

TRANS

series of sculptures by

Norbert Francis Attard

text by Nicola Petroni

We enact our notions of what we think a man or a woman should be with little cognizance of our complicity in a process driven by socio-cultural norms unseen but nonetheless there. Specific clothing, colors, walking styles, gestures and vocal ranges construct a dualistic reality in which we participate within and forge a specific sexual and gender identities that heeds a spectrum of maleness and femaleness. Yet, what does it mean to inhabit a liminal space in which one's gender or sexual identity is located somewhere in the middle, along the spectrum of maleness and femaleness? This work of Norbert Francis Attard seeks to address this quandary in approaching this very question. He has sought to blur the lines between what a male or female could be, not just within the realm of people, but within the chosen objects as well. In a series of sculptural works, Attard explores the relationships between maleness and femaleness, carving out an in-between space through which the viewer can inhabit and question for themselves their own identity.



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Amerali

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What is the power of the object or, to further problematize, how is the object ascribed agency and consequently granted power in the material world? How, in turn, do objects constitute instruments of performativity as signifiers of social roles and behaviours? These epistemological questions that challenge our knowledge of the everyday are placed under scrutiny in Norbert Attard's TRANS* series, begun in 2011. Objects from popular culture and clothing imbued with an explicit gender-bias are displayed conjointly to explore prominent visual and discursive stereotypes, and the subversion of such. In a surrealist act of disjointed recontextualizing, Attard reformulates the normative position of these objects as cognitively understood (and expected) in society. The questioning of gender norms has been a topic of much academic debate in various disciplinary fields tackling the notion of identity in the contemporary era, predominantly in the work of feminist theorist Judith Butler.

If one first takes a look at the critical work preceding postmodern thought, the ambivalent and contingent concept of ways of social being, or rather, the standardization and control of such may be found in the writings of Walter Benjamin. His late essay *Doctrine of the Similar*, published in 1933, observes the production and recognition of similarities through the notion of the 'mimetic faculty'. These may be identified in actions, gestures and, also, in objects.[1] Attard employs easily identifiable products of culture and fashion that, with their overt references, are often left undebated due to their habitual uses or ubiquitous appearance. A Spiderman quizzically upholding an item of female underwear, or a mannequin simultaneously modeling male and female undergarments, paired with accessories that are similarly indicative of sexual binaries. Appropriateness is certainly not on the agenda here, but taboos always present difficulty when discussed publicly. The terminology applied to analyze this series is itself imbued with a troublesome depth of meaning and usage. Butler's first chapter to her 1990 text *Gender Trouble* distinguishes between the concepts of gender and sex. This is eloquently elucidated in the following statement; 'the distinction between sex and gender serves the argument that whatever biological intractability sex appears to have, gender is culturally constructed.'[2]

How then does Attard approach these two definitions and Benjamin's mimetic faculty in his work? Butler herself answers this question by criticizing the presumption of the sole existence of two opposing gender polarities, which perpetuates the assumption that there are two modes of behaviour determined by sex and limited to it.[3] Therefore, through mimicry of normativity, the liminal spaces are rendered invisible and hybridity is negated. Diverting from a reality does not make it disappear, and Attard's objective is to counteract this by bringing the heterogeneity of gender possibilities to the fore. He does this in a light hearted manner, employing a language we can all comprehend and partake in. Those who strive for social acceptance fight against the comparison of the normal versus the abnormal, or 'the other'. Attard defies conventional binary oppositions in the hope of seeing an inclusionary future within which the suppressed would no longer exist as so.

NICOLA PETRONI

[1] Walter Benjamin, "Doctrine of the Similar," in *New German Critique* No. 17 (Spring, 1979), 65-69.

[2] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 9.

[3] *Ibid.*, 10.





TRANS 1

Mannequin, man's boot & female shoe, female dress, man's tie, 2011

This female mannequin leans against the wall, arms and hair misplaced. She appears as a misfit, her expression of identity being torn between two spheres of recognition. She wears an unmistakably female dress with a male neck tie, a bulky unruly boot and slender patent heels. The look on this static figures' face compounds with her outfit, as she stares blankly and unsure into a void.



TRANS 2

High-heeled female shoe, action figure, 2010

The generic battle of the sexes is played out in this assemblage with the femininity of a high heeled court shoe and a boys' action figure. The undisputed winner in this instance is the shoe; not solely a symbol of well-dressed women but one of power and success. The action figure, despite being muscular and supposedly super-human, remains in the preliminary stages of a child's development, and has not yet reached the level of maturity its opponent represents.



TRANS 3

Female handbag, action figure, mannequins hand, 2011.

What one expects to find in an overtly feminine handbag are associative objects of concomitant use. This well-built topless action figure emerges unexpectedly from the handbag's exterior in a threatening pose suggesting some form of potential attack. The handbag dangles from the grip of a mannequin hand, as an item placed on show to the viewer. Overall the piece foregrounds several contradictory objects and gestures conventionally pertaining to divisive categories.



IT'S NOT FOR GIRLS

Male mannequin's arm, female bracelets, Pisces tattoo, Yorkie chocolate bar, 2013

On the sterile, white arm of a male mannequin is a transfer tattoo of the Pisces sign indexing a motif that alludes to a sign of masculinity and having an ambiguous gender identity. Adorning the wrist is a series of female bracelets of a variety of materials, beads, silver, pearls. etc. Held within the hand of the mannequin is a YORKIE chocolate bar which contains the slogan 'It's Not For Girls'. The advertising campaign of this product is aimed at creating gender distinctions for market appeal; to entice females to consume this chocolate through the technique of prohibition. The contradiction between these gender signifiers raises issues of the gender and sexuality dichotomy (and the spaces in between) which Norbert Attard seeks to address in his TRANS* series.





CHANGING PLACES

3 Mannequins, pole, male and female underwear, accessories, tattoos, 2013

Three female mannequins suspended from a metal rod are adorned with male and female undergarments, accessories and jewellery, as well as transferable tattoos. The use of female brassieres and male boxer shorts on the same mannequin, paired with other objects of sexual reference, elucidate the dynamism of gender identity. The mannequins are also indicative of consumer culture and the influence it has on one's identity.









FISHING FOR BOYS

Spider man action figure, female underwear, 2013

A spider-man figurine, an object associated with a young boy's toy, extends a pair of lace underwear along the extremities of his four limbs. The title FISHING FOR BOYS makes reference to the material of the underwear, which may be assimilated to that of a fishing net, and to the allusion of the figurine with boys's leisure activities. Not only is there a gender contrast here, but also one of maturity, since the underwear is the type worn by older woman, rather than young girls.



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Works

Trans 1

Trans 2

Trans 3

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