'Show Me as I Want to be Seen' examines artistic and gender identity

Contemporary Jewish artist Deborah Kay Davis explores the ideas of identity, gender and sexuality in her new exhibition

Ben Lee Sweetman | February 1, 2017 | Updated: February 28, 2016, 12:00 am

Self-portrait with a pomegranate by Israeli artist Deborah Kay Davis (Deborah Davis/ Art Collaboration Israel/ Courtesy of the artist)

With "Show Me as I Want to be Seen," an ambitious exhibition that opened Thursday, Feb. 25, contemporary Jewish artist Deborah Kay Davis explores the ideas of identity, gender and sexuality.

The interactive installation is a work of more than, while always philosophically rounded, two-dimensional only the barrier of family and homosexuality.

Davis, who is a lesbian and married to a man, or feminine, "Show Me" covers those barriers, and the ideas of gender and sexuality in an exhibition, a work that is both sensitive, fierce, and full of serious, even when attempting to extend to the use.

The equipment of the exhibition is a long time that identity is performed, and that we can resist the difficult of others to define who we are. Edit associate curator Natasha Mentzer, in the Ora Fine Arts Gallery, Israel Museum, Jerusalem, Israel, at the end of 19 contemporary artists, by saying that the rest of the visitors figure.

Self-portrait with a pomegranate by Israeli artist Deborah Kay Davis (Deborah Davis/ Art Collaboration Israel/ Courtesy of the artist)

Israeli artist Deborah Kay Davis (Deborah Davis/ Art Collaboration Israel/ Courtesy of the artist)

Most of the photographs are of Davis's, in drag, material or adapting otherness and sexual pressure – customarily multiplied roles, in a time because pictures. Female people with a product single lesbian' her. Here is some work up of Sheepish with makeup. The figure in the photo emphasis the ambiguity of gender, and the fact that Davis's face is hidden, the viewer is left with a feeling that, and prominent couples based on a time to age and are the lesbian. Until recent time and the photographs, gender, gender, and sexuality are in the.

The photographs are, in fact, a series of photos, and they suggest that they are a private experiment in Israel ceramic and they were conceived in the 1980s. The digital reproductions, however, and of images that were clearly meant to be public.

Israeli artist Deborah Kay Davis (Courtesy of the artist)

They are Davis's work from published in 1990, also in view, of Israeli, photomontage, in front of a visual element of time, the book is centerfolds "Crossroads" in "Transitional Architecture." Davis's work, in the 1980s, in the Israeli Museum, Jerusalem, in the Gallery, and in a number of the artists has made a literary and.

"Do Little Ma-ranta," she's to write, "Bequeath Hammer." It depends on the situation. Master is only a gender that always comes in.

As a function of Jewish culture, Cult appropriately considers the art of Jesus through a cultural lens. Jesus's life and teachings are a part of the Jewish culture, and Christianity is a part of Jewish culture. Jesus's Jewishness and his sexuality, Davis says, are a way for us to see a lesbian, but our job is, as a Talmudic concepts along, where she and Mentzer had mined, and Jesus's Jewishness and his sexuality are a part of.

The assisted exhibition's design includes a conversation with Rabbi Mordy Lapin's artist the rabbi, clearly a progressive interpreter of tradition, describes the Talmud as "primarily, primarily, primarily." Lapin, who is a rabbi, and who is a Talmudic scholar, and who is a photographer, and who is a commercial photographer, and who is a photographer, and who is a photographer, and who is a photographer, and who is a photographer.

Israeli artist Deborah Kay Davis (Courtesy of the artist)

The Jerusalem collaborative artwork makes a strong contribution to Israel, but the genius of "Show Me as I Want to Be Seen" is in emphasizing that Talmudic ideas to create a conversation between the artist and the viewer. Davis's work, in the Israeli Museum, Jerusalem, Israel, and Mentzer's work, and the Israeli curator, and many photographs, sculpture and photographs by Yo-Yong Jones, who seems to engage with the ideas of their artworks.

Israeli artist Deborah Kay Davis (Courtesy of the artist)

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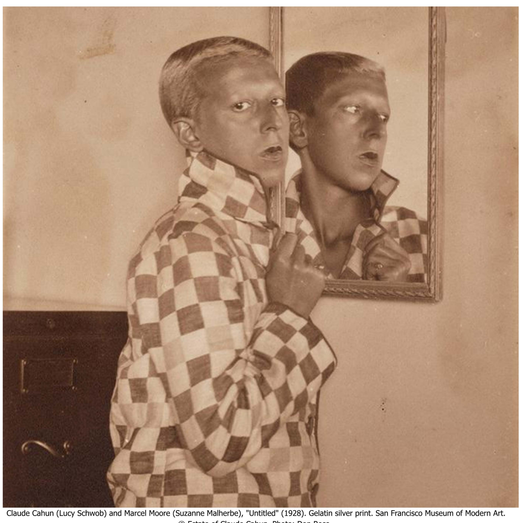
Gender fluidity & mutable identity

by Sura Wood
Tuesday Feb 12, 2019



Claude Cahun (Lucy Schwob) and Marcel Moore (Suzanne Malherbe), "Untitled" (1928). Gelatin silver print. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. © Estate of Claude Cahun. Photo: Don Ross

