

AI ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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EXPLORING IDENTITY CONSTRUCTS

a mixed media collection exploring genderqueer identities within the social and political climate

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Exploring Identity Constructs is an exhibition that focuses on the wide range of trans and genderqueer identities expressed through different mediums to express their own experiences or to uplift other queer identities. This exhibition aims to convey the complexities within people's genders, and to combat the current erasure and effect that the Trump administration has on the transgender community.

This exhibition works with both lesser-known artists and more acclaimed artists, bringing forward potentially unheard stories for a diverse range of experiences. This exhibition featuring the works of Rose Schmits (2019), Kim Leutwyler (2022), James Schaffer (2025), Carson Stachura (2023) and Cassils (2011) explores a varied and personal experience of gender identity through their materials and practices. This exhibition is built on the understandings of queer theory, and the 'true transsexual' dominant narrative, as well as the social and political era in the US under the power of Donald Trump.

The Queer Theory centres around Judith Butlers understandings and the subversions of identity within her book 'Gender Trouble' (1990). Butlers theorises the ideas of gender are socially constructed, performed on and reinforced by societal norms rather than biological

qualities. Queer theory is heavily based upon the ideals of feminism, spoken upon by Butler and many other theorists of queer theory such as Simone De Beauvoir, who asserts in *The second sex* (1949) that ‘one is not born a woman: one becomes one.’ (p272). Beauvoir theorises that to distinguish between sex and gender, femininity becomes a socially constructed ideal rather than biological. This and queer theories ideas of subversion can be applied to the artists within this exhibition, as they all aim to break the perceived ideas of gender, subverting traditional binaries.

The ‘true transsexual’ dominant narrative is explored by Meg-John Barker and Alex Iantaffi in *Life isn’t Binary* (2019). Barker and Iantaffi state the ‘Western dominant discourse’ (2019, p 69) where medical practitioners aimed for only trans individuals that couldn’t be ‘trained out’ could attempt to become cis through procedures. This resulted in trans people being required to ‘‘prove’ they were ‘true transsexuals’’ (p70) to access procedures, sewing doubt into individuals who may feel they weren't dysphoric or ‘trans enough’. This narrative is addressed through artists Leutwyler (2019) through the vast variety of queer identities, and Schaffer (2025) through the perceived necessary erasure of their feminine childhood.

Transgender and genderqueer identities are currently subject to discrimination through the Trump Administration, and this influenced both the exhibition theme and location. White house official statement released details the ending of ‘Democrats’ ‘‘Transgender for everybody’’ insanity’ (2026) removing the curriculum educating on ‘gender ideology’ and ‘equity’ within US schools, removal of ‘self-identification’ on government documents and the declaration of ‘only two immutable sexes: male and female’ . One way these laws impacted genderqueer individuals, reported on by the Kaiser Family Foundation or KFF (2026), a nonprofit journalism agency focused on healthcare in the US. The KFF states that since passing these bills, reports of healthcare facilities pausing gender affirming care for youth and narrowing forms to remove LGBTQ questions in surveys making tracking their health more difficult. The gallery chosen for this exhibition, the Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian American Art Museum, is significant for its location, being the closest gallery to The White House, considered the centre of decision making and the home of the President and his family, and a ‘living museum of American History’ (The White House, 2017). The Renwick Gallery being used for this exhibition makes a statement on the existence of

genderqueer people, aiming to use its location to The White House to attempt to use the understandings of Butlers' and Beauvoir's social construct of gender and sex within the legislations made. This exhibition shows the different identities that subvert the social and political norms, aiming to display these identities closest to the person whose policies influence their daily lives: Donald Trump.

Rose Schmits is a London based ceramicist whose work is inspired by her experiences as a transgender woman. Schmits' collection of ceramic vases titled *Trans Forms* (2019) features 281 ceramic vessels of varying size, bright white, twisted and cut with dark blue scientific and surgical markings. Installed for her BA degree show in the City and Guilds of London Art School in 2019, Schmit arranged her work using a pink background with her ceramic pieces at floor height arranged at random. Schmits uses these asymmetrical forms to comment on the 'mutability and variety of bodies' (Schmits, n.d), these shapes 'invoking organic growth' and markings representing 'artificial intervention made by modern science'. Schmits brings to the exhibition a different experience of being transgender for the exhibition, as she is the only one not from the US. This opens new experiences and potential interest from the viewers to want to explore different interpretations across the globe.

