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Identity

In his book *The Will to Knowledge: The History of Sexuality Volume 1*,¹ Michel Foucault reveals the mechanisms of power that structure our hidden and manifest relations with our sexuality. In doing so, he undermines the semblance of freedom that has obscured these power relations from the Victorian Era through the 20th century. He exposes a discourse that attempts to engender a process of discovery – yet which contains within it processes of concealment, categorization and structuring, and systems that combine various restrictive and liberating devices. Foucault's book thus engenders a discussion of what is "permitted" and "forbidden" in a liberal bourgeois society. In Israel, where the term "permissive" is part of a structured, conservative and nationalist discourse, this discussion becomes even more meaningful given the aggressive and one dimensional interpretations of masculinity.

Eitan Gross is both a "he" and a "she" who calls herself "Eitan," and who has been totally devoted to working in clay for the past 40 years. Gross lives in a state of symbiosis with his home, his art, his identity, his family and his life in Jaffa and in the local Israeli landscape. These elements all come together within the framework of the impossible power relations that shape Israeli reality – the relations between masculinity, femininity and the Israeli machoism that lies between them; and the relations between Arabs, Jews and the occupation that lies between them. Gross tells both an individual and a collective story based on materials that constitute an

¹ Michel Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge: The -History of Sexuality Volume 1*. London: Penguin Books, 1998

alternative Israeli identity – one that has not been defined in any manifesto. His is a personal narrative that involves a torturous process of coming to terms with an alternative identity before the term "gender" entered our consciousness; before coming out of the closet became an accepted act accompanied by various kinds of personal and social support. Long before all of this, Eitan Gross was experiencing the constant pain of being imprisoned within a complex identity; of being confused and repressed both personally and sexually, while attempting to be part of – but also to extricate himself from – the hegemonic formula: "wife, children, family."

This exhibition combines acceptance and defiance, which Gross expresses in the course of forging a new relationship to the world around him – a relationship that no longer involves concealment and submission to an imposed social order. Working from a position of subjective freedom, Gross has created a self-revealing exhibition in which he touches upon childhood memories, family life, private dreams, questions of identity and gender, loneliness and the longing for love. The name of this exhibition – "Zipora, if Eitan Were a Girl, I Would Wait for Him!" originated with the remark of one distant relative about Eitan's appearance as a child: a blond, blue-eyed, shy boy with the soft facial features of a preadolescent girl. Already back then, this sentence germinated in the fertile ground of a double identity. The complex nature of identity is, indeed, at the heart of this exhibition. As André Green remarks in *Le complexe de castration* (the complex of castration), the birth of a child is immediately followed by the identification of its sexual organs by doctors and parents, and later by the official attribution of a sexual identity when it is registered in the census. Finally, children come to identify themselves as boys or girls through their experience of their

body and of their identity. In a similar manner, others identify the child as belonging to a given sex.²

The process of self-identification and the construction of social identity raise a host of gender-related questions that touch upon every area of life. As an artist, Gross has chosen to work in clay, which allows for two parallel creative processes. On the one hand, it involves the creation of functional objects that are connected to a domestic sphere traditionally gendered as feminine; moreover, ceramic art is regarded in Israel as a quintessentially feminine pursuit (about 90% of Israeli ceramicists are women). On the other hand, Gross has created a body of ceramic works reflective of an inner world in which the firm, muscular body traditionally identified with "masculinity" is not a representation of his own body (a self-portrait of sorts) but rather an object of longing, part of an imagined reality that is experienced through these works. The status of his chosen medium in Israeli culture, as well as its personal and sensuous nature, thus define it as a tool for the production of identity

Contemporary Ornament

Ever since the dawn of civilization, human beings have decorated both themselves and their surroundings. Ornamentation is often based on a repetitive pattern, which creates formal relations between the individual unit and the whole. Patterns familiar from various ornamental traditions include animal and vegetative motifs, or geometric forms that divide up the surface in various manners. These rich designs play a significant role in determining the nature of ceramic volumes, and infuse them with life. Our material culture is imbued with a long tradition of "decoration," which exerts a strong influence on all artists. Every object is part of material culture, yet at the

² André Green, *Le complexe de castration*. Collection No. 2531, 1995.

same time it is also a form of cultural "material." This duality serves to define an extensive field of action. Within this field, Gross vacillates between a devotion to ornamentation that involves a dialogue with age-old traditions, and the creation of a personal artistic vocabulary.

