pp.167-182). It would be misplaced to assume that culturally subjective identities and traditions in non-Western societies are not as vitally important in cultural self perception as rationalist and modernist ideologies are in the Western world (and vice versa).

Throughout this dissertation I have referred to the 'gender fluid' individual, and I am aware that this infers a concept of a classifiable subculture with a community, be it local or global. It is necessary at this point to clarify this terminology. As stated in the introduction, the term 'gender fluidity' has been used as an umbrella classification to encompass all realms of non hetero-normative, gender variant identity. This classification therefore acts as a convenient terminology, inclusive of all gender identity that sits outside of traditional paradigmatic expressions of dimorphic gender. This is not to suggest that any of the individuals it refers to actively refer to, or think of their selves, as gender fluid. Most, if not all, of the groups I discuss in this chapter have an established set of cultural beliefs, narrative practices and pre-actualised gender identity and it is not my intention to infer otherwise, rather I use this terminology for clarity of expression.

The arguments and debates used so far have generally been positioned from the perspective of predominantly Caucasian middle class academics from the homogenous Western lifeworld. This may falsely suggest that gender fluidity or gender variance belongs to a predominantly white middle class ontology. When exploring issues of gender identity in non-Western environments, it becomes apparent that the scope of traditional Western ideologies concerning gender is rudimentary indeed. Where Westerners traditionally maintain the certainty of binary gender, and any deviance from that certainty is perceived as an aberration, many Eastern and Indigenous cultures have long-standing and largely accepted traditional third gender communities. These cultures have a wealth of historical narrative and abiding spiritual mythologies. Across the globe, in cultures that have been slower to embrace Western ideologies, there are various belief systems that accept the existence of gender variance in all its forms. There are spiritual and religious stories that present the fluidity of gender anatomy and identity in many non Judeo-Christian ideologies; from Africa, to India, from Samoa to the Americas, in China and Japan.

It would be at least myopic to discount the cultural beliefs and ideologies of such a broad range of geographies and at worst entirely arrogant to privilege the Western rationalist approach to gender over such an enduring body of pre-existing cultural knowledge. With this in mind I have included observations of narrative practices from a research trip I undertook to Thailand, India, Samoa and the United States of America. My hope was to better understand the people I had been researching and to stock a representational cache from which to work with in my arts practice.⁵

My only regret, due to funding restrictions was that I was unable to visit and present a more thorough cross section of global gender fluid identity. I would very much liked to have

⁵ This will be discussed further in the reflexive analysis of my creative practice in chapter six.

visited the female to male ‘Sworn Virgins’ of Albania (Young, 2000) and Australia’s Indigenous Tiwi Island ‘Sistagirls’ (McCrum, 2010) whose lifeworld voices may have enlivened this discourse further.

Using the writings of Johanna Schmidt (n.d.), I examine the traditional family role of the Fa’afafine in Samoa and how encroaching Western ideology is disrupting traditional perceptions of gender fluidity in Samoan society. I also discuss the spiritual role of the Hijra and other gender fluid groups in India and examine how colonialism has impacted upon these communities that previously had a far less maligned social status in Indian society. I present mythologies and representations from the Indigenous two spirit people of North America, the Kathoeyes (or ladyboys) of Thailand and instances of other non-Western mythologies that are relevant to broader gender fluid ontology.

A global research trip

In the summer of 2009 I embarked upon a journey that took me around the globe investigating non-Western gender fluid identity. To refer to this journey as a research trip may be unintentionally misleading, as my intent throughout the trip was not to collect and collate hard data, rather to gain a greater emotional and subjective insight into the practical narratives of gender fluid individuals of various ethnicities. After hearing and reading about traditional third gender communities in non-Western countries, I was curious as to how prevalent these groups were and to what extent they were accepted in their broader general communities. One of the many things that prompted my urge to experience these narrative practices for myself was a conversation I had with a friend who identifies as a traditional gender fluid Fijian. We were discussing my interest in Fa’afafine culture on the island of Samoa and I had mentioned watching *Paradise Bent*, a National Geographic documentary (Croall, 1999). My friend suggested that particular documentary misrepresented the

Fa'afafine lifeworld to such a great extent that many gender variant Samoans and other Islanders are now reticent to speak about the topic with Western researchers for fear of being misquoted and generally misrepresented. The bad press of *Paradise Bent* had soured their view on Western modes of cultural appropriation. This came as quite a surprise to me and forced me to re-evaluate the validity of my supposedly objective research as I had intended to draw heavily upon *Paradise Bent* as a beneficial and reputable source. This again was one of the key developments that encouraged a heavier reliance on authentic lifeworld voices within my research and led me to consider the importance of including narrative practices in my writing to a far greater extent. Hearing stories from the 'horse's mouth' and drawing on my comparative lifeworld experiences as a gender fluid artist made greater sense than relying entirely on potentially flawed academic sources.

It made sense that some of the perspectives on non-Western gender were researched and written by academics coming from an inherently Western position. This revelation made me realise that much of what I had assumed to be objective cultural information may naturally be peppered with a great deal of subjective opinion and cultural bias. This awareness led me to my decision to experience these cultures for myself and hopefully listen to first-hand accounts of what it means to be traditionally gender fluid in a culture other than colonial Australia.

My intention on this research trip was not to attempt an anthropological or sociological survey of gender fluid individuals, (which I am eminently underqualified to do). Rather, my intention was to gain an overall sense of how gender fluid identity was perceived in each of these communities, both by myself as a visual communicator and by those who live in and amongst supposedly traditional third gender communities. As a gender fluid identifier, with a lifetime of personal experience in this field, I felt my experience in each of these countries,

however brief, would enable me to better understand how gender identity is approached and navigated within non-Western cultures. I had many questions about each of the individual cultures that I could not find answers for in the published texts that were available to me. I was keen to find out how gender fluid people in these cultures understood their own narrative practices and how they felt they were perceived by their broader societies. I was curious to discover both the similarities and differences between Western and non-Western gender fluid perspectives. I felt that these insights could better help me develop my creative practice and help me communicate more authentically to my audience, developing a form of collaborative sense-making (Ragland, 2006, pp.165-182). My exposure to gender fluid cultures on my research trip opened my eyes not only to aspects I hadn't considered but also shattered many of the preconceived romantic illusions I had unknowingly been holding about non-Western gender identity. It also had the unexpected and uncomfortable effect of forcing me to confront and re-evaluate my own gender identity position. My experiences and subsequent discoveries are interspersed throughout the following explorations of non-Western gender fluid identity and include anecdotal accounts of conversations I had with members of traditional gender fluid communities and organisations who work closely with them. The inclusion of this 'anecdotal journalism' may at first seem problematic, but stems from my wish to not misrepresent these texts as qualified objective data. Rather my intention is to illustrate non-Western gender fluid narratives from the subjectively experienced perspective of a Western visual arts practitioner (Haseman, 2007). My travel journal plays the dual role of collecting my research, and perhaps more importantly acted as a surrogate travel companion through which I could ruminate on both my findings and the subjective emotional journey I found myself on. Overall, the affect on my creative practice of maintaining my travel journal was to allow me to remember more thoroughly the various experiences of my

journey. This in turn influenced the later paintings to a great extent, allowing me the luxury of revisiting conversations and events with a greater clarity.

The Katoeys of Thailand

Travel Journal entry 28/11/09 Day 8 in Bangkok, Thailand

...Bangkok has opened my eyes to a great many things, amongst them, my own prejudice and inherent sense of entitlement. A friend from the United States commented that my blog entries read like the diary of a colonial squire and I suppose he is quite correct. I approach this country and this town and its people from a privileged Western perspective and it's been quite an unpleasant revelation to realise that for someone who considers themselves reflexive, I am actually incredibly culturally staid.

So rather than pretend to be something I'm not, if I'm honest I must admit there is a great deal I detest about this place. These dislikes are fuelled by and informed by my position as 'the colonial squire'. I come from a very lucky country and I am spoilt and pampered by my affluence in comparison to much of the world. This revelation, however honest and true, does not prevent me from being repelled by the filth and crassness of Khaosan Road, the stench of urine, the desperate scrabbling for the tourist Baht. I am sickened by the ugly greedy sunburnt tourists leering after all the Thai women, who must smile and put up with the foreign lechery or risk not feeding their children. I am also disappointed that the utopian vision of the Katoey ladyboys I had obviously been harbouring is so obviously false.... at least in this part of the city. The Katoey I see at 3 in the morning, screeching at drunken Western teenagers whilst trying to pick their pockets amongst the puddles of vomit are an anathema to me... a cruel awakening from an unrealistic dream.

By far my most trying of times, Bangkok forced upon me the reality of a culture almost entirely alien to my own. Although I spent many years in Perth on the Gay scene, indulging in some extremely open minded and fetishistic relationships with people from various walks of life, Bangkok reminded me of how long ago all of that was. I have become quite conservative in my mature years in no small part due to the responsibilities of raising children and having settled into a predominantly hetero-normative married life. My practical narrative falls closer to my hetero-normative Western counterparts than I had initially realised. Bangkok served up to me a vision of what appears to happen when a part of a culture ceases to be self-reflexive and yearns only for the tourist dollar. It came as quite a shock to me how capitalistic the tourist sex industry was, with flesh as a commodity, no different to t-shirts, alcohol or cheap plastic souvenirs. In a commodity market such as Bangkok, I suppose it becomes commonplace that 'the body,' being in demand, can be used as a form of revenue; as soon as the ideological shift is made, the ethical or moral dilemmas attached to prostitution become minor inconveniences. Then, of course, the important personal decision is made of how one will market one's 'product' (Trotman, 2003 pp. 105 -127).

It was in this climate that I met with Siripong, one of Thailand's many Katoey, or 'Lady-boys.' Siripong was introduced to me by my hotel receptionist, Somsek, after I decided I was not socially equipped to approach the multitude of Lady-boy sex workers who roam Khao San road in the evening. Siripong works as a travel agent in Bangkok and, although our initial meeting was a little uncomfortable and limited because of language difficulties, she was quite open and forthright about her place in Thai culture. I'm not sure what I was expecting as I waited for her in the hotel restaurant where we had agreed to meet; I guess I had a pre-conceived idea of who might turn up, based on the girls I had seen 'working the tourists' on the main drag. Instead I was met by a young, well-dressed and very 'pretty' boy, who had

obviously invested a great deal of time on his appearance. It was immediately apparent that the 'feminine' aspect of Siripong's character was well developed and she lacked all the stereotypical masculine posturing affected by so many of the local Thai men I had met. Siripong had an air of confidence about her that was refreshing and she was quite charming, composed and also obviously bemused by this strange Westerner who was asking all sorts of odd questions.

We talked for sometime about the lady-boy lifestyle and I asked her if she knew how long there had been Lady-boys in Thailand. She appeared confused and answered that there had always been lady-boys as far as she knew; it had always been part of Thai culture. I mentioned that I had found it difficult to find support groups for Katoeys or even Gay and Lesbian groups and she suggested that was because such institutions were unnecessary, as this was just part of life in Thailand, and it was for the most part accepted. I explained to her how I had assumed there must be some issue with gender queer exclusion as I had seen so many lady-boys working as prostitutes in Bangkok, and surely this must indicate a lack of acceptance in more 'conventional' industries. Siripong laughed and set me straight; she explained it had nothing to do with their gender identity; it was more about their level of education. Apparently, many of the working girls I had seen plying their trade on Khao San road were originally from the poorer rural areas of Thailand, drawn to the city by the lure of the mighty tourist dollar. Siripong explained that, being under-educated, they are not suited to skilled positions in retail trades so turn to prostitution as a means to make a living. These rural refugees soon become aware there is more money to be made as a lady-boy than as a male sex worker, so they adapt to suit the market. As many young Thai males are very slight physically, the transition to a feminine performance is relatively smooth, needing only cosmetics and superficial changes in appearance. A smaller percentage of Katoey in

Bangkok, Siripong explained, actually go through with gender reassignment surgery but many prefer just to remain lady-boys rather than to transition to anatomically female. I felt it was inappropriate to ask whether Siripong had decided whether to transition or not, and I think in the scheme of things it doesn't really matter. She was obviously comfortable identifying as a lady-boy and was holding down a well paid position as a travel agent that afforded her a level of status within the community. I found myself wanting to ask her why she was wearing 'boys' clothes to our meeting, but I caught myself and asked instead of myself "Why do you need to know that? What Western conventions are you overlaying on her and for what purpose?" Really, I could ask the same of myself; why am I wearing boy's clothes, when, after all, I'm aware that I don't identify as male in the conventional sense of the word? This is one of the many significant questions I have found myself endeavouring to answer in my creative practice.

The Fa'afafine of Samoa

Traditional Samoan family life is predominantly agrarian and the role of the individual in the extended family or 'aiga' is of primary importance in Samoan daily life. As such the role of gender in Samoan culture has been defined by the role the individual undertakes within the community. Anecdotal evidence suggests that at a young age certain boys are chosen for their inclination towards traditionally feminine tasks, and are raised as Fa'afafine. The role of the Fa'afafine has been at one with the traditional feminine role within the family, looking after

the family by doing the cooking, cleaning and laundry. Fa'afafine are to all intents and purposes regarded as, and given the same respect as, women in traditional Samoan culture.

It is important, especially as a Westerner, to consider the cultural context of the Fa'afafine identity, in that the focus of the individual is on familial responsibility and not on sexuality. The traditional role of the Fa'afafine is a communal role, not an individual life choice based on personal individuation, sexual or otherwise. Approaching the concept of Fa'afafine identity from a Western perspective risks misinterpretation by aligning it with Western concepts of trans-sexuality, cross dressing or female impersonation (such as in the Western sense pertaining to drag queens). However according to Johanna Schmidt, author of *'Redefining Fa'afafine'*, Samoan cultural attitudes are changing; "In spite of the historical non-alignment of Fa'afafine with Homosexuality, Samoans are beginning to re-interpret Fa'afafine in line with foreign discourses of sexuality and identity" (Schmidt, 2001). Schmidt further explains,

In recent decades, migration out of the villages in search of education and employment, and the influx of modern Western economic, social and technological forms has altered family and village structures. ... capitalist ideologies such as 'personal freedom' and economic structures such as wage labour stress the individual over the family. ... As family and labour lose their centrality in constructions of Samoan identities, Western culture exerts an increasing influence. This cultural shift has contributed to an emphasis on the individual, and on personal appearance and bodily expression as a primary marker of gender. For example, clothing has become more significant in relation to gender. While the everyday wear of most Samoan men and women is a lavalava [a sarong like piece of clothing worn around the waist by men and under the armpits by women]... and t-shirt, in Apia younger Samoan women are beginning to wear short skirts and skimpy tops, while young men favour a more hip hop 'baggy' style of shorts (Schmidt, 2001). Schmidt goes on to suggest:

Christianity is now an integral part of fa'aSamoa, effectively incorporated into the discourses and enactments of Samoan culture. While Samoan modesty may be a legacy of missionary morality, today overt sexuality or bodily exposure, especially for women, is considered very unSamoa"(Schmidt, 2001).

Inherent in Schmidt's text is the increasing dichotomy between traditional and contemporaneous perceptions of Fa'afafine life. With the influence of the Eurocentric Western world, ideas about sexuality, gender and the individual role within the community are being questioned and revised. Understandably this revision of cultural attitudes may oft times be polemic and difficult to reconcile. Unsurprisingly, as Western ideology plays a more integral role in Samoan society, the traditional feminine role is changing. As in Western societies the emphasis on the woman's role has adopted the issues surrounding work and home life balance, along with the relatively contemporary concepts of individualised narratives surrounding sexuality and gender. Schmidt suggests that gender identity is beginning to relate more to Western gender signifiers such as appearance, clothing and the adoption of explicitly gender specific western names. "Thus both name and clothing become signifiers of hyper-feminine, highly sexualised Western gender constructs" (Ibid, 2001). Schmidt also suggests that a sub cultural division between the Fa'afafine themselves has occurred, where the more Westernised and sexualised city Fa'afafine are derogatory about their village counterparts because of their more 'masculine' build that has come from traditional village labour. Ironically it is this physical appearance borne from serving the 'aiga' that defines them as more womanly by Samoan standards (n.d.). Previously Samoan life revolved around the individual as a member of a larger community, their role in the aiga, or family, being far more relevant than any insular sense of self. This practical narrative position change has essential cultural consequence as the individual moves from holding the needs of the collective as most important, to a focus on personal individual welfare.

On my research trip I had the distinct pleasure of sharing a meal with Fa'afafine artist Dan Taulapapa McMullen in Los Angeles and something he told me struck a resonant chord in regards to my own gender identity position. Dan collected me from my hotel in Los Angeles

and I was struck firstly by how tall he was and secondly how traditionally masculine he appeared. A very softly spoken person, Dan explained to me over dinner that his Fa'afafine identity was inherent in who he was, both culturally and spiritually, and it was a mistake to assume that it was a role to be performed for others. He felt no need to 'perform' his identity, as he *is* Fa'afafine and is wholly accepted as such within his Samoan community. Being himself is being Fa'afafine, regardless of the perception of his superficial appearance. For me this was quite an epiphany, as I have spent my entire life playing stereotypical roles set out for me by various hegemonic influences and expending a great deal of energy concerned about how I am 'read' by others. The idea that I could 'just be' was as confronting as it was comforting.

Dan's ease with his gender identity translates also to his position as an artist in Los Angeles, where Fa'afafine culture is less known. He explained that in Los Angeles he is positioned by others as a Gay man and he is entirely comfortable with that, knowing that he is actually Fa'afafine and how others perceive him has no impact on his traditional place in Samoan culture. It was refreshing to experience the modest self-confidence of an individual for whom gender fluidity is a cultural norm, perhaps even secondary to more pressing daily matters. Dan's arts practice is heavily influenced by issues pertaining to his narrative practice and I explore his artwork in greater detail in Chapter Five.

The Hijra of India

Gender fluidity in India is steeped in centuries of history and spiritual mythology. Ancient Vedic writings dating back to before 300 AD make extensive mention of the third sex in India, where Rama names the Hijra as his chosen people. (Herdt, 2003).