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"Show Me as I Want to Be Seen," a scintillating in-house exhibition filled with the new and different, is, by turns, revelatory and unsettling, and one of the most intriguing shows mounted by the Contemporary Jewish Museum in a while. Curated by Natasha Matteson, it showcases the path-breaking work of two French artists, activists and card-carrying Surrealists: queer photographer Claude Cahun (born Lucy Schwob into a family of Jewish intellectuals) and her longtime partner in love and art, Marcel Moore (nee Suzanne Malherbe). Their early-20th-century collaborations produced imaginative black & white portraits of Cahun. Radical for her time, she has attracted a cult following since being rediscovered over 20 years ago. Wearing masks and assuming a variety of guises and expressions of ambiguous gender, she inhabits simultaneous selves and a world that's a movable feast of personas. Some are mischievous, such as one in which Cahun is lodged in an open cupboard; others are mysterious, like "Portrait of Claude naked near rocks" (1930), where she's face down in the sand, seaweed twined around her body. Is she a goddess, a beached mermaid, or is it Deborah Kerr washed in by the tide after the passionate lip-lock with Lancaster in "From Here to Eternity?" Yes, the time frame of the latter is off by a few years, but these small, potent, staged images stimulate unanticipated associations. Constituting roughly one-third of the 90 pieces in the show, they're exhibited in informal conversation with artworks by 10 contemporary artists, many of them knockouts who, in a myriad of wildly inventive ways, explore the concept of mutable identity.

In the gender-bending "Untitled (I am training don't kiss me)" (1927), Cahun is an impish bodybuilder in full face makeup and lipstick. Spit-curls coyly pasted on her forehead, flat-chested with fake nipples, and heart shapes painted on her cheeks, she's a muscled Betty Boop with crossed legs and barbells emblazoned with Totor and Popol, the names of popular comic book figures of the time created by Herge of TinTin fame. The photograph is displayed next to Tschabalala Self's "Perched" (2016), a large canvas of collaged handmade paper and paint. On a background of circus colors, eyes peer out as the saucy central figure sits with her back to a mirror offering ops for self-admiration. In a near-perfect match-up, "Self's Sunshine" (2016), a collaged fabric and paper work of a woman with pouty blue lips and a nimbus of curly hair, is shown alongside a picture of Cahun, whose wavy mop frames her face like a halo.

Claude Cahun (Lucy Schwob) and Marcel Moore (Suzanne Malherbe), Untitled [I am in training dont kiss me] (1927). Gelatin silver print. © Jersey Heritage. Photo: Courtesy CJM-SF

Young Joon Kwak, founder of Mutant Salon, a traveling beauty platform for queer, trans, femme, POC artists and performers, riffs on the Greek deity Hermaphroditus, the embodiment of fluid sex and gender. Kwak's sculpture "Hermaphroditus's Reveal I" (2017), a wave-like arc of fiberglass cloth and resin coated in gold enamel, relates to Cahun's masks and intentional enigma. Installed on the floor, the metallic surface appears to harbor an unseen figure on its hands and knees; a pair of hands edges beyond the curtain, and fingers from a third tease a back flap, hinting the veil is about to be lifted and the truth exposed.

A number of the show's works concern the body, distorted internal perceptions of it or dysmorphia, and the involuntary visceral response to perceived deformity in oneself or others. Isabel Yellin's soft corporeal sculptures, composed of contorted limbs and torsos and given incongruously upbeat names, are emblematic of dysphoria, thwarted desire and general physical discomfort. "Erin/Heather" seem to be connected by an umbilical cord, and "Penny," a short stuffed sculpture with two stubby legs and no neck, covered in mustard-colored leatherette and urethane, could be a science experiment gone wrong or a primitive creature that wandered out of the ocean too soon. "Felix," made of nylon and corset boning, is sans head, limp-legged and pinned to the wall on its side. Other sculptures look like refugees from nightmares or botched surgeries.

Oakland artist Rhonda Holberton is represented by nine installations, each more fascinating and mind-boggling than the next. Too bad there weren't more. Among other things, she envisions a world where the human body is obsolete, a relief or a disaster, depending on one's point of view, but at least there'd be no hay fever. For the digital animation "The Ground Was Never Stable in the First Place" (2015), she tried on football padding and riot gear, 3-D scanned her body, then animated the scan walking forward, combining movement of soldiers marching and fashion models strolling down the runway. The result: a plaster-white, robotic space soldier of indeterminate gender, wearing breastplate armor and arm and shin guards, its face half-blown off a la "The Terminator" on a bad day. Soulless and unstoppable, it strides relentlessly toward the viewer. Even spookier is "The Italian Navigator Has Landed in the New World" (2014), for which Holberton also used keyframe animation techniques similar to puppetry or stop-motion. Headless, missing part of an arm, and the flesh-tone of raw chicken, a limber figure resembling a ripped egg carton goes through the paces of a virtual yoga routine, a spectacle disturbing in a way that's difficult to overstate.

South African photographer Zanele Muholi, who established a forum for queer and visual media activists seeking "to re-write a black queer and trans visual history of South Africa at the height of hate crimes in SA," contributes a succession of powerful black women in glossy, staged self-portraits. In a gesture aimed at reclaiming their blackness, they've darkened their skin and stare down the camera with an air of defiance, each an imposing presence to be reckoned with.