Gross began his artistic career as an ardent student of the ceramicist Yael Gurfinkel Pasternak. At times, Gurfinkel Pasternak uses the potter's wheel as part of an industrial production process. In some instances, she has produced functional works that entertain a dialogue with local ceramic traditions (such as the Arab and Armenian ones); in other instances, she uses the wheel to shape elegant volumes – containers of sorts that create a breathtaking tension between form, material and color. Like her, Gross entertains a dialogue with the notion of Israeliness in order to define local identity – an attempt that characterized the work of various ceramicists until the end of the 1970s.

Gross, who like many ceramicists is devoted to the creation of series, has developed his own personal, ornamental world. Everything around him becomes a source of inspiration for the repetitive forms he creates and infuses with volume, color and life. Family members, local flora and fauna, David Ben Gurion, the singer Madonna, childhood dolls, tattoo patterns, drag queens, drawings by Tom de Finland³ – all these become the basis for ornamental patterns. Gross freely mixes various images and styles, combining them with bold, colorful glazes and photographic images. The result is a rich and sophisticated collage that tells his life story in a contemporary language: applied to the ceramic volumes, painterly matter becomes material painting.

³ Tom de Finland is a painter of provocative male erotica, who is well known in the gay and lesbian community. 1998

It is impossible to ignore the connection between Gross' free-flowing creative process and the work of Grayson Perry, winner of the 2003 Turner Prize. Indeed, both artists similarly engage in the construction of an identity that exceeds fixed gender definitions; both have taken the license to express themselves freely on ceramic volumes; both similarly contend with a world that is at once personal, revealing and political, and which blurs and challenges the boundaries between the "normal" and the "perverse." In Perry's work, the crossing of boundaries is undertaken by his alter ego, "Claire," an extroverted female persona that makes public appearances as an overly adorned and made up bourgeois woman. Gross does not make such separations: for him, transgender is a stable rather than an internally divided state of being, and his own model of an alternative identity is expressed through his very being, his artistic language and his everyday life. Perry's engagement with clay – the most "deviant" and excluded form of visual art⁴ – bespeaks a conscious strategy of adopting marginal practices. Gross, by contrast, is a professional ceramicist. Unlike Perry, he sees nothing wrong with creating functional and decorative ceramic vessels. His engagement with clay is total and long term (36 years), and stems from a connection between his personal inclination and his need to support himself financially.

Notwithstanding the differences between them, Perry's receipt of the Turner Prize serves to underscore the power of Gross' work by expanding the definition of ceramic art, which is often marginalized both by longstanding artistic tradition and by power struggles within the art world. Moreover, it may be viewed as a rare positive instance – in which the "vase" is revealed as a sensuous canvas that invites every

⁴ Ruti Director, "Grayson Perry - Potter and Transvestite," *1280°c – Ceramic Art Review* Ceramic Artists Association of Israel, Spring 2004 [Hebrew].

artist to detach himself from tradition and to work freely, in a manner that challenges the politics of art.

"Zipora, if Eitan Were a Girl, I Would Wait for Him!"

Eitan Gross' exhibition consists of an installation composed of a series of clay works, which have been sculpted or manually processed after being spun on a potter's wheel. The language of these works vacillates between the provocative and the expressive, between the painterly and the naïve, in a free and bold manner. Although they have been transported to the museum, these works seem to still be situated in their context of production, since they are displayed upon the kind of cheap shelves characteristic of ceramic workshops. The blurring between the space of the museum and that of the studio endows the display with the intimate quality of a visit to an artist's workshop, where the finished works are displayed alongside various layers of the work process: in the studio, one also sees what will not be exhibited and what has been ruined, as well as the artist's sources of inspiration. There one peers at the artist's inner truth, rather than at the meticulously designed surface of a museum display. This intentional duality is part of the entire world created by Gross, which is constructed out of a series of oppositions – between private and public, traditional and contemporary, functional and sculptural, introverted and extraverted, deep sadness and creative joy, expressiveness and naïveté.