Kim Leutwyler is a mixed media American-southwest rooted artist based in Australia, whose work features themes of the natural world, queerness and identity. Leutwyler's series titled *Queer Corporeality* (2022) features hyper realistic queer bodies with missing anatomy, showing the background incorporated. Corporeality, defined by the Cambridge Dictionary as 'the fact of existing as a physical body' (2023) Leutwyler's work addresses the queer body through exploring bodies by deconstructing 'gender-based power dynamics of 'the gaze'' (Leutwyler, 2023) to create space for multi-identities. In an essay by Dylin Hardcastle (2022), they speak on themes of western tradition, and a corporeality beyond the 'cis-het European man' with colonial authority. Hardcastle speaks on *Queer Corporeality* as a 'Somatheque' (2022) opposing 'western medical-anatomical tradition' approaching the body as a participation into queerness and political archive. The exhibition features (amount) of oil painting from this collection, opening the exhibition to the range of diversity and individuality within the queer community.

James Schaffer is a multidisciplinary artist exploring traditional understandings of transgender people, advocating for bodily autonomy and self-authorship. Shaffer's' works exhibited are three embroidered pieces created in 2025, the first titled *know it's for the better* (24" x 28"), the second *is it obvious* (12" x 13" x .5"), and the final titled *it's all the same* (37.5" x 48"). The first piece carries religious themes, asking if their loved one would still love them knowing who they became. It shows the guilt of losing a loved one having them not know who you truly are. The second piece reflects on the feeling of not feeling trans enough and the feeling of erasing your past to feel included. The third piece reflects on their personal childhood feelings of missing out, the longing to be born the same as their brothers.

Carson Stachura is a portrait photographer and archivist based in New York, responding to themes of gender, freedom, desire, vulnerability and friendship within their series *My Body is a Weapon (Waiting at your Door)* (2023). The series features monochrome photographs depicting 'found family', self-portraiture and still lives of Stachura's depiction of transness, attempting to make sense of a body that is marked as dangerous within the world. For example, a study titled *the impact of 2023 legislation on transgender youth* (Mallory and Redfield, 2023) nearly 500 pieces of legislation were attempted to pass, with over half targeting transgender youth. With twenty-two states having laws that ban 'access to gender-affirming care for transgender youth' (p4) Stachura's series is at both a crucial point in time both in the current political climate, becoming increasingly relevant in America now, and from figuring out their own journey. In an interview with Gem Fletcher (2024), Stachura states this work was created at a crucial time within their transition; starting hormones, having chest reduction surgery and 'figuring out so much' (Stachura, 2024).