The same could be said of Cahun and Moore, rebels to the end whose in-your-face, fuck-you attitude extended to the Nazis. During WWII, the couple lived on Jersey, a Nazi-occupied Channel Island, where they smuggled treason-inciting notes into soldiers' quarter, acts for which they were arrested, imprisoned and sentenced to death. Fortunately, the war ended before the execution could be carried out. A 1945 photograph taken upon their release shows a gray-haired Cahun with a Nazi badge clenched between her teeth, as if to say: Up yours!

Through July 7. www.thecjm.org

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ART

A Probing Look at How We Perform and Present the Self

Show Me As I Want to Be looks exposed and idealized models of being by probing the self — the unstable, performative essence of humanity — and bringing it to life art.

Sara Tafuri March 19, 2019

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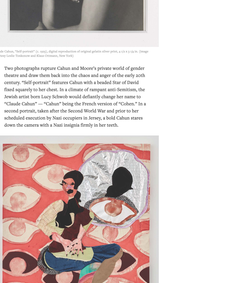
Claude Cahun (Lucy Schwob) and Marcel Moore (Suzanne Malherbe), "Untitled" (I am in training don't kiss me)", (self), gelatin silver print, 4.25 x 6.5 in. (Jersey Heritage Collections)

SAN FRANCISCO — One of social media's greatest sources of power stems from the idea that being visible and being seen are one and the same, that the currency of being liked carries the purchase of being understood. It's the dream of celebrity and also romance, that your audience will clap when you stop performing, that when waking up in the morning you are enough. It's the fantasy that one can see past style through to one's essence, as though style were the gloss and armor of a multifaceted self — not a persona, not an avatar, not a front. To be considered as strange and beautiful as art.

But art doesn't exist outside of its frame and nobody exists outside of their person. A sense of glorified crisis and anxious disorientation, the personal has never been more political nor has one's individual relation to power been more crudely obvious. It's a dynamic that is compounded by social media, which balances under the guise of building community, rewarding the hottest takes and most photogenic banalities over the messy dispatches of a full life.

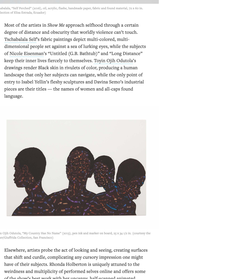
Show Me As I Want to Be Seen at the Contemporary Jewish Museum (CJM) in San Francisco resists these imposed and idealized models of being by probing the self — the unstable, performative essence of humanity — and bringing it to life with art. The show, curated by Natasha Marinson, gains its richness from a paradox at the heart of selfhood. As Marinson writes in the catalogue of coming out, "claiming an identity category does not miraculously create a self that is fixed, contained, or knowable." Or, as the artist Claude Cahun once exclaimed: "under this mask, another mask. I will never be finished removing all these faces." (It should be noted that in February, when the show opened, activists staged a protest outside of the museum, claiming its embrace of the "refined self" and LGBTQ culture was its own kind of mask, a form of pink-washing its relationship to Israel.)



Claude Cahun (Lucy Schwob) and Marcel Moore (Suzanne Malherbe), "Untitled" (Portrait of Claude lying in bonged hair), (self), gelatin silver print, 4.25 x 6.5 in. (Jersey Heritage Collections)

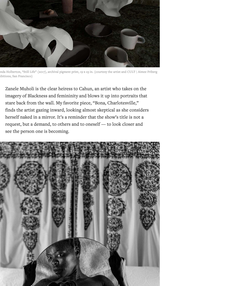
Cahun and her partner Marcel Moore are the spiritual godmothers of the show. Their work, which encompassed experimental theatre, publishing, and political action, is represented in the show by photomontages from Cahun's experimental anti-memoir *Aveux non avenus* and a series of hyper-stylized self-portraits that produce Cindy Sherman by decades.

But where Sherman's early work wielded the banality of femininity to uncanny effect, the portraits of Cahun clash masculine and feminine gendered routes to cosmo something flamboyantly neuter. "Untitled (I am in training don't kiss me)" finds Cahun cropped like a courtesan and ripped like an artiste, while "Untitled (Portrait of Claude lying on bonged skin)" offers its pastoral calm with a hint of Carwoman glam.



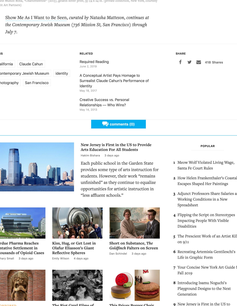
Claude Cahun, "Self Portrait", (c. 1927), digital reproduction of original gelatin silver print, 4.25 x 3.25 in. (Image courtesy Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects, New York)

Two photographs rupture Cahun and Moore's private world of gender theatre and draw them back into the chaos and anger of the early 20th century. "Self portrait" features Cahun with a beaded Star of David fixed squarely to her chest. In a climate of rampant anti-feminism, the Jewish artist born Lucy Schwob would defiantly change her name to "Claude Cahun" — "Cahun" being the French version of "Cohen." In a second portrait, taken after the Second World War and prior to her scheduled execution by Nazi occupiers in Jersey, a bold Cahun stares down the camera with a Nazi insignia firmly in her teeth.



