

I. We. They. Celebrations of Gender.  
Juror Statement by Thea Quiray Tagle

Arts Benicia's summer juried exhibition theme for 2024 is "I. We. They. Celebrations of Gender." From a large group of applicants, the selected artists and artworks present us with a diversity of forms, genres, and mediums that elevate and activate expressions of gender identity across the spectrum, and in some cases, across species.

Through photography, artists including Pablo Bautista, Michael Gaines, and L.A. Hyder beautifully showcase the multiplicities of LGBTQ+ identities and lifestyles that refuse to conform to the mainstream. Pablo Bautista's portraits present the beauty of queer community as intergenerational and multiracial, from younger people fierce and proud to powerful adult femmes donning leather and lace. Michael Gaines' tender and vulnerable self-portraits show the artist in a domestic space embodying gender without binaries: from his wearing of high heels and a red one-piece pajama in bed to a shot taken from behind as he fastens a light chain around his neck. Another of his portraits uses shadow and light to illuminate the binaries embedded within everyday objects: a "masculine" thermos is placed alongside a "feminine" teacup. L.A. Hyder's portrait "Ivy & Acey, NYC" features a full color shot of lesbians from another generation spending time together in the concrete jungle of the city. These photographs and photographers do more than celebrate LGBTQ+ identities— they also express the resilience and thriving of queer people despite the odds.

Paintings by artists including Nathaniel J. Bice, Jovanna Briscoe, Anne Magratten, and Jing Qin offer representations that escape easy categorization as works about gender. Nathaniel J. Bice skews the traditional European still life in the series *Objects of Queerness*. Portraits of the artist and members of their community are composed of the mundane objects within their homes: a typewriter, beloved books, and a perfume atomizer are only some of these subtle signifiers of queer identity. Jovanna Briscoe's large-scale paintings illustrate youthful navigations and negotiations of gender through forms of play and dress. Anne Magratten's two paintings are lush landscapes in which it might be easy to miss the small nudes embedded within; "Lovers in the Church Garden" takes back the Adam and Eve conjugal story and subverts it through its placement in front of a house of worship. Meanwhile, Jing Qin's two paintings emphasize the interdependencies between people and more-than-human creatures: "I remember as you were" shows an Asian femme holding, improbably, a sloth, while "Coloradan Jacket" centers a very wrinkled cat being cradled by a person in the aforementioned outerwear. Across these different paintings, the artists find innovative ways to illuminate modes of living which are too often hidden from public view.

Drawings and other work on paper express the breadth of gender and sexuality present in all beings across species, through pieces that use color and shade for added complexity and depth. Gary Miller's "Chad and Drake" presents two men in repose, looking at each other with tenderness and care; their co-presence is adorned with metallic jacquard appliques and rhinestones, a campy and queer flourish that venerates queer intimacy. Meanwhile, Artemis

Jones' *Gay! The Animals* series of graphite, gouache, and ink works leans into the scientific proof of same-sex relations between animals including ducks, deer, hyenas, and damselflies. This too is a celebration of the beautiful diversity found in nature, a potent reminder when so much about queer identity is portrayed as unnatural.

Finally, the varied sculptural works in the exhibition render in three dimensions the beauty of bodies across genders and generations. Melissa Felderman's "Bow No. 1" and "Crown No. 1" remake artful and delicate objects of childhood usually associated with young girls— the sweetness of femininity rendered more precarious when cast in clay. On the other side of the spectrum, Sandy Frank's stoneware sculpture "Blue Eye Shadow" celebrates the aging body, complete with its wrinkles and sags. Together, these three pieces in particular encompass what is most compelling about the artworks in this exhibition when taken as a whole: the vast range of everyday experiences, identities, and expressions of gender and sexuality, and the power of art to celebrate, reveal, and render them spectacular.