Cassell's Encyclopedia of Queer Myth, Symbol and Spirit (1997) describes the Hijra as: "Transgendered male priest/ess/es and devotees of the Hindu goddess Bahucharamata." And that they "are chosen to become so by the Goddess, their metamorphosis often commencing with a dream wherein Bahucharamata instructs young men to begin transforming their attire and behaviour as well as their erotic and spiritual lives" (Lundschen & Conner, 1997).

The Hijra are possibly the best known of India's varied third sex devotees, however other gender fluid communities are apparent in different areas of the country, such as in Tamil Nadu where devotees are called Aravanni after their devotion to the god Aravan. Similarly devotees of the goddess Yellamma are called Jogappa.



Figure 5: *The Goddess Bahuchara Mata* (Source: Dolls of India, n.d.)



Figure 6: *The Goddess Yellamma* (Source: Simon Charsley, n.d.)

The role of India's traditional gender fluid community has been historically linked to spirituality, in that the vast majority of gender fluid individuals are devotees to specific deities. Many of these devotees, to varying degrees adopt a feminine performative identity. The goddess Bahuchara Mata's devotees; the Hijras, are often eunuchs, having been voluntarily castrated in a ceremony called a 'nirwan' in order to relinquish their 'manhood' as an offering to Bahuchara Mata.

Other spiritual devotees in India may only temporarily cross dress during particular spiritual festivals and celebrations, returning to their traditionally male lives and their families. Whilst

they are performing their spiritual celebrations, they identify as women and act accordingly.

Serena Nanda explains:

As vehicles of divine power, *Hijras* engage in their traditional occupations of performing at the birth of a male child and at marriages and as servants of the goddess at her temple. *Hijras* also engage in prostitution with men, although this directly contradicts their culturally sanctioned ritual roles (Herdt, 2003, p. 373).

Unfortunately, regardless of their long established auspicious roles in traditional Indian society, Hijras are increasingly marginalised in modern India. As the human rights organization Sangama explains on their website:

Most rights including right to education, employment, housing economic opportunities, health, mobility, marriage, adoption, ration card, passport etc. are denied to Hijras and other Transgenders, as they cannot prove their identities, their birth certificates and their present identities do not match (Sangama, n.d.)

Further to this Sangama claims that the Hijras, seen as part of a growing Indian Gay, Lesbian and Transgendered community, are also under constant threat of violence from India's criminal classes and even from the police. Whilst I was researching the Hijra of India, I stumbled across a transcript of an example of police brutality toward the Hijra in Bangalore in the south of India. The author of the piece was a non-government organisation activist by the name of Manohar Elavarthi. Intrigued by the text that described in detail the poor treatment of both Hijra sex workers in custody and the subsequent assault on the NGO crisis team members who tried to mediate with the police, I successfully contacted Manohar and organised to meet with him whilst I was in Bangalore. I was interested to find out about community sentiment toward the Hijra from someone who faces challenges with, and for, them on a daily basis; very often putting his own life at risk.

Manohar co-runs an organisation called Aneka from a small office in Hebbal in the northern part of Bangalore city⁶. Aneka's primary focus is to act as an intermediary between sex workers and the local bureaucracy. The organisation supports the predominantly poor and lower class sex workers, including the Hijra, through legal and financial aid. It is important to note that, through sheer consequence of being Hijra, the majority of these people are forced to become either prostitutes or beggars, as the general Indian populace is against giving the Hijra employment in any other profession.

The day of our meeting, I took an auto rickshaw through the city streets of Bangalore to Hebbal, a busy outer urban district, teeming with business people and congested with traffic and pollution. Even for my driver, Manju, it was a trial to find the address amongst the busy winding narrow lanes of Hebbal. I was quite taken aback by the throng of commuters, merchants, cars, trucks and a huge general populace, all moving about on their own daily personal missions amongst the heat, noise and pollution.

Eventually Manju, after asking several locals for directions, was able to deposit me at the front door of Aneka, a modest little two storey cottage on a small lane just off the main highway. I expected him to drive off into the fumes and crowd but he explained that in India, your driver was your driver until you no longer need his services, and he settled down to read his newspaper whilst I went inside.

I was met at the door by Manohar, who greeted me warmly, though a little distractedly. Manohar is a softly spoken gentleman and has the confident air of someone who through his constant dealing with the politics of NGO management is comfortable in all social situations. Later that morning Manohar explained to me that he was organising or speaking at five NGO

⁶ Manohar Elavarthi has an online presence at this URL: <http://manoharban.wordpress.com/>

conferences over the next two weeks, so his available time was limited. I sat in Manohar's office which he shares with a co-worker and tried to read some of the Hijra related literature he had provided for me, whilst he and his co-worker fielded endless phone calls in Hindi and English and answered emails and discussed tactics of how to share Aneka's meagre monthly budget around most effectively.

Eventually Manohar closed his mobile phone and suggested we escape the office before the phone started ringing again. He recommended that we go to a pub to have lunch and discuss any questions I might have, so we both clambered into Manju's tiny auto rickshaw and headed out into the noisy traffic.

Eventually after navigating through the dense and exhaust filled streets of Bangalore, Manohar took me to a pub where we ordered curry and beer. We ate and drank and discussed many of the issues involved in running a non-government agency. Manohar was an erudite and generous conversationalist and happily answered my questions, highlighting cultural mores and explaining the 'Indian' view of the politics of gender.

I was pleasantly surprised when he offered to discuss his own gender identity position, framing himself as gender fluid, neither perceiving himself as exclusively male or female, but a chimera of sorts.

Manohar also asserted that many of the Hijras he works with do not position themselves as transsexual or transgender, but place themselves apart from such Western ideologies. This is not to say there are not those within their communities who do identify as transgender, but the delineation between Transgender and Hijra is quite clear.

I was interested to ask Manohar why there was such animosity toward the Hijra in contemporary India, when in the ancient Vedic texts the Hijra and other third gender people

in India where considered blessed by Rama. Manohar said he believed it stemmed from empirical colonial rule, in that Indian men started to perceive themselves as emasculated by the advent of colonial rule and the forced Westernisation of India. Manohar suggested that contemporary Indians see masculinity as an important aspect of their cultural identity and this may explain why those identities that appear to undermine masculinity, such as the Hijras, may be met with hostility. Other evidence of the colonial impact on the lives of the Hijra is discussed by Serena Nanda in Herdt's anthology *Third sex, third gender: Beyond sexual dimorphism in culture and history*:

With the advent of British rule, the position of the *Hijras* began to lose traditional formal legitimacy. While the British initially recognized some of the traditional entitlements awarded the *Hijras* as they assumed control over Indian states, ultimately the British government refused to lend its legal support to the *Hijras*' 'right of begging or extorting money, whether authorized by former governments or not.' They thereby hoped to discourage what they found to be 'the abominable practices of the wretches.' (Herdt, 2003)

With this in mind, I mentioned to Manohar that many of the people I had spoken to, in regards to the Hijra, viewed them as a nuisance and a pest. As a Hijra advocate, I was expecting him to disagree and was a little surprised when he nodded and said that they were indeed a nuisance. Manohar was quick to clarify, however, that what choice did the Hijra have, when faced with a society that marginalise them to the point where the only options open to them are begging and prostitution?

Whilst I was in India, many of the people I spoke to would mention how the Hijra were notorious for bullying business owners into providing them with alms. One of the common methods of coercing charitable donations is the Hijras revealing their mutilated genitals to the businesses' customers by lifting their saris. The tolerance by the general public of such anti social activities may well be due to the belief in the magical abilities of the Hijras themselves:

... While they are often ridiculed, especially in Twentieth Century India, Hijras are nevertheless believed to carry magical power. For example, even those who ridicule them fear their curses, which are cast when they are not invited to sing and dance at special events or when they are refused alms. Moreover they are believed by many to hold the power to bring riches and rain. While they are considered Transgendered, they differ from traditional Hindu and Indian women in several key respects, foremost is their tendency to behave in a bawdy manner (such as lifting their skirts) and to use obscene speech (Lundschen & Conner, 1997, p.178).

Recently the increase in the authorities disciplining of the Hijras and India's other third gender people has prompted a rise in the number of pro-Hijra advocates actively vying for political positions in areas with large Hijra populations such as Bangalore and Tamil Nadu. Far from becoming 'shrinking violets' the Hijra community has become increasingly outspoken with activists such as Sabeena Francis openly and actively defending the rights of India's third gender. Hijras occupied important positions as spiritual figures in pre-British India. They were thought to be magical and in early Vedic texts were named as Rama's chosen people. It was during the British era that the position of Hijras deteriorated in society and it got no better after Independence. Francis laments: "Nobody even knows for sure how many Hijras are there in our country, since they are simply categorised as 'female' in the census." Though they are estimated to number over one crore,[ten million] there are no official figures available (Bageshree, 2004).

Francis, herself a Hijra, is working as an activist to try and change the Indian government's stance on Hijras, encouraging them to improve the lot of India's third sex "by providing reservation in education and employment and by amending laws on marriage, adoption, and property ownership to give them legitimate space in society" (Ibid, 2004). In many ways the Hijras struggle reflects many of the aspects of the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender movement in the West. When I first read of Manohar Elavarthi's experiences with police brutality towards the Hijra and their supporters I was immediately reminded of the experiences recounted by Leslie Feinberg in his book *Stone Butch Blues* (1993). The

correlation between the modern Western gay rights movement (sprung from the civil disobedience of the gay, lesbian and transgendered Americans in the Stonewall Riots (Feinberg 1996, p.153) and the ongoing political aspirations of the Hijras is strikingly familiar. There are obviously several decades and a vast geography between them but the underpinning similarity of resistance to authoritarian violence and oppression is certainly a shared one.

The Two Spirit people of North America

During my brief visit to New York in the winter of 2009, I was fortunate to share a meal with Harlan Pruden; a Two-Spirit from the Cree, or Algonquin, people of North America. Harlan lives and works in Manhattan for a government organisation by day and in his spare time organises funding and conferences for Native Americans concerning HIV/AIDS, Methamphetamine education and the recognition of Two-Spirit rights. We met for lunch in one of Manhattan's many diners and over our meal we discussed many of the issues surrounding Two-Spirit identity. Harlan was quick to point out that although he identified as Two-Spirit and it is a commonly used term, the Native American people are not a monolith and therefore the term is not universally accepted. Many other Native American tribes prefer their individual local terminology over the broader term of Two-Spirit. In his own Algonquin language Harlan refers to himself as Sesquia'acon, meaning not a man or woman. This multiplicity of identity across the North American Indigenous community, in many ways mirrors my own position on the varied gender fluid identities that exist both globally and locally.

When I asked Harlan about his personal gender identity he elaborated upon his position as a Two-Spirit man;

There is a fluidity in my identity, when I'm out in a non Native setting, I'm a gay man who is Native, but in a Native setting I also identify as a Gay man and I identify also as a Two-Spirit man, but within that Native setting, identifying as a Two-Spirit it transcends sex. It really has nothing to do with sex; it has to do with my covenant, my communications, my expectations, my responsibilities to my community. And the community as soon as I claim that, they will look to me with certain expectations; it's not a one way street. (H. Pruden, personal communication, December 2009)

In much the same way as Fa'afafine identity is centred on the role within the community, Two-Spiritedness is inextricably linked to the mutual responsibility between the Two-Spirit person and the broader community of the tribe.

A clear example of this, in Denver Colorado, in one of the high schools there was the largest class of graduating students that were native, there were eighteen graduating... and because they were native they came from very poor humble backgrounds. So, the native community reached out to the Denver two spirit society, their leadership and said "You have to do something" the community said "this is your role, we expect [it of] you." So immediately the leadership reached out into their network and got eighteen eagle's feathers to present to the graduating students. Eagle feathers are some of the most powerful medicine that we get in our community. The role of the Two-Spirit is still a very vital part of native community. (H. Pruden, personal communication, December 2009)

I asked Harlan about non-Native perceptions of Two-Spiritedness primarily because I was curious as to whether there was any correlation with the perceptions surrounding the Katoey in Thailand and the Hijra in India. I was keen to find out whether, as America has a well established and very political Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgendered movement, there were any residual benefits for the Two-Spirit Community. Harlan admits it always causes him a little sadness that the LGBT movement in the U.S. is a primarily white, highly privileged, very driven movement that is almost inaccessible to Native Americans. He asserts that historically people of colour didn't enter into the GLBT dialogue. Harlan contends that contemporaneously every major national GLBT organisation is headed by a white male or a white female and rarely is there any racial diversity. He suggests the same systems of racial

and social injustices perpetrated in the broader community are duplicated within GLBT systems and it becomes an equality based on systems of inequity:

There is a very Eurocentric “look what we discovered” mentality within the LGBT movement. ... Within the GLBT discourse we always hearken back to 1969 as the birth of the Gay movement, but of course the two spirits were here long before 1969 and there were people who entered into same sex relationships who were full citizens. Wouldn't you, if you were striving for equality want to go back and tease out and look at a model that actually existed on this land and worked?! (Ibid, 2009).

Harlan maintains that the inherent divide between the GLBT community and the Two-Spirit people has very concrete consequences in that in 2007 there were \$77 million dollars US given philanthropically to LGBT organisations, but of that amount only \$45,000 was earmarked for Two-Spirit organisations (which is about \$900 per state). Harlan added that the government does not fund any Two-Spirit program work so naturally there are huge impediments to working with his community financially (Ibid, 2009). Historically, the Two-Spirit people have been widely discussed in modern anthropology. Possibly the most famous historical Two-Spirit identity was Osh-Tisch-‘Finds Them and Kills Them’ who was a well respected badé or Two-Spirit, renowned for his bravery (Feinberg, 2007, p.39).



Figure 7: *Squaw Jim. American Indian Berdache* (Source: Changing World, n.d.)

Also very famous in the 1880s was the Zuni Two-Spirit We' Wha who became “*an instant celebrity...*”:

...Throughout the spring of 1886, she mingled with politicians, government officials, politicians, and the local elite. She befriended the speaker of the house and called on his wife. She demonstrated Zuni weaving on the Mall and worked with anthropologists at the Smithsonian Institution. She even appeared in a charity event at the National Theatre before an audience of senators, congressmen, Supreme Court justices, and the president (Roscoe, 2004).



Figure 8: *The Zuni “princess” We’wha* (Source:Geocities.com, n.d.)

Initially referred to as Berdaches by French colonists in North America, the term has since been replaced by the neologism Two-Spirits, as ‘Berdache’ etymologically refers to a male prostitute (Scott, 2005). However, Scott asserts there is no certainty that the term Berdache was ever used in a derogatory sense in relation to the Indigenous population of North America, and it is more likely to have been used in an affectionate sense. During my conversation with Harlan Pruden in Manhattan, he disagreed with Scott’s assumption and contended the term Berdache was indeed intended to insult. Harlan informed me that, at the third international gathering “the Basket and the Bow gathering” in 1989, a grand council was called and decided to discontinue the use of the word Berdache and the decision was made to use the term Two-Spirit, meaning a mixture of Man and Woman. Because it was

chosen by the grand council, there is self-determination to the term, even though it did not exist in the various traditional vocabularies (H.Pruden, personal communication, 2009).

It is problematic to attempt to classify Indigenous American gender identity using the same structures as Western nomenclature; as tribal terminology for gender identity roles differ across the country. Beatrice Medicine, a member of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe of South Dakota, provides a clarification of gender terminology within the Lakota tribe of South Dakota:

Wi a a (man); *winyan* (woman); *koshkalaka* (young man-youth); *wikoshkalaka* (young woman); *winkte* (Gay male); *bloka* (ultimate manliness); *bloka eglwa ke* (thinks being capable of doing manly things); *wean ketch* (ultimate womanhood); *winkte-winyan* (Gay female - first heard in 1993) (Medicine, 2002).

The existence of Two Spirit people is common across most Indigenous American tribes and communities across North America and the traditional social roles are as varied as the terminology of the names used to describe them. The existence of Two-Spiritedness is by no means an exclusively male-born domain; there are also prominent examples of female-born two spirits who have held important roles within the tribal hierarchy. As Roscoe suggests:

Such roles for males (and, likely, intersexed persons) have been documented in 155 tribes, with about one-third of these also having a named role for women who adopted a male lifestyle as well. ... Some Plains women, such as Running Eagle, or Pitamakan, of the Piegan, and Woman Chief of the Crows, who led war parties and married 4 women, earned places of honor in tribal memory. (Roscoe, 2004)

Indeed, as Scott suggests “a formal status also existed for females who undertook a man's lifestyle, becoming hunters, warriors, and chiefs” (2005). Traditionally, the decision of how a Two-Spirit was chosen is briefly outlined by Roscoe in *Native Americans* (2004):

Individuals who became Berdaches were typically identified in childhood by their families based on a marked preference for activities of the "opposite" sex. Since these inclinations were apparent before puberty, sexual preference was usually secondary in defining Berdaches. In some tribes, a boy's entry into Berdache status was formally marked. Shoshone, Ute, Kitanemuk, and Pima-Papago families staged a ritual test in which the boy was placed in a circle of brush with a bow and a basket (men's and

women's objects respectively). The brush was set on fire, and whichever object the boy picked up as he ran out determined his gender identity--if the bow, male; if the basket, Berdache. (Roscoe, 2004)

As with the Hijra of India, Katoeys of Thailand and the Fa'afafine of Samoa, two spirit people have generally existed in a paradoxical state of reverence and alienation within the broader society and the similarities with other gender fluid communities do not stop there. As with the Hijras and other Indian gender fluid devotees "... [B]erdache identity is widely believed to be the result of supernatural intervention in the form of visions or dreams, and/or it is sanctioned by tribal mythology" (Scott, 2005). Likewise the two spirit identity has similarities with the Fa'afafine of Samoa; "Male and female Berdaches are typically described in terms of their preference and achievements in the work of the opposite sex and/or unique activities specific to their identities", and as with the Katoeys; "Berdaches most often form sexual and emotional relationships with non-Berdache members of their own sex" (Ibid,2005).

Historically Two-Spirit people are renowned for their remarkable ability in craft. Their quillwork, beads, paint, pottery and basketry was much admired and it was considered high praise indeed if a woman's craft was compared favourably to that of a Berdache (Roscoe, 2004). They were also considered to have "mystical healing powers, and they were often taken into battle to care for the wounded" (Scott, 2005). Roscoe also suggests that Lakota warriors would have sex with the Two-Spirit '*winkte*' in order to increase their virility in battle.