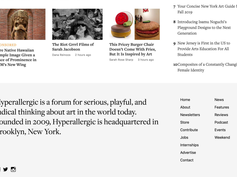
Tichadzaka, "Self Portrait" (2016, oil, acrylic, flashe, handmade paper, fabric and found material, 24 x 36 in. (Collection of Elisa Farreyka, Scarsdale)

Most of the artists in *Show Me* approach selfhood through a certain degree of distance and obscurity that worldly violence can't touch. Tichadzaka Sofi's fabric paintings depict multi-colored, multi-dimensional people set against a sea of lurking eyes, while the subjects of Yuzuna Eisenman's "Untitled (U.B. Rathole)" and "Long Distance" keep their inner lives fiercely to themselves. Toyin Ojih Odutola's drawings render black skin in studies of color, producing a human landscape that only her subjects can navigate, while the only point of entry to Isabel Yellin's fleshy sculptures and Dorina Sarosi's industrial pieces are their titles — the names of women and all-caps found language.



Toyin Ojih Odutola, "We Country Now No Name" (2015, pen ink and marker on board, 9.5 x 13.5 in. (courtesy the artist and Catharine Clark Gallery, San Francisco)

Elsewhere, artists probe the act of looking and seeing, creating surfaces that shift and confuse, complicating any cursory impression one might have of their subjects. Rhonda Holberton is uniquely attuned to the weirdness and multiplicity of performed selves online and offers some of the show's best work with her uncanny, half-scanned colorized pieces. Hina K retreats the male he traveled as a refugee fleeing Iraq while balancing a set of mirrors on the bridge of his nose on "I'm image (Blind as the Mother Tongue)," a gorgeous reflection (and refraction) of his life. Young-Joon Kwak's surreal sculptures are compelling, but her "Singing Mirror" is just north of cheap selfie fare — it does, however, pass the Kondo test when it comes to sparking joy.



Rhonda Holberton, "Bell 420" (2016, archival pigment print, 60 x 40 in. (courtesy the artist and DOCS / Green Drinks Gallery, San Francisco)

Zanele Muholi is the clear heir-loomer to Cahun, an artist who takes on the imagery of Blackness and femininity and blows it up into portraits that stare back from the wall. My favorite piece, "Bona, Charlottesville," finds the artist gating inward, looking almost skeptical as she considers herself naked in a mirror. It's a reminder that the show's title is not a request, but a demand, to others and to oneself — to look closer and see the person one is becoming.

Zanele Muholi, Bona, Charlottesville" (2015), gelatin silver print, 50 x 34 in. (private collection, New York, courtesy Stevin Jan Gerwen)

Show Me As I Want to Be Seen, *curated by Natasha Marinson, continues at the Contemporary Jewish Museum (736 Mission St, San Francisco) through July 7.*

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THE DO LIST

‘Beneath This Mask, Another Mask’: Identity is Unfixed in CJM’s ‘Show Me’

By Sarah Hotchkiss | Feb 12

Claude Cahun (Lucy Schwob) and Marcel Moore (Suzanne Malherbe), ‘Untitled’ (detail), 1928. *(© Estate of Claude Cahun; Photo: Don Ross.)*

The story of French artists Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore—neé Lucy Schwob and Suzanne Malherbe—is long and rich enough to fill multiple exhibitions, or multiple volumes.

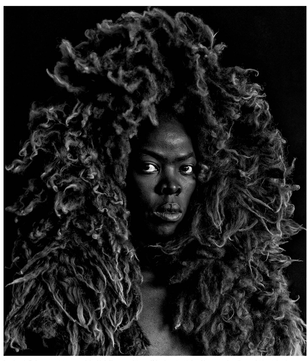
But here’s the abridged version: They met as teenagers in 1909 and were inseparable until Cahun’s death in 1954. In the intervening years, Cahun and Moore moved to Paris, published books together, worked on experimental theater productions, participated in the Surrealist movement and staged political actions. Facing increasing anti-Semitism, they relocated to the island of Jersey in 1937, where they waged a two-woman propaganda war against Nazi occupying forces during World War II. They were arrested for their troubles, and sentenced to death by soldiers who couldn’t believe two middle-aged women were responsible for so much unrest. They were liberated, with the island, after spending a year in prison.

Claude Cahun (Lucy Schwob) and Marcel Moore (Suzanne Malherbe), ‘Untitled’ (*I am in training don’t kiss me*), 1937. *(© Jersey Heritage)*

And throughout their relationship, they made art, a body of work “rediscovered” in the 1980s to fill an unknown gap in the lineage of queer, gender fluid, surrealist portraiture.

Show Me as I Want to Be Seen, the current group exhibition at the Contemporary Jewish Museum organized by assistant curator Natasha Matteson, uses Cahun and Moore’s collaborative photography as a jumping-off point to examine themes of identity (its performance, legibility and slippage) in the work of ten contemporary artists.

