

# THING

by beth solin

I realized very early in life that gender was not just something we were born with, but also, something we were taught. We, as humans are the only animals who define gender and genitalia with innuendos, suppositions, and stereotypes: the ill-fated culprits that dictate the “rights” and “wrongs” about the core of who we are. The rest of the creatures in the animal world have their own unique set of problems, but they remain unscathed in their ability to exist, as simple “THINGS”, in their essence, and undefined. Something humans are blessed with at birth, but lose hold of as we develop into cognizant beings, impressionable and eager to fulfill the desires of others.

Over the years, I have found myself spending more and more time trying to resurrect the part of myself that was just a “THING. The part who thought nothing about having male or female genitalia. The part that existed before the “natural me”, or “wrong me” was slowly let, like the blood from a cows jugular, and the “right me” was pumped in like an intravenous antibiotic, meant to kill some horrible bacteria, in simple terms, *a social transfusion*. Something perpetuated by the human obsession with defining the indefinable through categorization, the outcome that was not only limiting, but, often condemning, dangerous, and antithetical to actually understanding anything or anyone at all.

As a young girl with a creative temperament, the *social transfusion* I experienced from family and those around me left me feeling completely misunderstood and invoked a great amount of pain, frustration, and anger. So, I rebelled becoming a reactionary in an unconscious effort to remain faithful to the multi-sided nature of myself. To the naked eye, I was a classic tomboy, into tools and basketball, rough talk and cigars. For several years, the idea of wearing a dress was totally out of character and when I did put one on, I felt like a gay boy in drag.

As a older teen, one of my best girlfriends and I even marked our territory on two occasions by urinating, once, all over a very phallic monument, and again around the perimeter of a cave in an ignorant attempt to ward off large animals (female urine actually attracts male mammals). At one point, I even consciously took my own virginity, although this had more to do with a deep loathing I felt for my sexuality, acquired from derogatory banter about the female body - that inevitably focused on the vagina – that was frequent and harsh enough to inflict a scar that’s still in repair.

And yet, I was still boy crazy, girlish about my hair, makeup and breasts, and spared few people the knowledge of how much I enjoyed menstruating. It was a conflict, inside and out—between interior and exterior and each against each. When I finally did have real intercourse with a boy at 20, I was pulled away from the experience by a strange momentary confusion as to whether I was the

penetrator or penetrated. The body I had so painstakingly (and painfully) deconstructed would not slide into the “normal” sexual role and I was detached from the act as I observed in a bewilderment that bordered on horror as sexual body parts which felt like imposters protested the very idea of collaborating toward some great orgasmic end. Nothing “fit”, not emotionally, not physically, not even artistically. Having grown intolerant of this feeling with an added awareness that the first 20 years of my life were predicated on how other’s perceived me, I began to wonder if I could ever become immune to it all.

It was here that something snapped, and without too much forethought, I began to break apart my assigned role by way of cross-dressing and sexual experimentation with the same sex. It all began the night of a co-ed college party. Half of the attendees, myself included, were asked to come dressed as the opposite sex. The other half were not told anything and showed up to what they expected to be a regular party. I came dressed and ready to play the part as *the man of my dreams*. In my drunken stupor, I ended up acting like an overly sexualized predatory creep - towards both sexes. I didn’t want the night to end.

After sobering up, I was deeply disturbed by my feelings (and behavior). After much thought I realized that the pleasure I experienced had everything to do with the power, anonymity, and an unidentifiable ambiguousness I felt that night. I was *everyone* and *no one* all at once. Without a history, without a familial audience, without the “me” that for so long had been defined by others. On one level, I was free.

This freedom inspired a two-week performance that enabled me to take a closer look at myself. I dressed as different images of women for the first week, and different images of men for the second. Each gender image was explored for 24 hours during which I went to class, the gym (including the locker room), shops, and bars both gay and straight. My clothing, hair, and smell, were all adjusted accordingly, from long hair to a buzz cut, shaved to hairy legs, smooth-cheeked to falsely bearded, and doused with perfume or cologne, and sometimes a pungent body odor.

The identities were as follows: *Virgin Whore*: oh she’s just right, not too loose, not too tight, *Baby Doll*: clean, and pure, nothing like that dirty whore, *Mama*: with her baby gear isn’t she the perfect dear, *Throwaway*: inciting sneers, without a home she smells of fear, *Bearded Bitch*: won’t cut her hair – revolting in a world unfair. *Dykey Girl*: silk and grit, some shut her out some let her in. Gay Man: oh so soft and fem, Gay Man: leaning towards the straight not bent, Straight Man: got it piled high, he must be strong, he mustn’t cry. *Wrong Me Right Me*: sees the light, when right is wrong and wrong is right.

This performance was both a fascinating and miserable experience. The predominantly negative reactions I received from family, friends, colleagues, and even strangers hurt me, causing everything I’d buried from my childhood to rise to the surface. But in going through it, I was able to translate my internalized

images of gender into something that I could examine externally. I used the negativity I experienced during the performance as a vehicle to fuel more art and bring me closer to that original, unstamped version of myself I was searching for. Looking back on that original childhood and young adult disorientation, I see clearly that it wasn't womanhood or even personhood I was trying to achieve, but something much deeper. It was, rather the recovery of a native form - a nondescript and ambiguous "THING", a human animal unconditioned by personal terms, and something immune to *social transfusion*. Yet, even with these attempted definitions, the concept of "THING" remains totally indefinable. We look to art in search of what can't be found and as a delivery system to see more than what meets the eye. As artists we feel the compulsion to translate the indefinable into sounds, images, forms, or happenings.

Like the recollection of a strangely intuitive dream, I am working to recreate this "THING-NESS" in my sexual experiences and in my art. Not only is it happening, it is taking on a form of its own in both realms. My current installation in progress, titled *OUT ME IN ME OUT*, will be comprised of 9 life-sized Crystal Clear figures, all animals - some human, some not - that will be part of a scene with the purpose in mind of bringing into light, the relationship between sexuality, procreation, consumption and the lifecycle that binds the self to the animal "THING". Like so much of my work, this new installation, deals with the physical and psychological structure that lies at the center of our being, and defines us and every animal in the purest sense: transparent, without clothes, without skin, without muscle, just a skeleton of the primal, unscathed, and indefinable.