Beatrice Medicine asserts that "At present, *winkte* individuals are generally accepted among the Lakota. There may be instances of ribaldness or teasing. Homophobia is generally not a part of ordinary Lakota life" (2002). However, with the advent of Western colonisation and the increased implementation of hetero-normative teaching the perception within traditional

Indigenous communities towards, Two-Spirit people slowly began to alter, as Medicine recounts:

After about 1950, homophobia on reservations and in Indian communities caused many Gay Indian males to move to San Francisco or other urban centers where Gay sub-culture provided some form of safety net. ... As in other parts of North America, Gay people came to San Francisco to follow a Gay life style and escape a growing homophobia due to Christian influences and the forced legal assimilation to Euro-American life ways due to education away from traditional life. (Ibid, 2002)

Tara Prince-Hughes, in her text *Contemporary Two-Spirit identity in the fiction of Paula Gunn Allen and Beth Brant* (1998), suggests that there is need within two-spirit communities to recapture and re-indentify with the traditional spiritual role of Two-Spirits. Within Indigenous American fiction there appears a trope of “re-establishing continuity with the past and of healing division within individuals and communities and across cultural boundaries” (Prince-Hughes, 1998). She asserts that there is a marked difference between Eurocentric perceptions of identity compared to those of Indigenous Americans. Prince-Hughes posits that, where late modern European-Americans are emphasising the instability of identity, Indigenous American writers are seeking “to recover an underlying sense of stability based on spiritual and cultural continuity and interconnection with the wider natural world” (Ibid, 1998). She goes on to clarify:

At a time when many European-American queer theorists are celebrating the instability of identity and the performativity of gender, Gay American Indians are revitalizing traditional Native cultural roles for two-spirit people, people who manifest both male and female traits and who were thus accorded unique responsibilities and status in many traditional American Indian societies ... Such traditions offer a stable, coherent pathway for the development of identities which include Homosexuality as part of their characteristics but which in their defining traits—spiritual calling, childhood and adult propensities for the play, work, dress, and behavior of the other sex, mediative and healing work, and a sense of community responsibility—are primarily social. Although individual tribal groups have developed their own variations on the roles, two-spirit traditions are remarkably similar in their core features, allowing for the development of a pan-Indian awareness of the two-spirit as an alternative to Western concepts of Gayness that are grounded

primarily in sexuality and removed from any broader cultural context. (Prince-Hughes, 1998)

It is with this in mind that Two-Spirit acceptance in the broader Indigenous American community has become an important issue. As I have mentioned previously in regards to Fa'afafines in Samoa, colonial ideologies pose a threat to traditional perceptions of these gender variant social and spiritual roles. As Prince-Hughes warns: "If you make people hate Berdaches ... they will lose their Indianness. The connection to the spirit world, and the connection between the world of women and men, is destroyed when the Berdache tradition declines ... We must recolonize ourselves" (Ibid, 1998).

At my meeting with Harlan Pruden in the diner in Manhattan, I was struck by his words concerning contemporary Two-Spirit identity; "We're native first, but it is a mistake to think we are a static culture" (H. Pruden, personal communication, 2009). I believe Harlan's words encompass all gender fluid people globally, in that our fluid gender identity, although not always primary in importance is what links us to one another. It is a mistake to think we are not also much more than our practical narratives however; we belong to various unique cultures, spiritualities, economic and geographical backgrounds, our broader lifeworlds. This fact should never be discounted when contemplating the discourse surrounding gender fluidity. As I have been demonstrating in this chapter, it is a mistake to assume gender fluid identifiers are a static and classifiable community. Individuals who exist under the umbrella term of gender fluidity share one common trait, as with Harlan's statement; we are by nature, fluid.

Chapter Five, the role of contemporary art as an emancipatory tool

“But then people have always known, at least since Moses denounced the Golden Calf, that images were dangerous, that they can captivate the onlooker and steal the soul” (Mitchell, 1994, p.2).

In this chapter I discuss the concept that visual art has a greater role in society than simply being of aesthetic value. I will argue that visual art is an integral tool in forming a coherent social identity especially in an image-heavy contemporary culture. This ability to affect public and private opinion holds an important key in the development of both contemporary art and the agency of gender fluid identity. As Nicholas Bourriaud suggests this change in the role of art has substantial ramifications for artists and audiences alike:

The possibility of a relational art (an art taking as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and private symbolic space), points to a radical upheaval of the aesthetic, cultural and political goals introduced by modern art.(Bourriaud,1998, p.14)

I will examine the theories of representation developed by Bourriaud (1998), W.J.Thomas Mitchell (1994) and Stuart Hall (1997) who all touch upon ways the socio-political power of visual representation empowers agency in subjugated cultures. In correlation to this, the theories of Jean-Francois Lyotard (1992) and Boris Groys (2008) will reiterate the need for emancipatory politics in contemporary society. I will also discuss Nayland Blake’s (cited in Rinder, 1995) ideas on the appropriation and recoding of traditionally hetero-normative imagery by queer artists. To illustrate this discussion I will present examples of art that use representation as both an educational and emancipatory tool which will in turn demonstrate my position regarding my creative practice/praxis which is developed further in Chapter Six.

Predominant in these examples are the artworks of openly gender fluid artists from around the world. Some of these artists I have met and corresponded with through my research

overseas, but many have been brought to my attention through my research and the suggestion of my peers. Positively, it appears that the inclusion of gender fluidity in contemporary art is on the increase and I am pleasantly surprised and heartened at the growing body of information that has become public, even within the period of my own research.

Throughout my research process the question often arises of whether 'art' is the most efficient process applicable to emancipatory politics. I find myself asking, 'Surely, wouldn't an essay, an editorial or a documentary be more likely to achieve one of my primary goals, being that of acknowledgement of gender fluid identity?' Initially it would seem the short answer would be that the mass media could be utilised as an extremely effective tool in these circumstances. However, if one takes a critical look at the paradigmatic position of contemporary mass media as explored by Boris Groys in *Art Power* it becomes apparent that " [b]y criticizing the socially, culturally, politically, or economically imposed hierarchies of values, art affirms aesthetic equality as a guarantee of its true autonomy" (2008, p.16). This cannot be said for mass media.

Groys discusses the relation between art and politics and in turn the inefficacy of the mass media to communicate in a socially authentic manner. Groys asserts that art as in politics seeks a legitimizing position in order to gain recognition in the public arena:

Art and politics are initially connected in one fundamental respect: both are realms in which a struggle for recognition is being waged. ... [T]his struggle for recognition surpasses the usual struggle for the distribution of material goods, which in modernity is generally regulated by market forces. What is at stake here is not merely that a certain desire be satisfied but that it also be recognised as socially legitimate. ... Both forms of struggle are intrinsically bound up with each other, and both have as their aim a situation in which all people with their various interests, as indeed also all forms and artistic procedures, will finally be granted equal rights. (Groys, 2008, p.14)

He points out that those in politics have for some time begun to utilise the mass media for their own gain, successfully co-opting its overwhelming power to mass produce imagery on a scale that cannot be matched by contemporary artists:

The contemporary mass media has emerged as by far the largest and most powerful machine for producing images – vastly more extensive and effective than our contemporary art system. We are constantly fed images of war, terror, and catastrophes of all kinds, at a level of production with which the artist with his artisan skills cannot compete. And in the meantime, politics has also shifted to the domain of media-produced imagery. ... If one adds images of politics and war to those of advertising, commercial cinema, and entertainment, it seems that the artist – the last craftsman of present day modernity – stands no chance of rivalling the supremacy of these image generating machines. (Groys, 2008, p.18)

However, Groys further elaborates on the limitations of the image producing capabilities of the mass media:

But in reality, the diversity of the images circulating in the media is highly limited. Indeed, in order to be effectively propagated and exploited in the commercial mass media, images need to be easily recognizable for the broad target audience, rendering mass media nearly tautological. (Groys, 2008, p.18)

Through this investigation of the limitations of mass media's ability to authenticate through representation, Groys eloquently presents an argument for the efficacy of art in 'reaching' a broader audience. Art has the ability to lend individual validity of discourse through the very nature of its ontology; that of a voice independent of market trends and consumerism and concerned primarily with communication and aesthetics, as he posits:

The issue here is not that curators and art initiators have exclusive and elitist tastes sharply distinct from those of the broad public, but that the museum offers a means of comparing the present with the past that repeatedly arrives at conclusions other than those implied by the media. (Ibid, 2008, p.21)

It is from this position that the argument for the social-political power of art is won, as in an increasingly media-cynical world, the individuality, craft and specialism of art invests it with authenticity and validity unhindered by consumerist agendas.

To approach the subject of representation of gender in the visual arts, it is first necessary to discuss the role of art in contemporary society. Art has always served as a device by which practitioners capture and frame a brief snippet of the culture and ideology of the period. Perhaps the cultural periods represented in art are best read by acknowledging rather what is *not* represented by the artist; what is left out of the picture plane or the sculptural representation. These are ontologies that do not sit comfortably within the dominant ideology of their times; they fall into the category of, to borrow Stuart Hall's term, "matter out of place" (1997, p.237).

Visual art, historically, has predominantly been used as a vehicle for representing important, worthy or favoured subject matters and has quietly excluded those subjects deemed unworthy, unimportant or taboo by the artists and their patrons (Kleiner, 2001). Any visual representation can only serve to present a brief glimpse of what the artist has deemed important at the time, so the choice of subject has necessarily to capture the ideal as succinctly as possible.

Before the industrial revolution, Western art predominantly focussed upon the higher echelon of society. The monarchy, members of the wealthy privileged classes and the religious hierarchy held control of the purse strings and therefore controlled the subject matter of artists of the period. This control is apparent in the artwork produced during this time. Painting, sculpture, literature and music focuses heavily upon grandiose religious, mythological and military themes. The common lifeworld of the working class was not deemed worthy of representation. Instead the privileged classes favoured images of power, glory (both ecclesiastic and militaristic) along with biblical and mythological heroism.

The dominant classes taste for utopianism was understandably the dominant paradigm in the arts. Hence, as I have suggested, the exclusionary tactics of visual art maintained the status quo. Everything was in its place; heroism and the romantic ideal of the privileged classes reigned in visual art and the commoner was left with no doubt as to where their place was; firmly out of the picture, unworthy of representation.

With the advent of industrialisation and the democratisation of mass communication through print, gradually the all-encompassing influence of the social elite was lessened in representational art. There was a push, in accordance with concepts first broached by the enlightenment for emancipation of a broader humanity, or as Jean- Francois Lyotard put it:

This idea of a possible, probable or necessary progress is rooted in the belief that developments made in the arts, technology, knowledge and freedoms would benefit humanity as a whole. ... all these tendencies were united in the belief that initiatives, discoveries and institutions only had legitimacy insofar as they contributed to the emancipation of humanity. (Lyotard, 1992, p.91)

This Cultural Revolution saw the French impressionists choosing more proletariat subject matter. Common men and women were depicted in the general course of their work days, sweeping, cooking and washing. These depictions, apart from approaching subjects previously unexplored in art, also acted as a window upon the social life of the average man and woman, presenting an overview of roles, fashions and position within modern society. These included obvious positions on the role of gender, race and class, which in turn aided in the classification and standardisation of modern identity. The focus on the proletariat by artists during early modernity had the unfortunate and unforeseen consequence of tying them into more and more classifiable cultural roles. As Nicholas Bourriaud explains:

Instead of culminating in hoped for emancipation, the advances of technologies and “Reason” made it that much easier to exploit the South of planet earth, blindly replace human labour by machines, and set up more and more sophisticated subjugation techniques, all through a general rationalisation of the production process. So the

modern emancipation plan has been substituted by countless forms of melancholy. (1998, p.12)

Thankfully contemporary art has inherited the role of art as social commentator, and often artists seek to redress the disempowering stereotypes of early modernity. However, in the dawn of a new century, visual art's position as the primary representation of daily life has been steadily usurped by the technological giant of mass media, aided by the advent of global communications systems including television and the internet. The power of television over contemporary lives is discussed at great length as early as the 1970's by Raymond Williams in his book *Television: technology and cultural form* (1974) in which he states that "Its [television's] power as a medium of social communication was then so great that it altered many of our institutions and forms of social relationships" (1974, p.3).

I posit that Western visual art's dominant role now appears to be to critique and evaluate contemporary society's complete adherence to commodity culture and the all encompassing mass media. Indeed, as if in response to Lyotard's call; "Artists and writers must be made to return to the fold of the community; or at least, if the community is deemed to be ailing, they must be given the responsibility of healing it" (Lyotard, 1992 p.14). Increasingly, contemporary artists approach their subject matter in a reflexive manner, inherently trying to engage with social issues and to strip away layers of traditionally accepted ideology in order to examine and critique existing societal conventions.⁷ In correlation, Mitchell states:

...the tensions between visual and verbal representations are inseparable from struggles in cultural politics and political culture. ... issues like "gender, race and class," the production of "political horrors," and the production of "truth, beauty, and excellence" all converge on questions of representation. (Mitchell, 1994, p 3)

⁷ In particular those negotiating gender fluidity, as I demonstrate later in this chapter.

The power that contemporary artists have inherited through this demarcation of roles is made apparent by Nicolas Bourriaud. As he highlights in *Relational Aesthetics*, artists have the singular ability to open personal dialogue with their audience, and do so far more successfully than other media:

Art (practices stemming from painting and sculpture which come across in the form of an exhibition) turns out to be particularly suitable when it comes to this hands-on civilisation, because it tightens the space of relations, unlike TV and literature which refer each individual person to his or her space of private consumption, and also unlike theatre and cinema which bring small groups together before specific, unmistakable images. (Bourriaud, 1998, pp 15-16)

Bourriaud further elaborates that there is the ‘possibility of immediate discussion’ when experiencing visual art that does not exist in the arena of film, TV, literature or theatre. “I see and perceive, I comment, and I evolve in a unique space and time” (Bourriaud, 1998 p.16).

It would be a mistake however to suggest that the use of art as an emancipatory or educational tool is by any means a new concept. Indeed for centuries art has been produced with a vast array of moralistic teachings and propaganda designed to evoke patriotic or spiritual fervour. It could be said that all religious art is created with the spiritual intent of emancipating the viewer from a ‘godless’ existence. It is for this reason that I am suggesting that art has an integral role, also, in the re-empowering or empowering gender fluid identity. If one aligns the subjugated culture of gender fluidity in a similar light to other historically subjugated or disempowered groups (such as African-Americans, the Gay community or Australia’s own Indigenous population), then it seems viable that the agency and social change forged through art for those cultures can then be applied in the same way to gender fluid concerns. This recoding of context is discussed in greater detail later in this chapter using the theories of queer theorist Nayland Blake (1995).

Many contemporary artists, speaking from lifeworlds other than the dominant Western paradigm have engaged with issues of emancipation through their creative practices, aware that the exposure of their artwork correlates to the visibility of their culture. This visibility includes highlighting inherent social issues within said cultures, which may otherwise remain unacknowledged. One such artist is Carrie Mae Weems, who "...uses narrative elements in her photography to examine class and gender issues through the window of personal experience and African-American heritage" ("Women in photography", n.d.). Weems herself states:

My responsibility as an artist is to work, to sing for my supper, to make art, beautiful and powerful, that adds and reveals; to beautify the mess of a messy world, to heal the sick and feed the helpless; to shout bravely from the rooftops and storm barricaded doors and voice the specificity of our historical moment (Ibid, n.d.).

Weems portrays her African-American culture through her photography, with clarity, positioning it within the existing framework of American society with all its inherent history of racism.



Figure 9: Carrie Mae Weems' *Mirror, Mirror* (Source: www.carriemaeweems.net, n.d.)

She *re*-presents black people with race discordant text, such as racist jokes, in order to wrestle African–American agency from its detractors back into the rightful ownership of the African–American community. It would be myopic, if not shameful, to pretend that the contemporary African-American lifeworld is somehow utopian and that racial slurs do not exist and do not negatively affect African-Americans. Weems acknowledges this ‘fact of life’ in her artwork, but divests it of its semiological power by recoding and transferring ownership of it to African-American culture. The double benefit to African-American people through this process is the acknowledgement of the wounds of racism, but furthermore that the scars are *owned* by African-Americans and can be worn with a sense of agency. It is important to note that although I am not examining African-American culture, I have chosen Weems’ work to act as a position that correlates with gender fluid culture, in that both cultures are familiar with hegemonic subjugation.

In the same way, artists such as Jenny Saville approach the traditional art world subject of the female nude and reinterpret visual discourse on beauty and the politics of the body. By reclaiming ownership of the female form from the romantic and fundamentally patriarchal idealism of early modernity and the equally insidious glossy women’s magazines of high modernity, Saville enables agency for her subject, emancipating it from stereotypical contemporary role models. These are not depictions of the coy or coquettish maids of French Impressionism, or the airbrushed and overtly sexualised manikins of the beauty magazines, but simply representations of ‘womanhood’ in its visceral reality. Saville’s paintings attempt to show woman as she sees herself, not woman as the patriarchal gaze dictates.



Figure 10: Jenny Saville's *Propped* (Source: arti.pbworks.com, n.d.)

This concept of art as a socio-political tool is discussed by Bourriaud claiming, “the role of artworks is no longer to form imaginary and utopian realities, but to actually be ways of living and models of action within the existing real, whatever the scale chosen by the artist” (Bourriaud, 1998, p.13).

In *Picture Theory*, Mitchell (1994) uses Spike Lee's film “*Do the Right Thing*”, as an example of the political power of representation. Mitchell explains the premise of the movie that hinges around racial tension in a predominantly African-American community. The representations of solely Italian-American celebrities on the wall of Sal's pizzeria in Brooklyn become the focus for escalating vitriolic arguments on race. Sal's continued dogged exclusion of black celebrities on his 'Wall of Fame' culminates in a race riot in which one of the black protestors is killed by police and in retaliation Sal's Pizzeria is burnt down by the remaining protestors.