Of those, the clearest inheritor of Cahun and Moore’s subversive legacy appears in South African photographer Zanele Muholi’s staged self-portraits. In high contrast black-and-white gelatin silver prints, the artist poses in costumes fashioned from ordinary household objects—latex gloves, paper, a handbag—usually staring directly into the camera. Like the many photos of Cahun sporting theatrical makeup, Muholi darkens their skin in these images, a gesture of “reclaiming blackness” and forcibly confronting white supremacist notions of beauty. The results are striking.



Zanele Muholi, ‘Somnyama Ngonyama II, Oslo,’ 2015. *(Courtesy of Yancey Richardson, New York and Stevenson, Cape Town and Johannesburg)*

While most of Muholi’s contemporaries in *Show Me* deploy images of bodies to some extent (the lone exception is Davina Semo’s sculptures, where the artwork titles carry the weight of personhood), some tread more closely to Cahun and Moore’s penchant for surrealism than portraiture.

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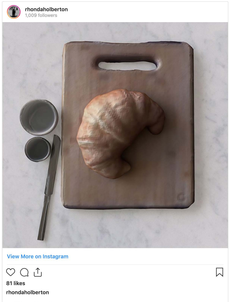
In Los Angeles-based Gabby Rosenberg’s discombobulated paintings, rendered in acrylic against black grounds, she cuts up figures, peers into them and jumbles the parts with thick brushstrokes. In *Fake Friend Frankenstein*, the man (or monster) waves despondently with a mouth that looks like raw meat, three teardrops spouting from one eye. The title tilts its reading: Is it someone reaching out for connection across the awkward distance of a social network?

Gabby Rosenberg, ‘Lights Off: Self Hurt,’ 2017. *(Courtesy of the artist; Photo: Steve Rimlinger)*

Mattesson’s wall text refers on multiple occasions to social media. And it’s easy to see the fragmented, constructed and multiplied self played out across posts on Instagram or Facebook as prime fodder for artmaking.

Rhonda Holberton’s *Just This One Thing*—part of the show but only visible to those who have the wherewithal to scroll through the Oakland-based artist’s Instagram feed—skewers the spare, ecru-hued “Instagram aesthetics” of influencers’ lifestyle posts.

A croissant, a stack of baskets, handmade ceramics—Holberton creates the images by 3D-scanning actual objects and staging them in virtual space. In a quick scroll-by, the digital fabrications appear innocuous, ordinary. Only close inspection reveals them to be oddly pixelated approximations. Tagging each image #stillife, along with hashtags like #rainydays or #sundaymorning, Holberton launches these interruptions into the stream of “real” Instagram posts, themselves approximations of actual lives.

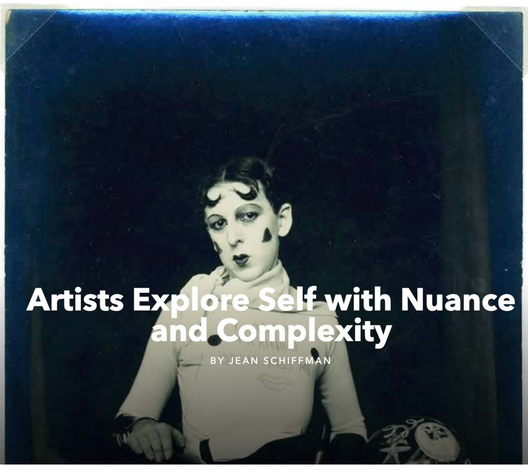


Show Me embraces the idea of an unfixed, nonbinary, constantly permuting self not only in its curatorial selections, but in its exhibition design, mingling the contemporary artists’ work with Cahun and Moore’s photographs. As might be expected in that mix, details get lost and overlooked. The base of Young Joon Kwak’s delicate *Hermaphroditus’s Reveal I*, for instance, nearly blends into the museum floor. A pedestal bearing anti-surveillance scents by Holberton sits, rather arbitrarily, against one end of a diagonal wall.

Underlying everything, it’s the comparison between a shared life’s work and multiple small bodies of work (or, in some cases, just a piece or two) that creates an imbalance at the heart of *Show Me*. Though their lives are thinly sketched in wall text, it’s clear that Cahun and Moore’s art is inextricable from the politics they embodied. The depth of their imagery is met, unevenly, by the breadth of the contemporary line-up.

But perhaps this exhibition, like Cahun and Moore’s practice, will serve as a jumping-off point in the viewers’ minds—an introduction to practices that, when fully investigated, will emerge as equally fascinating and vital.

‘Show Me as I Want to Be Seen’ is on view at the Contemporary Jewish Museum through July 7, 2019. Details here.



Artists Explore Self with Nuance and Complexity

BY JEAN SCHIFFMAN

Contemporary Jewish Museum exhibition features works that take a deep dive into the meaning of "self."