A Family Album

Gross' vases entertain a dialogue with three central traditions: the red and black figure vases of ancient Greece, the blue cobalt decorations on Chinese porcelain, and hand-painted Delft tiles.

Gross creates vases and "decorates" them with traditional blue color, while using them to tell a story and changing their gender definition: they cease to be containers of female fertility, and are transformed into a form of ornamented and ornamental masculinity. These decorative images -- which are a combination of painting and printing -- allow Eitan to open the family album, to take it apart and to reconstruct it; in them, Gross appears as a child, a mother, a father and an uncle -- reproduced, painted, cropped, torn and pasted. By introducing new characters into the family album, he redefines his roots in a nonlinear manner that is faithful to his inner self. His close family members appear on vases whose lids are painted with a reddish orange glaze, which is at once sensual and reminiscent of blood. These lids are glued on to the vases, which cease to function as containers and become hermetically sealed objects.

These images include a photographed self-portrait of Gross dressed and made up as a woman; a childhood doll that appears upon various surfaces (like Yemima, the doll familiar from an Israeli children's song -- at once pretty and distorted, loved and bewitched); small sculptures of putti; made-up cupids -- some of whom have mature and erect penises -- who are depicted riding eagles with yellow beaks and outstretched wings, flying from heaven to the realm of darkness and back again. The vase with multiple spouts,⁵ which connects Gross to local, traditional Arab culture, was created as a gift for his own imagined wedding. These are the materials that Gross uses in order to recreate and to reveal to us a private, three-dimensional family album.

⁵ See Professor Nurit Knaan-Keidar's article in this catalogue.

Drag Queens - the Ornamentation of a Performative Gaze⁶

In the series "Drag Queens," Gross has created a group of theatrical heads typical of drag performances, which feature extreme renderings of femininity. This series is based on the reproduction and subsequent processing of a head taken from a display window mannequin – thus underscoring the theme of display introduced by the drag performance. Gross' inanimate sculptural performance is itself a display that does not require the performer to subsequently discard the theatrical persona and reveal the body hidden beneath it. The creamy heads of these drag queens have been eternalized in matter, and painted with bold colors and sensuous glazes. They impersonate a wide range of figures – objects of longing that function as a collection of possible identities in the dressing room of theatrical fantasy.

The Wings of Angels and the Halos of Saints

Wings and halos are familiar from a variety of iconographic sources, and numerous ancient myths involve human beings who are endowed with certain animal qualities. The desire to sprout wings is familiar from the myth of Icarus and Daedalus, the father and son whose longing to fly resulted in a heavy loss. In Christian iconography, wings and halos are related to the figures of angels and saints. Gross creates wings and angels – substances related to sacredness, spirituality, freedom and light – out of clay, which is an earthly substance.⁷ Some of these wings and halos are sharp and repellent, and seem to be bursting out in protest. These are not spiritual objects that allow for an ecstatic communion with a god; rather, they are heavy objects that injure and scratch their carriers like an unbearable burden. In Gross' private iconography, the

⁶ Judith Butler, "Critically Queer," in *Bodies that Matter*. New York: Routledge, 1993, pp.223-42.

⁷ Avishay Eyal, "One Woman's Voice, On the Life and Work of Raya Redlich," *Fallen Halos*, The Art Gallery, University of Haifa, 2002.

images that were meant to elevate him to the spiritual realm weigh down on him and ground him to the material world.

Craft and Subversiveness

The personal journey undertaken by Eitan Gross in this exhibition constitutes a moment of respite, observation, suspension and reflection. His choice of introducing us into his world by putting these works on display is a symbolic act that parallels the act of "coming out." Although Gross may have come out a long time ago in his personal life, here he finds himself contending with a comprehensive, mature and unified artistic statement. This statement unites the different elements of his identity as an artist, a craftsman, a transgender person, a family member and an Israeli. Gross' work endows us with a new and liberating option. He uses his materials to reflect the state of conceptual distortion we are immersed in – a state characterized by the perpetuation of fixed power dynamics. Gross, a serial saboteur of accepted norms, exhibits his ceramics at a contemporary Israeli art museum, presents us with different models of male, female and Israeli identity, and thus invites us to engage in a complex reexamination of the field within which we operate. If I were to define Gross' body of work, I would describe it simply as "subversive craft."