Mitchell explains:

[T]he Wall is important to Sal not just because it displays famous Italians but because they are famous Americans ... who have made it possible for Italians to think of themselves as Americans, full-fledged members of the general public sphere. The wall is important to Buggin'Out [a black patron and later protestor] because it signifies exclusion from the public sphere. (Mitchell, 1994)

Mitchell highlights an interesting point in his analysis of *Do the Right Thing*; he focuses on the essential difference between Black 'pride' and general societies' acceptance of African-Americans. He mentions the wealth of 'black imagery' in the form of public advertisements using black sporting celebrities, but suggests that an empowering 'agency' for African-Americans cannot be found in corporate owned depictions of African-Americans. True agency can only be achieved through Black ownership of Black imagery. In other words: authentic African-American imagery included in the broader non-commercial social sphere would initiate an empowerment of racial inclusivity. This would be achieved by creating positive and inclusive ethnic identity within the broader social sphere.

In correlation, depictions of gender fluidity in contemporary movies such as *Boys don't cry*,(1999) *Transamerica* (2005), and *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (1994), whilst acknowledging gender variant identity and issues, are primarily designed and marketed for the entertainment and consumption of hetero-normative audiences. The actors seen on screen are simply that; actors, and do not identify (at least publicly) as gender fluid. Essentially, and perhaps cynically, these performances could be viewed as the contemporary version of white vaudevillian actors who donned 'black face' to represent African-Americans in the 1930's when there were plenty of capable black actors who could play the roles, but were excluded, ironically, because of their race.⁸

⁸ This is a theme I discuss in more detail regarding my series of paintings entitled 'Them', dealing with issues of alienation and agency in chapter six.

Taking this into consideration it becomes apparent that contemporary art should be recognised as playing an essential role in re-framing the politics of gender identity and should not simply be seen as a passive and innocuous representative tool. As Bourriaud maintains:

There is nothing more absurd either than the assertion that contemporary art does not involve any political project, or the claim that its subversive aspects are not based on any theoretical terrain. Its plan, which has just as much to do with working conditions and the conditions in which cultural objects are produced, as with the changing forms of social life, may nevertheless seem dull to minds formed in the mould of cultural Darwinism. (Bourriaud, 1998, p.14)

The necessity for art to play a role in the emancipation of gender fluid identity is encapsulated with clarity when Lyotard stresses the need; "...to make humanity adept at adapting itself to ways of feeling, understanding and acting which, in their extreme complexity, exceed its requirements" (1992, p 99). In other words, it is not simply enough to maintain change in the realm of short term socio-political goals, but essential that creative practitioners strive to set in motion positive change for the continued and ongoing benefit of future generations.

Feminist theories, through their active and oppositional stance against traditional patriarchy, have paved the way for queer theory and queer art. Malcolm Miles touches upon the concept of gender in his critique and exploration of art and design in contemporary public spaces. Whilst Miles is predominantly concerned with issues of feminism in these environments, parallels can be made when considering gender fluidity in the same context. He suggests that art and design in the public space is generally a masculine domain and through his text he considers how to achieve a feminist reclamation of these spaces. He advances Luce Irigaray's suggestion:

... to anyone who cares about social justice today, I suggest putting up posters in all public spaces with beautiful pictures representing the mother-daughter couple – the couple that illustrates a very special relationship to nature and culture. ... This can be

done before any reform of language, which will be a much longer process. (Irigaray cited in Miles, 1997, p.54)

Irigaray's quote, infers that visual representations of 'difference' hold a key to an immediacy of communication in public spaces. Though Irigaray uses the example of the mother-daughter representation, which stands in opposition to the traditional Judaeo-Christian pairing of mother and son, a similar use of gender ambiguous representation in public spaces may well raise corresponding reactions and achieve a correlatory goal. By exhibiting my own representations of gender fluidity, in the form of my paintings in a public gallery, my aim is to increase the visibility of gender fluid identity. Broad public awareness of my artworks and those of other gender fluid artists will publicise issues of gender identity and may go some way to altering the paradigmatic classificatory systems discussed by Foucault earlier in Chapter Two, a view that is shared by Miles:

A society's value structure is evident in its classifications, such as gender and other mutable definitions including health and sanity, as well as its cultural production and language. Western society's image of the feminine has changed in history, through shifting perceptions of physiology, and through assigned roles and images which are gender specific. (Miles, 1997, p.56)

It is this gender specificity that on one hand enables feminist discourse, as it gives 'the feminine' solid oppositional ground in the 'masculine' patriarchal environment. On the other hand, it may as a barrier to gender fluidity as it risks once again reinforcing a binary landscape. The inclusion of yet another specific gender through the act of representation is necessary for the empowerment and emancipation of those individuals who do not identify as either male or female in the public realm.

At this point it is necessary to reintroduce my creative practice in regards to this discourse. The goal of my practical work, that is, my paintings, is to reinvigorate the broader acknowledgement of gender fluid identifying individuals. The inclusion of representations of gender fluid identity, even on the smallest scale, ostensibly queers the landscape for future

artists approaching identity in their practices. The reinterpretation of gender can only serve to unbalance the existing predominantly binary hetero-normative model of representing gender. The re-codification of symbology that has traditionally been used to represent hetero-normativity may be used as a tool to bring gender fluidity into focus for the art viewer.

This idea of a gender ambiguous or gender ‘queer’ creative voice is elaborated upon by Lawrence Rinder and Nayland Blake in *In a different light – visual culture, sexual identity, Queer practice* (1995). Lawrence Rinder at time of publishing was curator for Twentieth-Century Art at the University Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive of the University of California at Berkeley. And Nayland Blake, an artist himself, is also an art critic and curator of queer exhibitions. Blake has primarily dealt with issues of Gay and Lesbian art in the contemporary realm, however in this text he discusses the concept of queerness in a way which correlates closely, and often overlaps with issues of gender fluid identity.

Rinder in his Introduction points out the problematic concepts when dealing with queer art, in that there is an essence of fluidity within queer art that negates firm parameters:

If identifiable Gay or Lesbian aesthetic styles or sensibilities exist, they exist in multiplicity, and in complex intersection with mainstream arts practice. They are emanations of complex, fluid sociological constructs, never simply Gay or Lesbian. Just as the manifestations of sexual desire and behaviour are multifarious and mutable, so, too, are the reflections of those desires and behaviours in art. (Rinder cited in Blake, 1995, p.6)

Rinder goes on to suggest that not all queer art is produced by Gay and Lesbian artists, that straight artists are not automatically excluded, as signifying languages being used are not only the domain of Homosexuality:

An ostensibly straight artist may identify with any one of numerous conditions – sexual or otherwise – central to the experience of Gay men or Lesbians. He or she may create a work of art that contributes to the cultural dialogue of both the Gay and Lesbian communities and of the culture as a whole. Drag, for example, is situated primarily within the experience of Gay men and Lesbians because the culture at large

identifies Homosexuality with gender transgression. However, drag and its implications pervade the culture as a whole. Drag points toward the fact that any gender position is accomplished through role-playing and imitation, as if to say, “Honey, we’re all in drag!” (Rinder cited in Blake, 1995, p.6)

Rinder’s reference to drag strongly connects to the performative nature of gender discussed by Judith Butler earlier in chapter two. The individual performs their gender, as a learnt role; therefore all expressions of gender identity in the visual arts and the broader community are performative and not necessarily connected to the individual’s sexuality.

Rinder’s assertion is that the ontology of being ‘queer’, in fact diminishes the divide between Gay and straight artists, uniting them in a common state of ‘queerness’. “Queerness, as opposed to Gayness or Lesbianism – or for that matter, straightness – is becoming a term which subverts or confuses group definition rather than fostering it: queer identity is spontaneous, mutable, and inherently political” (Rinder cited in Blake, 1995, p.7).

Nayland Blake, in his curatorial essay for *In a different light* (1995) touches on the difficulty in presenting a ‘queer’ semiology in contemporary art:

Those on the outside have to struggle to find their face in the distorting mirror of mainstream discourse. This struggle has a deeper meaning for queers since they do not have recourse to the usual alternative repositories of meaning: religious, ethnic or familial heritages. (Blake, 1995, p.12)

So where artists concerning themselves with traditional subjects have a breadth of history, tradition and mythology, artists who focus on ‘queerness’ have few if any traditional vantage points. The enforced silences within traditional discourse as discussed by Foucault (1978) have all but eliminated a coherent queer heritage.

Bourriaud also entertains the analogy of art and history as being an ongoing ‘game’, which practitioners enter and leave adding to and changing and adding to the game, but never ending it:

...the essence of humankind is purely transindividual, made up of bonds that link individuals together in social forms which are invariably historical (Marx: the human essence is the set of social relations). There is no such thing as any possible "end of history" or "end of art", because the game is being forever re-enacted, in relation to its function, in other words, in relation to the players and the system which they construct and criticise. (Bourriaud, 1998, p.18)

In this sense Bourriaud is suggesting the individual artist enters the 'game' of art and by doing so alters the trajectory and rules of the game. Relating this to queer artists, suggests that levels of political awareness and social action can therefore be introduced to existing art structures, essentially changing and perhaps levelling the playing field of contemporary societal consciousness.

Blake is in accord when he indicates why queer identity holds such a tenuous position in the broader perception of representative contemporary art. He suggests the very nature of a community that has no broadly acknowledged heritage must fight to find or appropriate stable foundations, using fragments borrowed from the general community:

The extremely provisional nature of queer culture is the thing that makes its transmission so fragile. However, this very fragility has encouraged people to seek retroactively its contours to a degree not often found in other groups. Queer people must literally construct the houses they will be born into, and adopt their own parents. The idea that identity and culture are nonorganic constructs is also one of the most important characteristics of postmodernism. ... in certain ways, the discourse of the postmodern is the queer experience rewritten to describe the experience of the whole world.

From the margins, queers have picked those things that could work for them and recoded them, rewritten their meanings, opening up the possibility of viral reinsertion into the body of general discourse. (Blake, 1995, P.12)

This recoding and rewriting of current discourses that Blake introduces has become of intrinsic importance for me whilst writing this dissertation. It offers a 'correlation' of discourses, which allows me to appropriate and borrow from feminism and queer theory in order to discuss gender fluidity in a way that can be understood via a bricolage of experience.

The emancipatory political imagery surrounding the GLBT movement, the Feminist movement and the Black Power movement can be partially appropriated, as its inherent symbolism is that of emancipation, which is central to my discourse on gender fluidity. It is appropriate and valid for me to include any representation of sex, or surgery or any imagery alluding to gender bending, struggle or alienation etc., as all of these disparate concepts also relate to gender fluidity. The appropriation and re-codification of these concepts and imagery is both valid and necessary in the light of the non-engagement of the broader mass media in relation to the subject of gender fluidity. I would argue the appropriation and re-codification of these concepts and symbols is absolutely necessary for the survival of gender fluid representation. If the mass media, a tool of hetero-normative hegemony, will not represent gender fluid identity in its newspaper and television programs, then to create a viable history and mythology for gender fluid identifiers, creative practitioners (such as myself) are obligated to do so through our creative practices.

As Blake puts it:

To be queer is to cobble together identity, to fashion provisional tactics at will, to pollute and deflate all discourses. Historically, this activity has been a possibility for either the upper class, whose reworkings of high culture have often served as a form of social resistance. At various times queer practice has been associated with both the upper and lower class positions. Because queers do not share a set of physical characteristics, we have also had to have greater recourse to semiotic means to express our tribal affiliations. We resort to dress codes, colors[sic], earrings, references to tell tale cultural interests, whether Judy or Joan Jett (Blake, 1995, p.13).

In an attempt to create a signifying language for gender fluid identity in visual art, the answer may be found in Blake's suggestion of a 'cobbling together', appropriation, recoding and rewriting of traditional representations of gender in art, may inform the creation of a viable representational language. A language that mirrors the paradox of gender fluidity, in that it is part of its surroundings, enough to be understood by the viewer, and sitting outside of convention enough to be honest to its own amorphous nature.

Approaching the subject of emancipatory politics in art is essential, as is discussing how other disenfranchised cultures have utilised representation to empower change (Thomas & Rappaport, 1996, pp.317-337). However, to amalgamate these concepts it is more useful to examine how gender fluid artists are already communicating these issues within their own contemporary art practices. In this section of the chapter, I will present the artworks, thoughts and lifeworlds of several gender fluid artists from around the world.

In 2009, a groundbreaking exhibition of GLBT and Intersex artists was hosted by the Glasgow Museum of Art in Scotland, featuring the works of luminary queer artists such as David Hockney and Robert Mapplethorpe. The exhibition entitled *sh[OUT]: Contemporary art and human rights* showcased artworks which were primarily concerned with queer identity and the push toward a more inclusive society. Among the artists were a number of visual arts practitioners who fall within my umbrella term of gender fluid. Ins A Kromminga, Grayson Perry and Del LaGrace Volcano all exhibited artwork specific to the concepts of their subjective gender identities.

Ins A Kromminga is a German born intersex artist whose work often addresses the topic of intersexual identity, as Ze states in the GOMA catalogue:

The topics of my work stem from my personal experiences as an intersex person. Both the creative and political inform my practice. As an activist in liberation networks such as the Berlin-based non-government organization TransInterQueer and Organization Intersex International (OII), I am part of a movement to introduce the concept of human rights for intersex people (GoMA, 2009).

Kromminga's painting in the *sh[OUT]* exhibition explores some of the imagery surrounding societies' perceptions of intersex people, highlighting the sensationalist approach traditional representations take when discussing the topic of intersexuality:

The mythology of hermaphrodites informs the way that society continuously fails to see intersex people. We are seen as either god-like creatures, for example in Ovid's

Metamorphoses, or monstrous beings, referred to as having a disorder. Both viewpoints allow society to avoid examining its own values of what constitutes “normal” (GoMA, 2009, p 28).

Kromminga is in accord with the previously discussed gender activists and asserts that there is a real need to navigate away from gender dichotomous narratives, which are inherently damaging for gender fluid people. Ze argues “... Acceptance should not have to come at the cost of our physical and mental integrity” (2009).

Also in the *sh[OUT]* exhibition was Grayson Perry. Perry is a well known British artist, renowned for his contemporary ceramic works and his open approach to his very public position as a transvestite (Jones, 2007). He also starred in Channel Four’s documentary *Why men wear frocks*, (Crombie, 2005) in which he explores his compulsion to dress as a woman.

Perry’s ceramic work in the *sh[OUT]* exhibition ‘*Transvestite looking in mirror*’(2009) has an intentionally iconographic feel, reminiscent of religious artifacts. Perry explains his decision to present his work this way:

I have always loved the icons of Orthodox Christianity, the fact that the very artwork itself is venerated and kissed. This ritual of imbuing an object with sacred power is familiar to the fetishist. Every transvestite has favourite moments with magical articles in the transformative process, the application of mascara, zipping up a frock or donning a wig. At their bedroom alters [sic], with the sacraments of femininity, transvestites commune with a mislaid part of their own spirit (GoMA, 2009, p.38).



Figure 11: Grayson Perry's *Transvestite Looking in the Mirror* (Source: freeartlondon, n.d.)

Due to hegemonic restraint, gender fluid people (including transgendered, intersex, cross dressers etc) throughout history have been excluded from being immortalised in visual art. Grayson Perry's work, in my opinion epitomises the successful re-codification of existing artistic tropes as one could imagine; an arts history that re-included images of gender fluid subjects.

Alongside Grayson Perry and Ins A Kromminga, Del LaGrace Volcano also participated in the *sh[OUT]* exhibition, presenting an image, *Herm Torso* (1999). Del LaGrace Volcano is

an openly transgendered and intersex artist and author of *The Drag King Book* (Halberstom, 1999). Volcano states on Hir website:

As a gender variant visual artist I access 'technologies of gender' in order to amplify rather than erase the hermaphroditic traces of my body. *I name myself*. A gender abolitionist. A part time gender terrorist. An intentional mutation and intersex by design, (as opposed to diagnosis), in order to distinguish my journey from the thousands of intersex individuals who have had their 'ambiguous' bodies mutilated and disfigured in a misguided attempt at 'normalization'. I believe in crossing the line as many times as it takes to build a bridge we can all walk across (Volcano, 2005).

Volcano's photographic work firstly deals with issues of gender and queer identity and secondly attempts to privilege Hir own practical narrative, distinguishing Hirsself from others who identify as gender fluid. Hir photograph *Herm Torso* was exhibited at the Glasgow Museum of Art's *sh[OUT]* exhibition which was concerned with issues of the regulation of gender and sexuality in society.



Figure 12: Del LaGrace Volcano's Herm Torso (Source: GoMA, 2009)

'Herm Torso' was originally entitled "Hermaphrodite Torso" when it was created in 1999 as part of the series Transgenital Landscapes. My intention was to problematise the notion of bodily truths and at the same time demonstrate how (physiological) sex is as much of a cultural construct as gender. ... Herm Torso speaks to the truth of corporeal realness, ambiguity and liminality (GoMA, 2009, p.48).

Far from trying to politely navigate around the complexities of the social mores of gender physiognomy, Volcano presents the unavoidable reality of the intersex body. The viewer has no choice but to be confronted by that which has been absent in art; a true representation of physical gender fluidity, stripped metaphorically of all the trappings of moral values and

institutional dogma that has kept images like this hidden previously. Volcano's image is shameless, as it should be, and it reinforces my argument there is space for an open and honest embracing of gender ambiguity. Stuart Hall (1997) referred to floating signifiers as "matter out of place", for me Volcano's image is 'matter rightfully reinstated'.

GoMA's *sh[OUT]* exhibition has been an important event for me when considering my own work. The correlatory aspects of reflexivity and praxis within the exhibition have been instrumental in my own engagement with my creative practice. This awareness of other gender fluid artists feeds my own artwork, through a broadened sense of shared signifiers.

Rich Kereopa – Auckland, New Zealand

Richard Tawhanga Kereopa is a gender fluid artist working in Auckland, New Zealand. Rich defines himself as 'whakawahine', which is a Maori term that describes an individual as 'being like a woman'. Rich was raised in a small village called Ohinemutu, centrally located in Rotorua, one of New Zealand's primary tourist destinations.

My whanau, or extended family are direct descendants of my tribe and sub-tribe's chiefly line, which enables us to live in the heart of our village. My siblings and I are all adopted, with my elder sister being my father's biological niece, and myself and my younger sister relating to my father through broader inter-tribal links. My younger brother is Samoan and my mother is Pakeha, or non-Maori. In this sense my immediate family are a complete mish-mash of cultural identities. Even though my father was quite well educated, and played for the New Zealand rugby league team in the 70s, he found it really difficult to find work in Rotorua (R.Kereopa, personal communication, 2010).