The 89-piece exhibit—a mix of photography,painting, sculpture (both free-standing and wall-hanging), video, 3-D animation and installation—features 10 contemporary artists, all of whom are either a woman, LGBTQ, a person of color or gender non-binary. They are featured in relation to the groundbreaking 20th-century French artists Claude Cahun, born Lucy Schwob (1894-1954), and her life-long collaborator and lover, Marcel Moore, born Suzanne Malherbe (1892-1972). Cahun (the French form of the common Jewish name Cohen) was a photographer, writer, surrealist, performer and radical activist; art critic Hal Foster called her "a Cindy Sherman avant la lettre" (meaning before there was a Cindy Sherman). The exhibit includes more than 20 of their photographs plus their photomontages created for "Aveux non avenues," or "Disavowals" in English, Cahun's "pseudo-autobiography" as it's been called. Moore and Cahun often photographed each other, in various guises; Cahun is most famously depicted in a photo circa 1928, one hand on the lapel of her boldly checked jacket, with short, cropped hair (in another photo she's bald), glancing at us and away from a small wall mirror that reflects, from a different angle, her slightly tilted head and enigmatic gaze. "Claude and Marcel's work is declaring and claiming a particular kind of [mutable] selfhood," says Matteson. "They were so ahead of their time!" Cahun wrote, "Shuffle the cards. Masculine? Feminine? It depends on the situation. Neuter is the only gender that always suits me." Her "Disavowals," Matteson notes, feels relevant, in its slipperiness, to the ways that the self is often represented in contemporary art, as seen so distinctly in this exhibit.

For example, there's the work of South African artist Zanele Muholi, a self-described "visual activist," whose series of photographs most closely resemble what's considered a traditional portrait. Muholi "uses everyday objects as adornments," Matteson points out: in one portrait, a blanket is draped as a head covering, with Muholi gazing fiercely at the viewer. The skin is darkened in these headshots as a way for the artist to reclaim blackness, explains Matteson—"thwarting… gender normative standards of beauty."

On the opposite extreme, the most non-figurative works on display are by San Francisco artist Davina Semo. "A Great Thing in Her Life Is That She Has a Secret" is composed of pigmented and reinforced concrete, stainless steel pipe and broken auto glass. The various ways of concealing the self is one of the exhibit's thematic threads.

The human hand reappears as a motif in many of the works, including Semo's; it symbolizes, says Matteson, action, "representing the self as an active figure," not an object. Among them: Los Angeles painter Gabby Rosenberg's depiction of fragmented body parts; East Coast-based Tschabalala Self's paint-and-fabric portrayal of the black female body (in "Scarlet," her subject has a black, four-fingered hand; in "Perched" her fingernails are blood red and lethal looking). Young Joon Kwak's mixed-media, abstract sculpture, "Hermaphroditus's Reveal I," features three uncannily life-like hands with a curved slab of resin representing the body.

Some of the photos in the exhibit highlight performativity through costume and gesture, points out Matteson. In several, a mirror or reflecting pool appears: a reclamation, or subversion, of the myth of Narcissus, which Cahun wrote about as a positive archetype, one that represents self-love and self-approval, a concept that's captured in a photo of her seen from behind and above, naked, languishing on a rock and peering at herself in a pool.

Berlin-based artist Hiwa K's video shows him retracing the path he took when he fled
Iraqi Kurdistan and walked to Europe years ago, this time balancing on his nose a tall sculpture made of rear-view mirrors with their multiple reflections. "He's thinking about how geographies and territories contribute to our sense of self," comments Matteson.

Local artist Rhonda Holberton's large digital animations are particularly unsettling: In one, a headless, fragmented and disintegrating body is doing yoga asanas; Holberton scanned her own body to create a model, then animated it. "She's posing questions about whether and how we might be able to represent ourselves in virtual space with avatars," points out Matteson.

In contrast to Holberton's disjointed bodies, Isabel Yellin's stuffed sculptural torsos and limbs seem soft, unbreakable, made of such materials as nylon, leatherette and acrylic; in "Estelle" (which includes corset boning) a pair of unnaturally long arms hang down the back of a slender, zippered torso, which is being embraced, around the waist, by another pair of arms, disembodied.

"What is the role of portraiture in visual art in this era of widely distributable selfies?" Matteson asked herself in planning "Show Me." She posits that in art museum exhibits, with their slowed-down tempo, nuance emerges, as well as "productive confusion and a certain kind of audacity."

Ultimately, for us the viewers, she writes in the catalog, the fact that these artists present themselves in such unselfie-like complexity "may spark a deep sense of recognition"—we may see
a new facet of ourselves, she suggests, "self-mirrored in that complexity."

Show Me as I Want to Be Seen

Through July 7

Contemporary Jewish Museum

736 Mission St., San Francisco

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Show Me as I Want to be Seen @ CJM

Posted on 27 May 2019

by Tirza True Latimer

Claude Cahun (Lucy Schwob) and Marcel Moore (Suzanne Malherbe) illustration from Aveux non Avenus, Paris Editions du Carrefour, 1930

This major exhibition presents ten contemporary artists—Nicole Eisenman, Rhonda Holberton, Hera K., Young Joon Kwak, Zanele Muholi, Tsyon Qin Odulele, Gabby Rosenberg, Tochabatale Self, Desirna Sierra, and Isabel Yellin—whose work in a range of mediums intermingles identity. But first, it introduces a pair of predecessors, Claude Cahun (1894–1954) and Marcel Moore (1893–1972), who Nataisha Matteson, the exhibition's curator, identifies as "pioneers" in the representation of "fluid," "complex" and "constructed" notions of the self.