Rich explained to me that ze had always aspired to be an artist because it was the one thing ze could do that surpassed people's expectations of hir abilities. Having been subjected to both overt and subtle racist stereotyping, creating artwork was an oasis that stood outside the daily reality of the racial paradigms of New Zealand at the time. As a teenager, having to constantly deal with the negativity surrounding hir cultural identity fortunately lessened any anxiety ze had about sexual preference and ze came out as gay to hir family when he was 18.

Identifying as whakawahine, Rich suggests that ze is able to be a whole person, rather than the fragmented person that ze has always felt to have been:

I think that as a Maori man, I have developed quite successful ways of slotting into preferred social norms in order to become invisible. I'm acutely aware of the fiction in the role I play in my day to day life. Generally, I am regarded as being quite masculine and am perceived as well dressed, socially alert, funny, and straight; I know this because I am particularly self conscious and adept at monitoring my behaviour. I find ways to avoid being anything other than 'normal' in order to feel like I fit in (R. Kereopa, personal communication, 2010).

Alternately, Rich explained to me that hir feminine aspect allows a freedom that is unattainable in hir masculine life due to a history of racial objectification:

As a woman, however, my self-consciousness flies out the window and I'm impossible to ignore. I love that I have the ability to transform into the person I aspire to be. This is a perception that is perhaps at the core of my artistic practice and my gender performance work. As a man I hate it when people look at me, it makes me worry that I've done something wrong. Coming from a tourist hot-spot I learnt quite young that I was always on show, so in my daily life I have always tried my best to avoid being seen. My daily performance of a masculine gender stands in contrast to the feminine, more emotionally expressive and confident person I feel I am, and in my art I try to expose this internal disjuncture (Kereopa R, personal communication, 2010).

Many of Kereopa's critiques externalise representations of identity, and hir Facebook performance work in particular scrutinises the hegemonic baggage ze carries and how ze has internalised negative perceptions of self, and how these contribute to the person ze appears to be. "I want to entice viewers to look beyond the surface of my outward persona; at the things that lie beneath my apparent identity, so I play out a range of drag-queen personas on my 'fan page'." (Ibid, 2010) Rich explains that most of these personas are one-dimensional in that they only have a singular intent, or narrowed point of view. "Depending on how I feel about myself, they prattle between each other lots, or often not at all. They are like fragmented aspects of my colonised self" (Ibid, 2010).



Figure 13: *Post post coloneyes will cry no longer*

(source: <http://www.facebook.com/EmoTingFAB>)

Rich also discusses the impetus to perform hir gender in an online and therefore very public arena. Ze feels there is a need to expose the ‘fierce’ nature of hir Maori femininity. Ze sees Maori women as being far more assertive, vocal and authoritarian than either Maori men, or non-Maori women:

I think that by embracing the feminine aspects of my identity, I can be more honest in my art making process, and in turn, be more honest with my audience. Performing gender, especially online, is a way for me to expose how much of myself I actually hide in my daily life; all those hidden qualities that I am afraid to show for fear of being seen. When I perform a feminine gender, I feel as though I empower myself (Ibid, 2010).

Rich explains that in traditional Maori society, artisans had a spiritual role and were the part of the community able to stand both inside and out; able to make statements about things

happening within their communities and then provide spiritual guidance. This is the space ze likes to inhabit because it validates the things ze does from both sides of the Aotearoa cultural spectrum:

To me, the production of art gives shape and form to a vague space, just beyond sight in the future. I think art provides a contemplative space to negotiate ways forward and help affirm the thoughts and feelings of people who experience art. I used to think that I made art because I couldn't do anything else, now however, I realise it is a compulsion. Often the production of art is the only way for me to communicate the frustration I experience as a marginalised societal participant (Ibid, 2010).

In hir work Rich performs the Maori oral history that recounts the transition of Hine-titama, the first woman, to Hine-nui-te-po, the goddess of darkness, “which to me was essentially an act of empowerment and self-determination”(Ibid, 2010). Rich supports the role of art as being able to activate social change and by performing in drag feels empowered to explain life from a Maori perspective, inclusive of notions of gender fluidity in pre-colonial Maori society. Rich suggests that making art in drag attains a license that enables hir to operate outside of accepted social behaviours. “In this way, I very simply address tricky social issues that are not so easy to discuss in general society because people expect drag queens to say and do uncomfortable things”(R. Kereopa, personal communication, 2010).

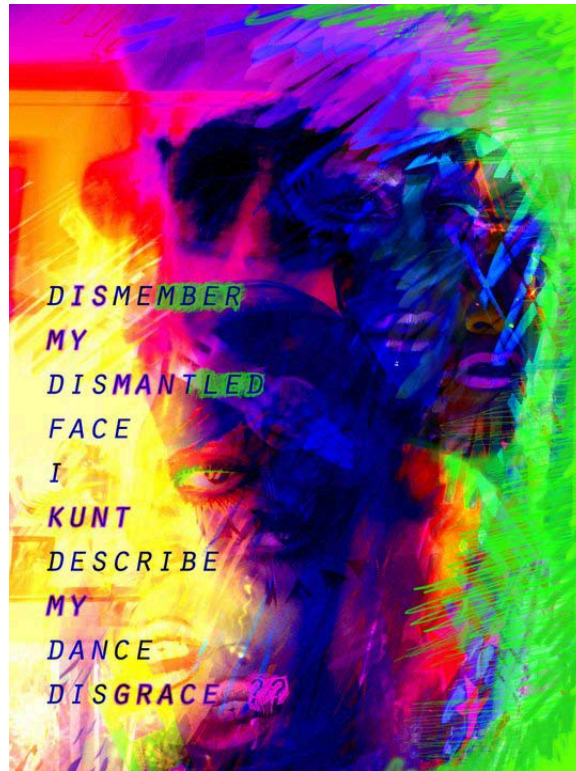


Figure 14: Dismember my dismantled face... Rich Kereopa 2010 (source:

<http://www.facebook.com/EmoTingFAB>)

On the flip-side, however, Rich suggests that being in drag often has the positive effect of empowering viewers of the work to be more relaxed, and perhaps more open with hir. “I’m fairly pleasant and engaging when in drag; I’m not scary at all, so I often have viewers that come to me and tell me that they identify with the gender confusion I experience” (Ibid 2010).

When asked about contemporary views within Maori culture and whether there is a dawning re-acceptance of traditional Maori gender ambiguity, Rich responded that it remains a very problematic issue:

I want to believe that because it’s 2010, society is more accepting of gender ambiguity, but I can’t truly convince myself of that. This uncertainty, in part, comes from my perspective of post-post-colonial Maori beliefs surrounding the pre-colonial existence of a third gender in Maori society. Often I hear remarks from Maori leaders

who reinforce the limited perception that Maori were the people in ancient Polynesia with only two distinct genders. This goes against all evidence to the contrary. (Ibid, 2010)

(I think its is important here to make note that Western colonisation may well have played a role in these strikingly hetero-normative revisions to traditional Maori narratives.)

I think that I'm lucky that in my own village I have mana, or prestige, for being one of a handful of traditional weavers actively involved in community projects, but when it comes to my gender, I'm not sure it would go down to well if I turned up at our tribal meeting house in five wigs, a face-full of make-up and a pair of stilettos. Of course, one day in the near future I'll have to test that theory just to be sure (Ibid, 2010).

For me the significance of Rich Kereopa's creative practice lays in the strength of hir cultural conviction. Ze has the benefit of a pre existing and very firm cultural foundation from which to position hirself as both Maori artist and gender fluid community member. Rich's unapologetic approach to performing hir 'fierce' nature is refreshingly devoid of the inherent shame that could so easily colour artwork from a subjugated practical narrative.

Dan Taulapapa McMullin – Los Angeles and Samoa

Dan Taulapapa McMullin, introduced earlier in Chapter Four, is a Samoan artist living in Los Angeles who identifies as Fa'afafine, Samoa's traditional third gender. His multi disciplinary arts practice includes painting, sculpture, textiles, performance and poetry. Dan's subject matter is heavily influenced by issues of sovereignty in Samoa and the inherent political nature of representations of his culture. When I met with Dan in Los Angeles early in 2010 I asked him about his views on non Samoan representations of traditional Samoan life, such as the National Geographic documentary on the Fa'afafine, *Paradise Bent* (Croall, 1999). Dan suggested that, to Samoans most media representations are seen as political acts:

Any type of representation good, bad or indifferent, accurate or inaccurate is seen as a political act. It's more readily seen as a political act by the colonised subject than it is by the foreign media. The [foreign] media are not interested in politics per se, but they create politics, they create the politics that the people they represent have to deal with (McMullin, personal communication, 2010).

Perhaps in response to the often inaccurate portrayal of Samoan identity and Fa'afafine identity by the foreign media, Dan approaches issues of his subjective cultural identity from a uniquely Samoan perspective. He chooses issues that would, and have been, almost certainly overlooked by foreign media. His artistic practice allows him free reign to discuss cultural matters that have been disregarded by the broader media:

Having freedom as an artist gives you a great deal of intellectual freedom, because you are able to go where angels fear to tread; where some other historians don't go, because it is so politically charged or because it doesn't have political charge (McMullin, 2010).

In his artist's statement Dan hints at the plurality of his identity and the decision to embrace all facets of his artistic production:

I am like a seabird going back and forth between two nests in North America and the Pacific Islands. I also live between the worlds of men and women as a Samoan fa'afafine our traditional category of sexual and gender liminality. And my artistic production alternates between narrative and imagery: the story in the portrait, the landscape in the poem (McMullin, n.d.).

Further to this he discusses the need for a level of praxis within his creative practice, suggesting that Western colonial concepts of art and spirituality, being inherently dualistic, are a hindrance to the perception of what he does as an artist:

My latest work explores a relationship between pre-colonial Pacific Islander interpretations of the body and its narrative, and my own today. The Western interpretation of Oceania art, an interpretation which I am re-defining as well as operating outside of, has focused on its abstract visual methods. I, instead, begin with narrative, on the assumption that all abstract information in traditional Oceania art is performative and creative of a meta-body for the artist performer. I do not see these works as art as the West calls it, or even as spiritual, since both positions engage in a removal, are monotheistic and therefore colonial. Because my work researches outside the structure of Western culture, while searching within it, it is anti-colonial in a revolutionary position between nothingness and being (Ibid, n.d.).

When I met him, Dan spoke of his relationship with Samoa with a great fondness. This closeness and familiarity with his culture is certainly manifest within both his paintings and poetry. Dan's book of poetry *A Drag Queen named Pipi* (McMullin, n.d.) explores many of the facets of both Samoan life and also Fa'afafine life and experiences. As in this, the title poem from the book:

A Drag Queen named Pipi

Shoulder to shoulder
 My sisters and I
 Holding our lighters high
 Filing past the gray gardens
 Past the hollow beds
 Don't fall in
 We're just here to steal wreaths
 To stock our flower shops
 Don't mind us
 Don't fall in
 We won't help you out
 Your guess is as good as mine
 Single file through the gray gardens
 Meeting your sons after the bars close
 After the good girls go home
 After the police have turned in for the night
 Or come to join us in the gray gardens
 In the bone bar
 Looking for our dogs
 Your sons
 Your guess is as good as mine
 Your sons
 In the bone bar

(McMullin, n.d).

Much of Dan Taulapapa McMullin's art, both visual and textual has a distinct sense of melancholy for a nostalgic remembering of perhaps an easier life in Samoa. There is an overall feeling of pleasant easy going camaraderie in his depictions of Fa'afafine experience. For me, this stands as a marked opposition to my own memories of my early Transgendered life, which were filled with self doubt, alienation and occasionally even violence. Dan's artwork expresses easily the inclusive, albeit mischievous, nature of Fa'afafine existence

within broader Samoan culture. His artworks and poetry stand as a testament of a culture that not only accepts, but embraces, gender ambiguity and by doing so encourages the healthy self esteem that is mirrored within Dan's creative practice. I can only surmise that the inclusive nature of Samoan culture has enabled gender fluid people, such as Dan, the space and security to express themselves creatively without fear of alienation or ridicule. I would argue that this level of gender fluid acceptance is paramount should our community thrive within a broader hetero-normative society. As I have argued previously, the re-inclusion of gender fluid identity representation can only serve to strengthen the societal position of gender fluid people in the broader community.

In conclusion, I have presented a handful of gender fluid artists and their artwork which becomes a vehicle for their practical narratives. These gender fluid narratives both acknowledge broader lifeworld practices, and readily use them as stable foundations from which to re-present issues pertaining to gender identity. As Blake has suggested, there is a strength to be found in re-codifying and re-presenting cultural texts for the purpose of communicating about gender identity. New facets of ambiguous or fluid gender are fostered through the use of visual art, far more it appears, than through the capitalistic confines of the mass media. As Bourriaud suggests, the use of art, set apart from mainstream media, allows a level of autonomy and therefore agency in art as a valid educational communicative practice.

Chapter Six - Achieving praxis in a contemporary creative practice.

This chapter is both conclusion and consummation of the larger body of this dissertation. The previous chapters are condensed and incorporated into the resulting physical artworks presented in this final section. Throughout this dissertation I have expounded the necessity of reflexivity, praxis and the benefit of lifeworld narratives, in this chapter these concepts are put into practice within the body of artwork that I have produced in conjunction with the research undertaken and presented previously. My aim with these artworks, especially the portraiture, is to present practical lifeworld narratives, both my own and those of the many gender fluid individuals I have painted. I view these works as a culmination of my experience of each individual and an understanding of the information I was privy to both through conversation and the shared knowledge of what it means personally to identify as gender fluid.

One of the most trying issues I have had throughout the course of researching gender has been that of my personal engagement with the performance of my gender identity. Through my research I am constantly being reminded of how other people react to their gender identity constructs and the political mine-field that surrounds those decisions. Identity constructs including the covert cross-dressing of some transvestites, through to the daily trials of the openly transgendered and intersex, and with them reactions and consequences both from the general public and from within the broader gender fluid community.

I often find myself weighing up the pros and cons of performing my perceived gender identity; for if I am as I believe myself to be, a gender fluid person, then why am I not actively performing as such? Why am I not wearing garments that are not traditionally masculine? I argue with myself that surely I should be 'outing' myself as gender fluid in my mannerisms or being overtly gender transgressive? With each of these difficult questions that

I ask myself comes an equally problematic parallel question; If authenticity and honesty are so important to me, then why do I feel the need to perform my gender identity? Isn't just being gender fluid enough? Is it really necessary to physically broadcast my gender identity to the world, through my manner, dress and actions?

One answer may be that, as with much of my life, I am bound to my experiences through sheer repetition: 'I have always behaved this way therefore I shall always behave this way'. The knowledge of my variant gender identity is both intellectual and at the same time is a lived experience. My performance of gender has been forged from a lifetime of acquiescing to a dominant paradigm of hetero-normative enculturation. As such I have questioned its roles and its performances primarily on an intellectual level but have avoided taking to the 'gender queer stage' for any length of time because of the inherent futility of the performance itself. I am keenly aware of how fraudulent my acting a role would be and indeed has been in the past. Butler suggested that "Identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (2006, p.34). I would agree insofar as the expressions of my gender performance have constituted how I am perceived by others, though my reflexive knowledge of my performance negate those perceptions for myself.

I am and have always been perceived by others as a man. My anatomy possesses no signifiers that would dispute the fact. I am regarded physically as being at the more masculine end of maleness; I'm heavy set, somewhat muscular and hairy with male pattern baldness. Physically there are no clues to me being anything other than that which I appear superficially.

For me to play the role that my gender fluid identity presupposes, would be in many ways an exercise in alienation. Because of a representative system mired in thousands of years of dimorphic tradition, the performance of my true gender identity could only be seen as

outlandish, an extreme by which to be revolutionary or combative. Not, as I would wish, to just 'be', to simply exist as I am 'within'. I do not wish to be a contemporary pariah or, to be a semiotic warrior for gender identity politics (however worthy these goals may be for others). I would simply like to live as I know myself to be, as a gender fluid person. I am aware that at this juncture in Western culture that this goal cannot be achieved without attracting unwanted attention and hence I settle for the closest alternative, to remain as I am; performing the role that has become familiar, a role no less false for its familiarity. I am left therefore with a desire to institute social change through my visual arts practice, as the open performance of my gender fluidity would be far less effective and quite possibly disadvantageous. Much of what I need to say can better be said through text and visual representation and will undoubtedly be viewed by a wider audience and possibly received in a far less socially confronting manner and arguably can elicit social change as I hope to demonstrate below.

The reason I have chosen painting as my method of engaging with the concept of creating a signifying language for gender fluidity is twofold. Firstly, painting, in and of itself, is a global phenomenon and as such is a recognisable visual language in most cultures. As such, images of painting become an equitable medium and are broadly accessible to the majority regardless of ethnicity or social standing. The broader 'language' of painting is understood by most people in most cultures. This accessibility is important to me as it aids in the dissemination of the discourse I present in the paintings. Referring to the concepts proposed by Nayland Blake (1995), it is endemic of queer art to recode and rewrite existing tropes for the advancement of queer representation. In the same way a signifying language for gender fluid identity can be cobbled together and reworked from existing gender dimorphic imagery, provisionally fashioning tactics to empower gender fluid promotion.

Secondly, I have been a visual artist for over two decades, working primarily in paint on canvas and as such I have developed a wide range of technical skills and an ability to communicate a representative discourse through my work. For the past six years I have been developing a signifying language through the use of appropriated images used in paint collage. I have incorporated various mainstream images such as children's book illustration, advertising imagery, portraiture, and figure studies, plus images taken from fine art and advertising typography. I utilise these seemingly disparate representations by painting them on a single pictorial plane, where the images play against each other to create a multi-layered and multi-textual narrative. Through this polysemic mix of text and imagery I am able to express complicated ideas in a manner that can be read by the viewer on a plurality of levels. Because much of the imagery in the paintings is from mainstream advertising or storybook illustration, it is easily recognisable to the viewer and each image holds the accumulated connotations of its genre. By positioning one genre against another, it instigates a visual dialogue between the associated genres, which the viewer can decode according to their own subjective interpretation of recognised styles of imagery. The use of carefully chosen text creates a point of initial signification; in much the same way as titling a painting allows the viewer an idea of how to position the subject matter in a broader discourse.

Initially when approaching the practical aspect of this dissertation, that is, the paintings for the final exhibition,⁹ I felt inhibited by the need to produce a body of work which spoke to the textual component of the dissertation. I did not want the paintings to be solely illustrative as I think there is a necessity to allow the paintings to exist primarily as works of art, whilst still retaining a relevance to the presented discourse. Because of the wide scope of the topics discussed throughout this dissertation it became apparent that a single thematic body of

⁹ To be held at the Oats Factory Gallery in Carlisle, Western Australia in July 2011.

artwork would not be sufficient to discuss the multi-faceted nature of gender fluidity. I felt it necessary to speak of three core aspects of gender fluid lifeworld as I see it, namely the inclusive nature of the umbrella term 'gender fluid', the exclusionary politics perpetrated by the authorities and mass media, and finally my own perception of my subjective gender fluid lifeworld. To encompass this varied visual exploration of gender fluidity I simplified the collection of paintings and images to the titles *Us*, *Them* and *Me*.

The three aspects of this large body of paintings examine contemporary and historic representations of people who position themselves, or have been positioned, outside of the traditional binaries of masculinity and femininity.

The 'Us' series of portraits are a collection of representations of people who either identify as gender fluid or live traditionally outside the traditional Western paradigm of binary gender. These portraits include many of the people from my research trip including Transgendered individuals, the Hijra from India, Ladyboys of Thailand, Two Spirit identifying people from Indigenous North America, Fa'afafine from Samoa and many others who do not fit neatly in a binary gender construction. The portraits are designed as a document to re-include gender fluid identity in the typically binary representation of gender in traditional art. The works are a culmination of three years academic research and my extensive trans-global research journey. The title "Us" is intended to act as an indication of inclusivity, informing the viewer that these people are just everyday human beings and ostensibly no different than themselves on any practical level. One of the most important aspects of the 'Us' series is the importance of praxis between the text and artwork. Working in this way necessitated the need to avoid creating derivative and disempowering stereotypes of gender fluid individuals. It is perhaps pertinent to mention that my research trip harvested more than information and data, I found myself forging new and strong friendships with many of the gender fluid people I met. I

would assert that this is indicative of the strength of a shared bond of experience and yet another reason why gender fluid identity representation should be openly available to all, if only for the affirmation of individual lifeworlds.

Running parallel to the “Us” exhibition is the exclusionary exhibition of “Them”. This series of work presents the imagery of sensationalism that is often attributed to people of variant gender. The multi-panel painting in this exhibition examines the disempowering propaganda that so often is represented by the mass media, advertising and populist cinema. “Them” focuses both on the carnival of exclusionist dogma associated with gender fluidity, and on the consequences of the societal misunderstanding of gender fluid identity. The paintings draw upon archival imagery of gender variant myth, through to images from contemporary cinema and representations of surgical gender assignment of intersex children. The aim of the “Them” exhibition is to encourage the viewer to re-evaluate imagery and ideology that is often unquestioned, as it has been contextually presented as entertainment. This multi-panel painting considers the issues of gender fluid agency I have discussed in chapters two and three and incorporates the underlying structure that allows the mass media’s paradigmatic influence to forge the binary constructs that are so readily accepted in the broader Western society. Both the “Us” and “Them” series are designed to encourage discourse on the topic of gender identity and the power relationships inherent in contemporary visual representation.

Finally, the “Me” body of work presents a visual examination of my own gender fluid identity. This includes photographic images by photographer Heather Shaw of a superficial physical transformation of me from my masculine identity to a feminine one taken during a performance at the Kurb Gallery, Northbridge W.A. in 2008.

This collaborative artwork, which features images of my spouse Kristine aiding in my gender transformation, ponders the question of “what is drag, and what is authentic gender performance?” An additional series of photographs by West Australian photographers illustrate my own subjective questioning my gender fluid awareness and examine my perception of where I fit within a traditionally hetero-normative society.

My decision to have all three bodies of work exhibited concurrently is deliberate. I wish to present a gamut of oppositional positions, through which the viewer is encouraged to consider the concept of their own gender perception in relation to the sometimes controversial ideas I am presenting. My wish is to create an ambiguity of ideologies by offering the serial triune of artworks. The aim is not to offer the viewer anything as comfortable or sedentary as a right or wrong answer, but to encourage critical reflection on the topic.

Us, Them and Me – a commentary

In this second section of this chapter I have included digital reproductions of the artworks from each series with a brief discussion of how the images may possibly be read by the viewer and some of the decisions I have made in how they were painted. As I have previously suggested, it is my intent that viewers may read into these paintings many other connotations than those I have intentionally included. Though I have obviously steered the symbology in certain directions, it is essential that the viewer be allowed to forge their own subjective comprehension, thus embracing the inherent ambiguity of the subjects' identity and the correlating ambiguity of the surrounding discourse. In other words, there is no right or wrong way of 'reading' these paintings, as the individuals they portray are as diverse in their identities as the viewers who are scrutinizing them.

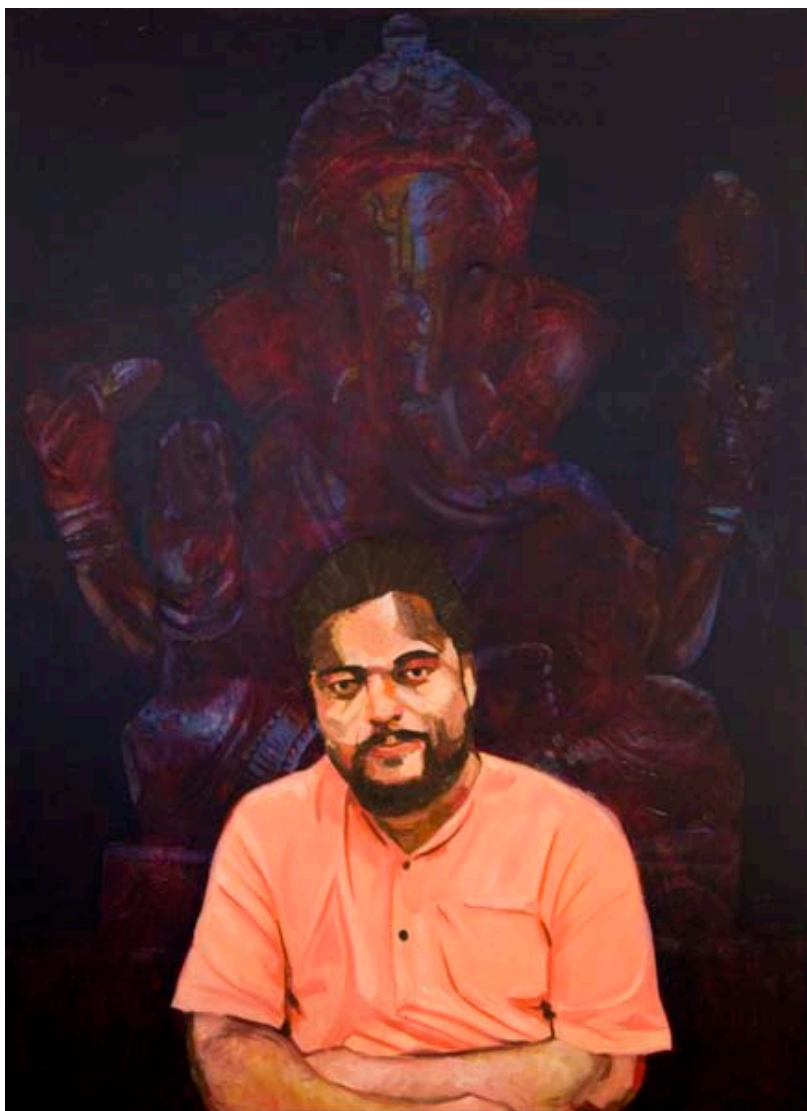
Us – a series of portraits depicting gender fluid identity

As I previously mentioned, the 'Us' exhibition was designed to present a number of gender fluid individuals from around the world. Most of the people I have met personally, others I have formed friendships with online, through the internet. A few of these people I count as close friends and one is, in fact, my spouse Kris. One of the main difficulties I confronted early in the process of painting these portraits was how I would facilitate a reflexive interpretation of each subject's portrait. Overlaying my own perception of the subject is unavoidable and as the 'biographer' of each painting I was aware that my subjective understanding of each subject must necessarily be addressed. After much reflection I decided to allow a certain subjective input, as it became apparent that each portrait is akin to a conversation between the subject and I. These portraits symbolise my engagement with the varied practical narratives I experienced through my journey; the culmination of identities being understood through the filter of my own inherent lifeworld.

It is pertinent to mention that the various subjects I have attempted to capture in pigment on canvas were often only in my company for a very brief time, if at all. I am by no means suggesting through my portraiture of them that I hold some specialist key that will unlock the nature of their individual identity. What I have endeavoured to achieve is simply a physical likeness and further to 'tip my hat' to the ambiguous nature that they all share to one extent or another. I have also included in many of the portraits symbology that directly relates to cultural, personal or perceived aspects of the individual's existence. For example the vast statue of Ganesh looming behind the rather plain portrait of Manohar Elavarthi, is intended to acknowledge the nature of the Hindu god as the remover of obstacles. This is, of course, in keeping with the difficult work Manohar is involved with, striving for the social benefits and welfare of the Hijras in South India. The natural, rather pedestrian, image of Manohar acknowledges the settings in which he and I conversed; a simple pub in downtown Bangalore.

These portraits are not attempting to glorify the individuals they depict, nor are they designed as objective documents to coldly record the superficial appearance of each subject. The portraits stand as a subjective exploration of individual identity ambiguity, the only two aspects that tie all these individuals together is a degree of gender fluidity and their connection with me as their portrait painter.

The paintings – a commentary



Jackson, M. (2011) *Manohar*, oil on canvas, 91cm x 121.5cm researcher's own image

Manohar Elavarthi is an NGO worker in Bangalore, India. I met Manohar on my research trip in late 2009 and discussed his work and life over a meal at a local pub. Manohar works for a non government organisation Aneka and in that capacity he works closely with the Hijra, India's gender fluid community. The Hijras in India although accepted as spiritual devotees are generally restricted from working in standard employment and are often forced into the position of procuring income through begging and prostitution. Manohar's role is to provide

legal counsel and look out for the welfare of hijra sex workers. He also aims to educate the broader community about Hijra and sex worker rights. Manohar also identifies as gender fluid, though he has deferred from the process of Nirwan by which young men become Hijra. I have depicted Manohar as I found him; an apparently pedestrian Indian gentleman, innocuous in his appearance. Looming in the background however the androgynous elephant-headed Hindi God Ganesha. Ganesha is the remover of obstacles in Hindu spiritual mythology and as such is the perfect symbolism for Manohar in his tireless pursuit for the welfare of the Hijra in Bangalore.



Jackson, M. (2011) *Siripong*, oil on canvas, 91cm x 121.5cm researcher's own image

I met Siripong in Thailand, early in my research trip in 2009. I was staying in Khaosan Road, one of the seedier parts of Bangkok, and trying to work out how to approach both my research and the topic of the Katoeys, or Ladyboys, of Bangkok. Siripong identifies as a

Ladyboy, the traditional gender fluid identity in Thailand. I have represented hir with the plum blossom branches and a white throated sparrow and surrounded by a spice coloured background. In some Asian countries plum blossom symbolises androgyny because it blossoms in an intermediary season, namely Spring. The white throated swallow is one of the many species which is intersexual, not bound to a gender dimorphic state. As I have suggested previously, I regard my paintings of gender fluid individuals as conversations between myself and the subject and with this portrait of Siripong I have tried to capture both the coquettish nature of the street wise Ladyboy but also the vulnerability of the differently gendered, within what can be a very difficult environment.



Jackson, M. (2011) *Zoo*, oil on canvas, 91cm x 121.5cm researcher's own image

I consider Zoo a good friend and we were introduced by mutual friends early in my PhD studies. For me Zoo epitomises the ambiguity and paradoxical nature of gender fluid identity. To all intents and purposes Zoo may look like the traditional anatomical concept of a woman, barring hir often eclectic fashion sense, complete with multiple tattoos and piercings. Zoo, however, identifies as monstrous in hir gender, as ze explains by quoting Boots Potential:

I am thrilled to have a vehicle which allows me to be simultaneously politically engaged, campy as hell, tough-as-nails, sissy faggy, butch new-wave dykey, dead serious, boy-girl-whatever, pansy, and terrifying all in one fell swoop. Male/female dichotomies do not allow for this mobility and simultaneity, but monstrosity does (Potential cited in Zoo, personal communication, 2008).

I was fortunate enough to come across a photograph of Zoo by photographer Crina Belevi, which I felt captured Zoo's innate sense of exhibitionism and inherent disregard for convention. I used the photograph as a starting point for the portrait and included the

carnival-esque typography of the word 'Monster' and the image of Boris Karloff as Frankenstein's Monster. The peacock feather fan that Zoo is holding was fortuitously already in the photo and bears the symbolic connotation of transforming ugliness and death into beauty and immortality, and the peacock is also symbolic of androgyny and transgenderism (Lundschen, 1997, p.264).



Jackson, M. (2011) *Zoo too*, oil on canvas, 61cm x 91cm researcher's own image

This second portrait of Zoo was intended to portray hir in a more pensive thoughtful perspective. The performance of gender fluidity in a predominantly hetero-normative world can at times be psychologically wearing. I was hoping to catch one of those moments in which I have seen Zoo pause and take stock. It is important to note that whilst the openly gender fluid person is often the subject of the broader gaze; it does not preclude the focus of all the attention from gazing back occasionally.



Jackson, M. (2011) *Kris*, oil on canvas, 76cm x 101.5cm researcher's own image

This is possibly one of the more personal portraits I have created in this series, as it is of my spouse Kristine. Initially I was reticent to include this painting as Kris has generally not, until recently, publicly identified as being gender fluid. However, after hir assurance I have decided that the paintings' inclusion is important. Kristine comes from a quite traditional Methodist background and although ze has always outwardly performed a stereotypically feminine identity, ze has always felt ambiguously in hir gender identity. I believe these experiences are quite common amongst many people; however because of the paucity of viable representations of gender fluidity, many may not acknowledge outwardly their doubts about the authenticity of their performed gender identity. I have represented Kristine with hir preferred short 'masculine' hair cut, straining to see out into some other place. My intention

with this portrait was to subtly infer a gentle curiosity about an alternate identity, as with a land as yet unvisited. The title *Kris'* is in acknowledgment of the ambiguity of the subject.



Jackson, M. (2011) *Alec*, oil on canvas, 61cm x 91cm researcher's own image

Alec is a 2Spirit/Intersex/Trans Activist, filmmaker and writer, currently working on "Rough Paradise" hir first novel about growing up gender variant.

We are here to make a difference, leave the world a better place than when we found it, is a message that our mother drummed into us from a very young age. We are pretty sure Ma harped on this to counteract the message the rest of the world pounded into us everyday; don't bother us, don't make trouble, shut the fuck up, freaks not welcome. Well, after 50 years of being a gender trouble maker, we have made a

difference and are leaving the world a better place than we found it. Thanks Ma.
(Butler, 2011)

The white wolf is hir spirit animal and symbolises hir innate gender ambiguity.

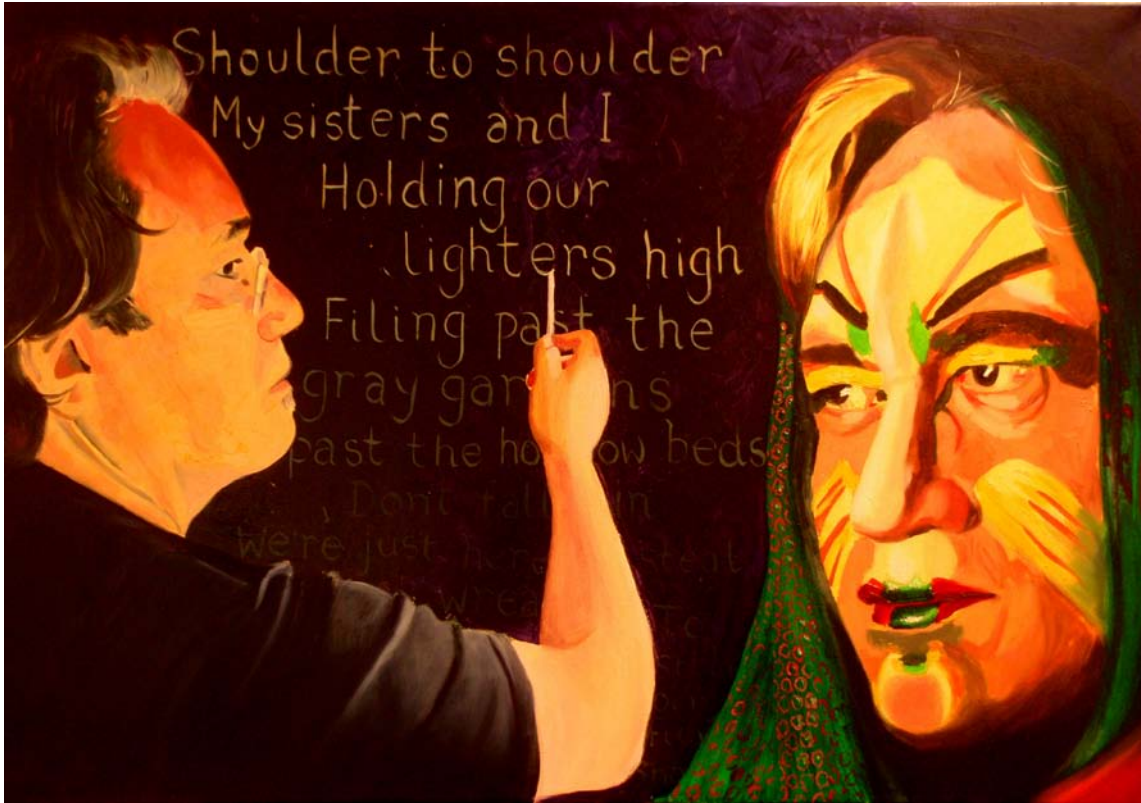


Jackson, M. (2011) *Lizzy*, oil on canvas, 61cm x 91cm researcher's own image

Lizzy is one of my oldest friends and I have known her since she was fifteen; she was originally a friend of my younger sister. Over the years I have watched the transition of Lizzy from a teenager, to a very successful female impersonator and finally to her contemporary identity as a Trans-woman. As Lizzy posits:

I identify as a transsexual. I live as a woman and to the broader public I interact and prefer to be known as a woman. But as time goes on, I am well aware and accepting of my Transsexuality and my connection to the Homosexual Community of which although I think the law status is incorrect and unfair, I would not want to deny or disown my Gayness (Henrick, 2011).