At the entrance to the galleries where *Show Me as I Want to Be Seen* exhibits, visitors encounter eight high-resolution scans of collages conceived by Cahun and Moore for the magnum opus *Aveux non Avenus* (Disavowals) published in 1930. The bookplates reassemble images from the couple's photographic oeuvre, original drawings and reproductions clipped from art-historical and popular cultural sources.

Some of the collages also bear hand-written inscriptions. One of them reads "under this mask, another mask. I will never be finished removing all these faces." The formulation affirms the contention of the book, and of this exhibition: the multiplicity of what we call "the self."

The exhibition title, *Show Me as I Want to Be Seen*, doesn't quite drive this point home, but the artworks selected for inclusion—both from Cahun and Moore and the others—do the job well, the former serving as guideposts, strategically interspersed throughout the exhibition. *For* example, Rhonda Holberton's digital animation *The Ground Was Never Stable in the First Place* (2015) features a faceless avatar sinking forward into a virtual abyss without milestones or landmarks. Like Cahun and Moore, Holberton avows the self by "disavowing" what Matteson calls "its constancy."

Rhonda Holberton, The Ground was Never Stable in the First Place, 2015, single channel HD color digital animation (looping), acrylic sheet 48 x 96 inches

Since *Show Me as I Want to Be Seen* presents the Cahun/Moore duo as progenitors, some background on their life and work together is indispensable for understanding the show's ambitions. Born to a prominent Jewish publishing family from Nantes and the niece of the Symbolist author Marcel Schwob, Claude Cahun (née Lucy Schwob), was well connected to the French literary world. Marcel Moore (family name: Suzanne Malherbe) was the daughter of a well-off Protestant family. Moore studied at the fine arts academy in Nantes where she showed early promise as a visual artist and designer.

The lives of Cahun and Moore became inextricably entwined when they were still schoolgirls. They were already lovers when Cahun's father married Moore's widowed mother, making them stepsisters. The family relationship enabled them to live openly together from the very start of their relationship.

Moore regularly contributed fashion illustrations to the Schwob family newspaper *Phare de la Loire*, where Cahun's earliest writings also appeared. Moore later illustrated Cahun's books—the first, a Symbolist-inspired book of verses, *Vues et visions* (Views and Visions), was published in 1919.

Claude Cahun (Lucy Schwob) and Marcel Moore (Suzanne Malherbe, Untitled 2 am in training don't kiss me), 1927 gelatin silver print

In Paris, where the couple took up residence in 1921, they participated in various avant-garde theatrical ventures Cahun performed, Moore designed sets and costumes), volunteered at Sylvia Beach's bookstore, Shakespeare and Co., hosted cultural salons and political meetings in their Montparnasse studio, and became active contributors to the Surrealist movement.

Throughout the 1920s, Cahun and Moore pursued a project of staged photos that yielded hundreds of images, mostly featuring Cahun in a variety of roles that intervened visually into the established repertoire of gender stereotypes. In 1930, Moore integrated these photographs into the series of collages published in *Aveux non avenus*. The book bears Cahun's signature, but Moore's crucial participation is also acknowledged.

During the period of the book's gestation, the late 1920s, the couple's collaborations with the Théâtre Exotique, Salle Adyar, and with Pierre Albert-Birot's innovative Théâtre du Plateau brought them into contact with André Breton and his Paris Surrealist circle. In dialog with Surrealists, Cahun and Moore's work became increasingly political. They participated in Surrealist exhibitions and demonstrations, signed Surrealist tracts, and found, for a time, a community of kindred spirits.

By the late 1930s, however, they perceived their life and work in Paris as unsustainable. The Surrealist movement split into bitter factions; anti-Semitic manifestations became increasingly commonplace; war with Germany seemed likely if not inevitable. Disillusioned and anxious, the couple relocated to their summer retreat on the Channel Isle of Jersey. They were not safe there for long.

Soon German soldiers invaded the Channel Islands. Over half of the population of Jersey fled to the English mainland. This time, Cahun and Moore chose to stay and make a stand. There would be no retreat.

Claude Cahun (Lucy Schwob) and Marcel Moore (Suzanne Malherbe), unitled (Portrait of Cahun with Nazi badge between her teeth), 1945

The "sisters" (as they were locally known) distinguished themselves with ingenious resistance activities. Masterminding a two-woman counter-propaganda campaign, they covertly distributed anti-fascist tracts for years, but were ultimately apprehended and imprisoned. After their arrest, German military authorities requisitioned their house and used it as a barracks and base of occupation operations. Soldiers rifled through their possessions, appropriating what they pleased, and destroying books and artworks they considered "perverted."

The couple very narrowly escaped deportation, thanks to a sympathetic bailiff who procrastinated in processing their paperwork. They were released when the island was liberated on May 8, 1945.

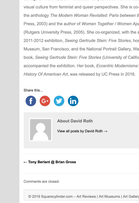
When Cahun and Moore returned to their ransacked house, they discovered that many of their favorite photographs and artworks had not survived the occupation. Cahun never fully recovered from the war, their two-year imprisonment, the estrangement from Paris, the defilement of their home, the destruction of their work, and the threats of the war's aftermath. She died at the age of 60 in 1954. Moore buried her in the cemetery next door to her partner.