To maintain her ability to live as a woman in suburbia, Lizzy has spent many thousands of dollars on cosmetic surgery, regularly travelling to Thailand for extensive painful and costly procedures. I think that generally people don't realise the lengths some gender fluid people go through to fit in or 'pass' in the broader society. This portrait is intended to act as an indication of the effect the expectations of the broader community has on gender fluid identifiers. As with hetero-normative consumers, the beauty myth and the need to conform to an ideal has a very real implication within the gender fluid community. I have included a garland of Narcissus blooms in the painting both to acknowledge vanity (but only to a lesser degree) and because the Narcissus, like the plum blossom, symbolises androgyny (Lundschen, 1997, p.247). The portrait of Lizzy stands as an ideal, a beautiful smooth depiction, perhaps the inner perception of her gender identity.



Jackson, M. (2011) *Dan*, oil on canvas, 61cm x 91cm researcher's own image

I met Dan in Los Angeles in early 2010; we shared a meal in a restaurant in Chinatown. Dan is a Samoan artist and poet and identifies as Fa'afafine. In this portrait I have portrayed him both as the studious quietly spoken artist I met but also as the gregarious spirit of his Fa'afafine identity. As an artist Dan creates a great deal of artwork concerning his Fa'afafine identity. In the portrait I have included a snippet of one of Dan's poems "A Drag queen named Pipi". (McMullin, n.d.)



Jackson, M. (2011) *Rich*, mixed media on canvas, 91cm x 121.5cm researcher's own image

I was fortunate enough to meet Rich online, through Dan Taulapapa McMullen, my

Fa'afafine friend. Rich and Dan have known each other for a number of years and are part of

a thriving Pacific Island artist network. Rich works as an artist in Auckland, creating performance and digital artworks dealing with gender identity. As ze explains:

I define myself today as whakawahine, which is a Maori term that describes me as 'being like a woman'. By identifying in this manner I feel that I am able to be a whole person, rather than the fragmented person that I have always felt I have been. I think that as a Maori man, I have developed quite successful ways of slotting into preferred social norms in order to become invisible. I'm acutely aware of the fiction in the role I play in my day to day life. Generally, I am regarded as being quite masculine and am perceived as well dressed, socially alert, funny, and straight; I know this because I am particularly self conscious and adept at monitoring my behaviour. I find ways to avoid being anything other than 'normal' in order to feel like I fit in.

As a woman, however, my self-consciousness flies out the window and I'm impossible to ignore. I love that I have the ability to transform into the person I aspire to be. This is a perception that is perhaps at the core of my artistic practice and my gender performance work. As a man I hate it when people look at me, it makes me worry that I've done something wrong. Coming from a tourist hot-spot I learnt quite young that I was always on show, so in my daily life I have always tried my best to avoid being seen. My daily performance of a masculine gender stands in contrast to the feminine, more emotionally expressive and confident person I feel I am, and in my art I try to expose this internal disjuncture (Kereopa, 2011).

I have endeavoured to capture the fierce spirit of Rich's whakawahine nature along with hir more pensive masculine persona. The symbols I have used are drawn from Maori culture and are representative of the plurality of nature. The Maori word, 'kauanuanu', at the top of the painting translates as 'respect' and was chosen for Rich's innate respect in both hir community but also hir essential self respect.



Jackson, M. (2011) *Gryphon*, oil on canvas, 91cm x 121.5cm researcher's own image

Gryphon lives in Middle America near Kansas. A gregarious character, his unique sense of fashion sets him apart from his contemporaries in daily Mid-American life. Gryphon

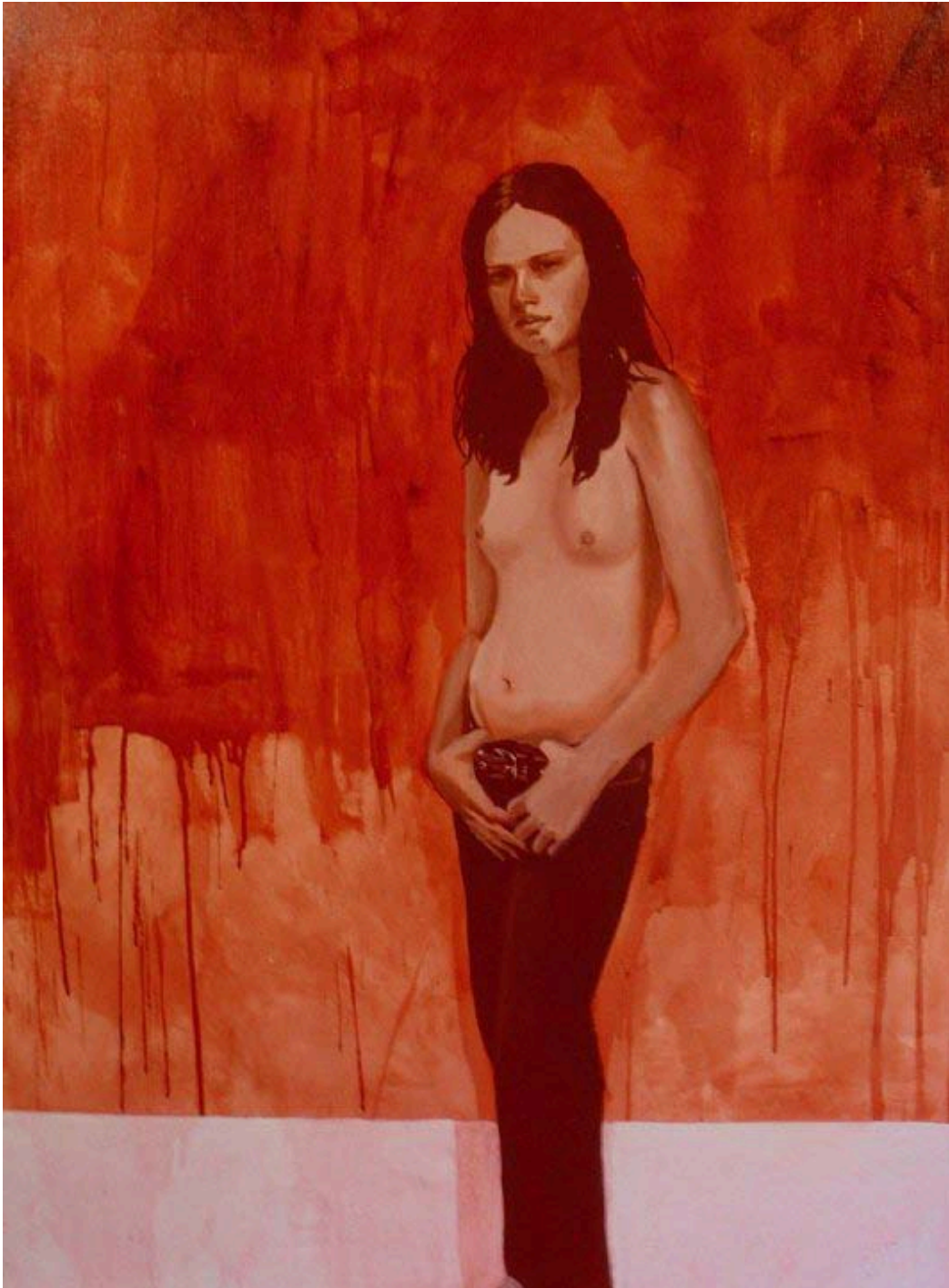
expresses his gender difference, his sexuality and his aesthetic taste through his wardrobe. Gryphon spends a large percentage of his time and his income on period garments for his sartorial collection. He easily switches from early twentieth century dandy to extreme drag queen and does so with confidence and aplomb. I was drawn to the idea of painting Gryphon because of his unabashed performance of gender fluidity. I have represented him as a double portrait, illustrating both as the severe masculine turn of the century gentleman and the coquettish, yet still bearded party queen.



Jackson, M. (2011) *Hijra*, oil on canvas, 76cm x 101.5cm researcher's own image

Whilst I was in Bangalore, in India, I was wandering along one of the main intersections when I came across a group of Hijras approaching the cars stopped at the traffic lights. They appeared to be asking the drivers for money, which was generally met with a resigned

compliance. I had heard stories of the Hijras' mischievous ways when their requests for money were denied; from lewd and bawdy language to them exposing themselves to tourists. As I watched and took photos of the scene, I was noticed by the Hijras, who immediately demanded money in exchange for their photo being taken. I was happy to comply and once it became apparent I was willing to pay without complaint, I was treated with friendliness and warmth. The Mango flowers I have included in the portrait are symbolic of the Hijras' ambiguity but I also like to think of them as a garland of hospitality and the kinship I was treated with by a subjugated community that has little reason to be hospitable, but nevertheless still is.



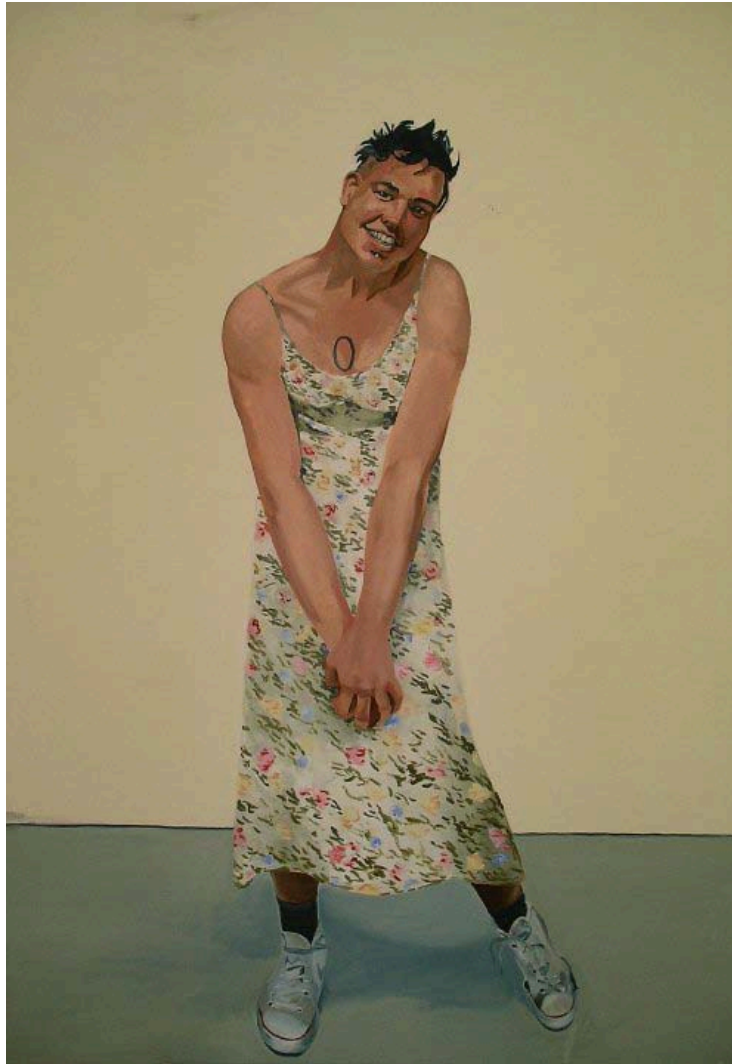
Jackson, M. (2011) *Samantha – not black or white but shades of other*, oil on canvas, 91cm x 122cm researcher's own image

Samantha is a recent friend, whom I met through my youngest daughter, Chanel. Sam describes herself in her online blog as having “Aspergers, bipolar and many other labels”

(Davies, 2011). When we first met I was curious as to how Samantha relates to her gender identity when so many social constructs in her life are constantly under review and viewed from a different perspective, such as Asperger's syndrome. From my conversations with Samantha, I have gleaned that the benefit of Asperger's for her has been that the idea of gender identity is just as inherently alien as everything else. A student of sociology she has firm views on her place as a Trans-woman:

I believe deep down that trans-women are beautiful, we're shaped by our personal struggles and histories, beaten down at every turn and yet we survive. Because we must and because we are strong. We come in all shapes, colours, sizes and sexual preferences. Our stories must be told if we are to ever be treated on our own terms, I firmly believe that they are also the key to escaping the false dichotomy that is 'passing'. There is of course the never ending pressure to conform to social expectations of how women should look, as well as the dysphoric feeling brought on by the simple fact of being a transsexual. That dysphoria has a whole language of its own that needs to be written. (Davies, 2011)

I have represented Samantha in her portrait topless, as during our discussions she mentioned both her affinity for her breasts as symbols of her femininity but also the fact that as a Trans-woman, there is no law outlawing her naked chest. As the title of this painting suggests I found Samantha's awareness of her ambiguity and her no nonsense gender identity refreshing.



Jackson, M. (2011) *Chester - boy in a frock*, oil on canvas researcher's own image

This painting of Chester was the first in this series of portraits. I initially wanted to explore the visual effect of putting traditionally feminine clothing on a male body. Chester does not, as far as I know, identify as gender fluid and I was interested to see whether there would be any performative change in his demeanour or physicality once he was wearing the dress. As I have tried to capture in the portrait, there is a coy playfulness and vulnerability that came about through this cross dressing. I was particularly taken by the interesting juxtaposition between the light floral material of the dress and the worn and dirty sand shoes; each professing a bond to the traditions of their dimorphic gender signifiers.

Them – the consequences of sensationalist and exclusionary representation

I initially approached this body of work with some trepidation; as of all the three series of work it is possibly the most contentious. Within the ‘Us’ and ‘Me’ series there is a sense of positivity and an inherent feeling of hope. This is not the case with the multi panelled and multi faceted ‘Them’ painting.

The difficulty I had when working on this painting was that I was aware that the message I intended to represent may well not be appreciated by people from within the gender fluid community itself. In the painting I present some of the most iconic representations of mainstream gender fluid identity; those of the Hollywood blockbuster movies. Among these movies are such successful titles as *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, *Too Wong Foo*, *Trans America* and *Boys Don’t Cry*; each and every one could be considered seminal events in Western gender fluid cultural acknowledgement. I personally have many fond memories of each of these movies and credit them with many of my identity changes; in the way I began to mould myself after certain aspects of their main characters.

However, as I have discussed in previous chapters, these iconic representations of gender fluidity are, regardless of their intent, documents that continue to strengthen the concept of ‘otherness’ in regards to gender fluid identity. They characteristically separate gender fluid identity from belonging in general society. The gender fluid protagonists are focussed upon, not for their similarities to hetero-normative society, but for those aspects that alienate them. As Stephen Riggins suggests in *The language and politics of exclusion*, even when a positive representation is attempted, the ‘other’ is exoticised:

Historically, it is without question that difference has been more often feared than appreciated. The exception to this general pattern is the phenomenon of *exoticism*. The Other – once again misunderstood – is considered to be superior or perhaps strange but beautiful. (Riggins, 1997, p.5)

It was disheartening to find as I revisited many of the pivotal movies of my youth, the fundamental tropes of ‘othering’, whereby the gender fluid characters were exoticised, demonised, ridiculed, made to appear pathetic, weak or unhinged. In cases where Trans or gender fluid people were represented semi-realistically, it became obvious in the plot line that their strength of character would inevitably be met with negative consequences, as in *Boys don’t cry*, (Pierce, 1999) a movie based on the real life experiences of Brandon Teena, a Trans-Man who was raped and murdered in Humboldt, Nebraska in December 1993.

The ‘Them’ paintings are an attempt to re-present these iconic images as endemic of the problems facing gender fluid identifiers. From my personal experience I am often so excited to see the rare representations of ‘people like me’ in popular culture that I am almost willing to overlook the hackneyed and clichéd stereotypes which we are allocated by mainstream media.

On occasion there are representations that are empathetic to the gender fluid lifeworld, but even with these the ‘language’ used to represent is inherently ‘othered’:

The discourses of identity articulated by majority populations are likely to be univocal and monologic because it is relatively easy for dominant groups to express and confirm their shared identity publicly. ... By comparison, the discourses of identity articulated by members of subordinate minorities tend to be contradictory, complex and ironic. Humour and satire are effective tools of minority discourse. (Riggins, 1997, p.6)

A key example of this is in *Torch song trilogy*, (Bogart, 1988) where the life and loves of a Gay Jewish female impersonator, Arnold Beckoff, are sensitively and humorously portrayed. The film of the play focuses upon the trials of being a cross dressing gay male in the 1970’s and 80’s. But once again therein lays the problem; the fixation is on Arnold’s difference from society, not his similarity. No amount of empathy from the audience allows the character Arnold Beckoff social purchase in a broader hetero-normative society. In fact the advent of

political correctness and social tolerance has only served to mask the intrinsic prejudice against gender fluid agency:

When Otherness is feared, the lexical strategies one expects to find are those that are evidence of hierarchy, subordination, and dominance. ... But today the public expression of racism, ethnicism, and intolerance is more complex than it was in the past because it tends to occur in situations where tolerance of diversity is a socially recognized norm, frequently one that is legally sanctioned. ... The opinions prejudiced persons express outside their circle of family members and friends will appear to be more temperate, less severe and cruel, than the opinions that they actually hold. (Riggins, 1997, p 7)

My reaction to this, "Them," as a painting, explores the exclusion of authentic gender fluid identity, it holds it up as a social pariah, as entertainment, as a curiosity; something alien to be viewed from a safe distance. My intent with this work has been to hyper-alienate representations of gender fluidity, in the hope that the audience questions the existing social structures that surround gender discourse.

Across the length of the six panel painting are the words "You think we are here to entertain and to thrill, yours to maim and kill." I am of course referring here to the use of gender fluid identity in fiction, such as movies, designed explicitly for mainstream entertainment and titillation; the exoticism of gender fluid people for the benefit of a movie going public. The latter half of the sentence refers to the daily consequences of not fitting into a gender dimorphic role; the brutal violence committed regularly to people like Brandon Teena (Pierce, 1999) and the ongoing non consensual surgery on intersex infants (Money, 1972) as discussed in chapter three.

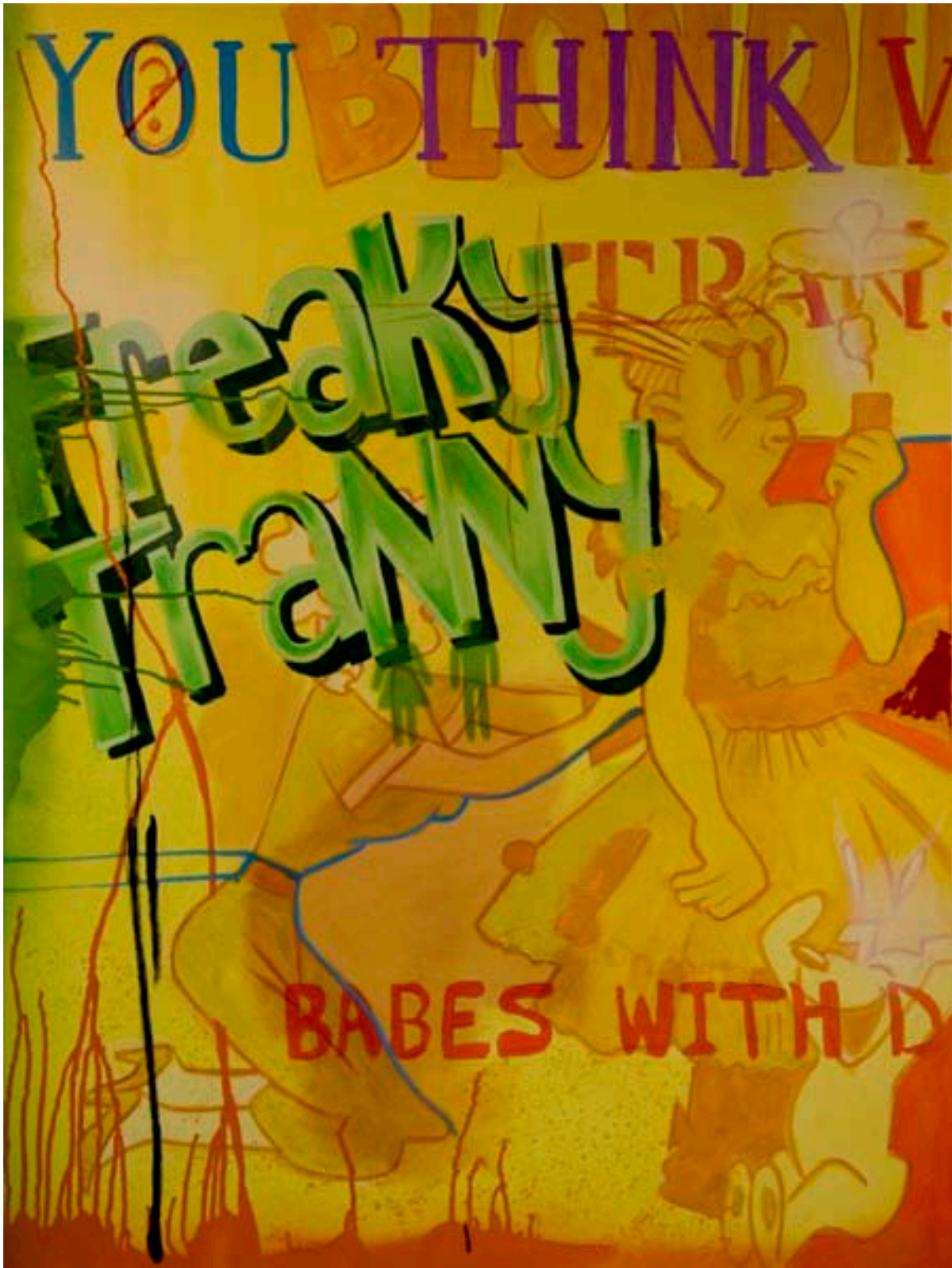
The painting is intentionally aggressive and accusatorial. I want the viewer to feel overwhelmed, set upon and confronted by the imagery. My aim in doing this is to place the viewer symbolically apart from the dominant painting, in an attempt to place them in an

unsafe, insecure and excluded position; in much the same way as gender fluid people find themselves in hetero-normative Western culture.

The ‘Them’ painting holds a mirror up to society and says plainly “You like to have us around to be your clowns and your exotic fantasies, but you constantly disregard our right to safety, dignity, freedom and equality. This painting is *aimed* at you, but it is not *for* you.”



Jackson, M. (2011) *Them*, mixed media on canvas, 6 x 91cm x 121.5cm researcher's own image



Jackson, M. (2011) *Them - panel one*, mixed media on canvas, 91cm x 121.5cm researcher's own image



Jackson, M. (2011) *Them - panel two*, mixed media on canvas, 91cm x 121.5cm researcher's own image



Jackson, M. (2011) *Them - panel three*, mixed media on canvas, 91cm x 121.5cm

researcher's own image



Jackson, M. (2011) *Them - panel four*, mixed media on canvas, 91cm x 121.5cm researcher's own image



Jackson, M. (2011) *Them - panel five*, mixed media on canvas, 91cm x 121.5cm researcher's own image



Jackson, M. (2011) *Them - panel six*, mixed media on canvas, 91cm x 121.5cm researcher's own image

Me – a personal engagement with gender identity



Figure 18: Jackson, M & Shaw, H. (2008) *The Meredith Project*

The Meredith Project was a performance I instigated at the Kurb Gallery in Northbridge, Western Australia in 2008. With both photographic and film documentation and the help of my spouse Kris', I underwent a superficial 'Trans-formation' from a masculine identity representation to a feminine identity representation. I had chosen to title the performance the *Meredith Project*, as Meredith is my middle name and is commonly regarded as both a male and female name. Indeed, throughout my youth my dogged observance of the correct masculine pronunciation, the emphasis on 'red', Mer-*RED*-ith, caused me much anxiety throughout my childhood. Yet later in life, during my budding gender fluid awakening, the name Meredith became a precious totem in my embrace of ambiguity.

Over a period of three hours Kris, with the aid of scissors and electric shears, methodically removed all my facial hair (a primary signifier of masculine gender) and in the process sculpted various new representative identities. The *Meredith Project* signified an

intellectualising of my gender performance. Up until this point, Drag, Cross dressing and Trans-identity were part of my life. They have been to greater or lesser degrees public, but always part of my lifeworld and generally only hinted at through my arts practice. The Meredith Project became a radical departure from day to day lived experience, instead elevating the private performance to that of public spectacle. One of the aspects of the performance, which I had decided early in its inception, was to keep the process as naturalistic as possible. This was not to be a drag show, nor was it a clinical portrayal of transition, rather an exploration of honest reactions to an unusual set of experiences. For myself, I was interested to revisit the physical representation of the woman I might have become had I continued on the path to gender reassignment. What I did not expect was the level of humour that came into the performance as it progressed and personally, a lightening of spirit as I reached the mid-point between masculine and feminine representation.



Figure 19: Jackson, M & Shaw, H. (2008) *The Meredith Project*



Figure 20: Jackson, M. (2011) *Photographs of me from my families' photo album.*

researcher's own images



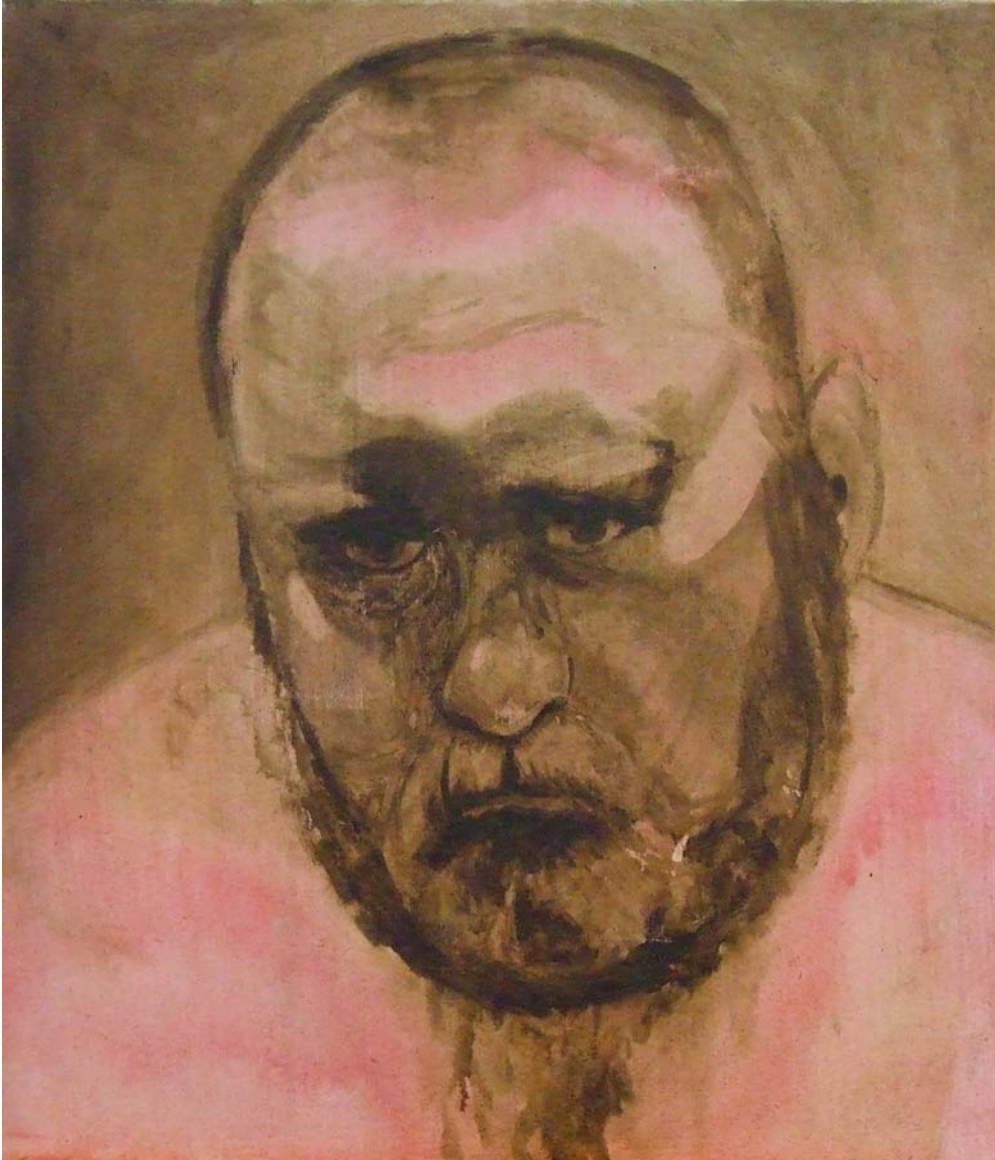
Jackson, M. (2011) *The Inner Bird*, oil on canvas, 90cm x 120cm researcher's own image

The Inner Bird refers to the concept of gender dysphoria that I have experienced regularly throughout my life. It represents the idea that I do not identify with the external physical appearance of my masculinity, but rather feel more attuned to a more ambiguous self-identity. The young boy in the image is a metonymical self-portrait expressing anger and frustration for the situation I find myself in.



Jackson, M. (2011) *Wonderland Lost*, oil on canvas, 90cm x 120cm researcher's own image

Wonderland lost is representational of the sense of regret I have felt for the decision I made early in my life regarding the cessation of gender reassignment. Although I am aware that I made the right choice for my wellbeing, there is always a level of grief and regret for the possible woman I may have become. The figure of the boy in the bunny ears and nose is intended as a symbol of naïveté and vulnerability and the young girl walking away represents opportunities lost. The title of the painting acknowledges the utopian, and unrealised, ideal of my 'passing' as a Trans-woman.



Jackson, M. (2011) *Self portrait – Still Drag*, oil on canvas, 43.5cm x 50cm researcher's own image

This self-portrait reiterates the concept that regardless of my superficial appearance, everything I present is in some way a performance of my practical narrative. Drag is performing a gender role, often using parody, of a gender identity that is not your own. This is often how I perceive my position as a gender fluid identifier. A Beard and other masculine trappings are no more or less drag to me than dresses, wigs and high heels.

Conclusion

Throughout this dissertation I have provided a broad overview of some of the major issues related to gender fluid identity, including an historical background, an analysis of the inherent power of representation and my own response to these issues through my creative practice. More pertinent, however, is my championing the need for the re-inclusion of gender fluid lifeworld inter-subjective discourse, especially within visual culture. The argument for this re-inclusion is forwarded from an emancipatory political position, asserting that practical narratives are as valid and authentic as academic and institutionalised peer reviewed texts. The inclusion of such narratives lends equity to information that may otherwise be dismissed or discounted through the standardising rationalism of objective academic research. Further to this, I assert that there is an onus on gender fluid creative communicators to wrest agency back from the mass media by producing authentic creative cultural texts, for and by gender fluid individuals. In recognition of this I have extensively privileged my own narrative and have included many personal subjective observations, framed by my experience as both a gender fluid identifying individual and also a contemporary creative communicative practitioner. My anecdotal journalism, as I discussed in chapter five, along with the subjective lifeworld stories from gender fluid individuals serve not only to ratify the various arguments I have raised, but also to lend a platform to cultural groups who have been almost as under-represented in academic writing as they have in visual art. Throughout I have positioned myself as a Western voice, particularly when discussing gender fluid communities from non-Western societies, so as not to infer that I am speaking with any specific non-Western cultural authority.

In this dissertation, through the use of historical texts and the theories of academic writers I have discussed the largely unacknowledged fact that not only is dimorphic gender a fallacy

biologically, it is also a social construct that has been employed to discipline society to conform for the benefit of capitalism and hetero-normative comfort. I have shown that despite the proof that scientists have found there to be at least 37 naturally occurring chromosomal genders (Thomas, 2006), it is still common practice for Western doctors to perform gender assignment surgery on intersex infants in order to affix them to one of the two currently acceptable genders: male or female. In regard to this I have argued that society would be better educated about gender fluidity, rather than blindly accepting limited hegemonic medical and psychological dogma. Further on the topic of medical intervention I contend that gender fluid people should reserve agency when it comes to their gender identity. Previously the domain of institutional health practitioners, these choices should be made with a greater sense of gender fluid autonomy. I maintain that gender fluid lives should be governed by gender fluid people, as it has become apparent that wide ranging psychological damage for gender fluid individuals is an innate risk under the current myopic Western health paradigm. I contend that far too much license over the autonomy of gender fluid lives has been afforded to institutions who continue to prove themselves to be resistant to current knowledge concerning the psychological and physical viability of ambiguous gender.

I have suggested that much of this resistance societally is due to a perceived need for ontological security. Using the writings of Stuart Hall and Anthony Giddens I have explained that the fundamental reliance society has on dimorphic gender structures is due to the overall discomfort caused by difference, change and ambiguity. Further to this I have discussed how reactions to this discomfort have manifested in stubborn and violent opposition to the indeterminate nature of gender fluidity. I have shown that in a Western contemporary

rationalist society the existence of an unclassifiable gender is an anathema, impeding the inclusion of gender fluid identity in contemporary gender discourse.

This is not the case in far more ancient cultures, globally, where the acknowledgement of a third gender has been historically and contemporaneously accepted. In Chapter Four I presented a raft of alternative positions on gender fluid ontology, in the form of several non-Western gender fluid communities I encountered whilst on a global research trip. Through anecdotal evidence I introduced a selection of traditionally accepted gender fluid communities including the Katoeys in Thailand, Hijras in India and the Two Spirit people of indigenous North America. In all of these cultures, to greater or lesser extents, the broader society has accepted the existence of gender fluid identity. Often revered, sometimes reviled, gender fluid people in these cultures are innately bound to their broader communities, often with traditionally prescribed roles allowing them a palpable level of individual agency.

This agency in Western representations of gender fluidity has been usurped by the contemporary film industry. As I discuss in Chapter Five, Hollywood blockbusters often contain a myriad of gender fluid identity signifiers. However, these representations are predominantly manufactured for the broader consumption and entertainment of heteronormative audiences and rarely present gender fluid individuals in pedestrian roles. The roles dedicated to gender fluid characters in mainstream media are so often parodies or stereotypes of gender fluidity and as such they are generally portrayed as deeply psychologically flawed. I argue that even when a gender fluid character is offered some dignity in these performances, the inherent agency of gender fluid people is denied through the co-opting of our existence and our stories by a consumerist entertainment media. I continue by framing the overarching problem of the lack of gender fluid signification in representative history. As the history of art has dealt almost exclusively with images of the traditional gender binary, creating a viable

equivocal signifying language that sufficiently advantages ambiguity becomes a pressing necessity when representing gender fluid identity. Borrowing from the emancipatory political methods of artists and theorists from other subjugated communities (such as the African-American, Feminist and GLBT communities), I suggest that the re-codification and re-presentation of existing hegemonic imagery may well be a successful approach to creating a viable gender fluid visual language. There is a certain congruous irony to creating a visual language for people who see themselves as neither male or female by drawing upon traditionally dimorphic image base and re-codifying that imagery to symbolise ambiguity. By way of illustration I present a selection of artworks and viewpoints produced by contemporary gender fluid artists from around the world and examine the methodologies and concepts behind their art practices. The diverse nature of these artists' practices serves to emphasize the futility of trying to impose a classificatory system upon such an inherently varied compendium of individual gender identities.

Finally I conclude my dissertation with a commentary on the paintings I have produced in conjunction with this text. I illustrate through my artwork the inter connectedness of the research already conducted and its influence over the material and conceptual basis of my paintings. Through the artwork I am able to viscerally signify the concepts of ambiguity that I have acknowledged as being so important. The paintings become a valuable vehicle to present individual gender fluid lifeworlds, highlight social inequities, and re-codify traditional signifiers. They also provide a voice for my subjective concerns regarding the position of gender fluid ontology through an equitable medium in which I am adept. It is apparent there is an inherent endeavour towards praxis within both this dissertation and the corresponding artworks; each references the other in an attempt to ratify the primary goal of re-presenting gender fluid identity in a contemporary art practice. If this objective has been

fulfilled then the lifeworld of gender fluid individuals is one step closer to becoming more equitable and therefore one step closer to emancipation from outdated dimorphic dogma.

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