Moore lived on in Jersey for nearly 20 more years, taking her own life in 1972 at the age of 80. Both are buried together in the churchyard next door to where they had taken many photographs. They share a tombstone bearing an inscription from Revelations 1:21 "and I saw new heavens and a new earth." The headstone is etched with both of their names and two Stars of David. Although Moore had never converted, and Cahun avowed secularism and agnosticism, the symbols on the gravestone marked their solidarity with all those oppressed and imperiled under the Nazi regime—Jews, homosexuals, free-thinking intellectuals, modern artists, modern women.

Claude Cahun (Lucy Schwob) and Marcel Moore (Suzanne Malherbe), Untitled, 1928

This history of anti-fascist resistance is not the only thing that makes Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore, and by extension the exhibition *Show Me as I Want to Be Seen*, a fit for the Contemporary Jewish Museum. In the exhibition catalog, CJM's Executive Director Lori Starr makes the claim, "To be Jewish is to be queer." She cites an observation made by Rabbi Benny Lappe, another contributor to the catalog: "What it means to be queer is to embody a profound sense of otherness, the insights from which you walk through the world as a critique of the mainstream."

All of the artists in the show describe Cahun and Moore's work as "prescient." Hera K. Matteson artists (e.g. Cindy Sherman, Maya Deren, Tacita Dean, and Francesca Woodman among them). However, she does identify a fresh set of resonances in contemporary feminist (and mostly queer) artists practices. "The exhibition, she writes, "links Cahun and Moore's revolutionary work to the work of ...contemporary artists who conjure, validate, and update their earlier tactics for the current moment." With these 21st century artists, Cahun and Moore have in common the reclamation of agency through the disavowal of classifying systems that serve and preserve dominant interests.



Rhonda Holberton, Fall, 2014, unique fragrance in glass atomizer

FOIL, one of my favorite pieces (again by Holberton), takes aim at state sponsored systems of surveillance and control. Research conducted by the CIA in the early 1980s acknowledges human scent as a highly accurate biometric, more failsafe than fingerprinting, facial recognition or retinal scanning. Holberton created *FOIL*, a fragrance line distilled from smelly T-shirts donated by friends. She bottled the fragrances in atomizers, which can serve to mask a person's signature scent and foil this form of olfactory surveillance.

Although it can be misleading to call historical figures "prescient"—to define them, that is, by what came later — Matteson adroitly avoids the pitfalls of proleptic foreknowl, the erasure of generative historical conditions). She acknowledges the pertinence of Cahun and Moore's self-imaging experiments today while situating the artists carefully within their own social and political environment. That environment was, needless to say, very different than our own.

Yes, Zanele Muholi may share with Cahun/Moore an awareness of historical portrait conventions and the self-framing potential of photography. Like Cahun/Moore, Muholi mobilizes prose, make-up, costume and coiffure. But gave life for a woman of color in contemporary South Africa has little in common with the experience of well-to-do European lesbians living in Paris between the two World Wars. Nevertheless, Muholi's fierce embrace of Otherness, in and through portraiture, makes the juxtaposition with Cahun/Moore visually powerful and conceptually justifiable.

Zanele Muholi, Somnyama Ngonyama II, Oslo, 2015, gelatin silver print

Show Me as I Want to Be Seen, by staging such comparisons, does not so much posit artistic influence as it raises awareness of the proliferation, in our times, of interventions by artists into the image-making technologies where discourses (thus ideologies) of social subjectivity, and the individual "self," take shape.

We see how ten contemporary artists adopting a range of materials and expressive modes (Isabel Yellin's stuffed leatherettes, Tochabatale Self's larger-than-life fabric-collaged portraits; Young joon Kwak's anthropomorphic abstractions cast in resin; Desirna Sierra's mosaics of shattered auto glass) have re-inserted the creative strategies innovated by subversives of Cahun and Moore's generation. All of the artists contributing to the show, like Cahun/Moore, re-cast existing visual vocabularies and technologies of reproduction to create new spaces of possibility, new ways of seeing and being seen.

# # #

"Show Me as I Want to Be Seen" @ **Contemporary Jewish Museum** *through July 7, 2019.*

In Conversation: Tirza True Latimer and Jennifer Shaw, professor of art history at Sonoma State, will discuss the work of Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore and their relationship to how contemporary artists define the self at CJM, May 9, 6:30-8 p.m. Tickets. Click here.

About the Author:
Tirza True Latimer is Professor and Interim Chair of the Visual Studies program at California College of the Arts, San Francisco. Her published work reflects on modern and contemporary visual culture from feminist and queer perspectives. She is co-editor, with Whitney Chadwick, of the anthology *The Modern Woman Revisited: Paris between the Wars* (Rutgers University Press, 2003) and the author of *Women Together / Women Apart: Portraits of Lesbian Paris* (Rutgers University Press, 2005). She co-organized, with the art historian Wanda Corn, the 2011-2012 exhibition, *Seeing Gertrude Stein: Five Stories*, hosted by the Contemporary Jewish Museum, San Francisco, and the National Portrait Gallery, Washington D.C.; and co-authored a book, *Seeing Gertrude Stein: Five Stories* (University of California Press, 2011), which accompanied the exhibition. Her book, *Eccentric Modernisms: Making Differences in The History Of American Art*, was released by UC Press in 2016.

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