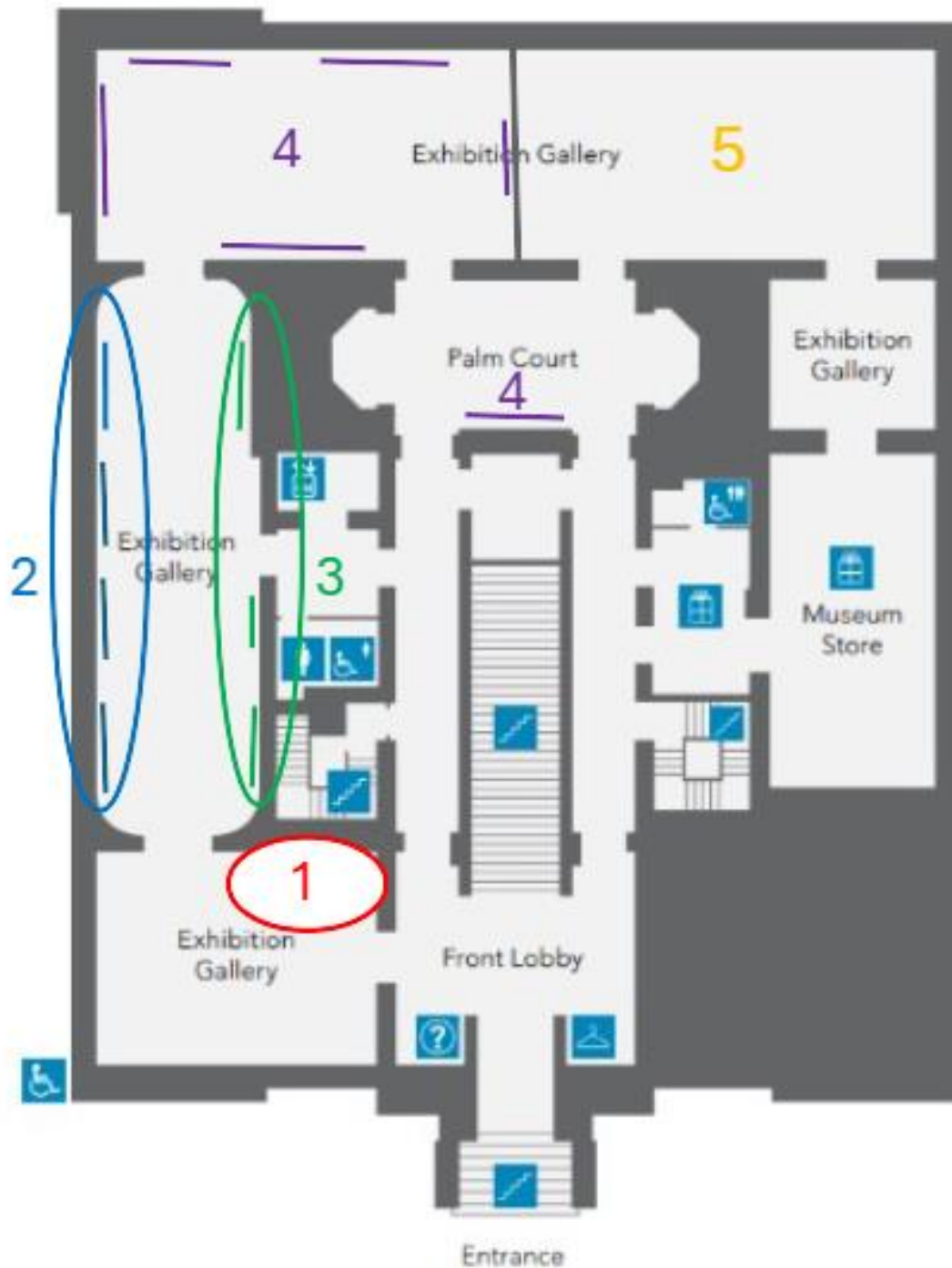
Cassils is a Canadian visual and performance artist, whose material and focus is their transgender body. The exhibition features Cassils' piece titled *Tiresias* (2011), a 3-day performance piece where Cassils uses their body heat to melt a neoclassical ice sculpture of a Greek male. The performance carries themes of endurance, the desire for an unattainable physique and the point of contact between the masculine and feminine. Tiresias is described by Cassils as a blind prophet, 'transformed from a man into a woman for seven years' (Cassils, 2025) using Tiresias' story for endurance and transformation within their piece. Cassils draws from historical context to create this piece, using this to examine the present

moment and the ideals of current social bodily norms. A section of the Renwick gallery would be concealed and darkened for the performance, then using the 15-minute video with a projector for viewing after.

The exhibition setup uses the bottom floor of the Renwick Gallery, subverting expectation of the US artists by starting with Schmits ceramics collection. Moving through into the second room containing both Leutwyler's collection of oil paintings and Schaffers textile pieces- both connecting through the subtheme of the 'true transsexual' dominant narrative. Then continues through to Stachura's collection of photography pieces, extending into the palm court for cohesion leading into Cassils performance piece.

Renwick Gallery floor plan

1st FLOOR



Numbers in relation to artists and artworks displayed below:

Artist 1: Rose Schmits



Date: 2019

Medium: Ceramic

Dimensions: size unconfirmed

Artist 2: Kim Leutwyler (images below left to right in gallery display)



Date: 2022

Medium: oil on canvas

Dimensions: 76 x 102cm (both pieces above the same dimensions)

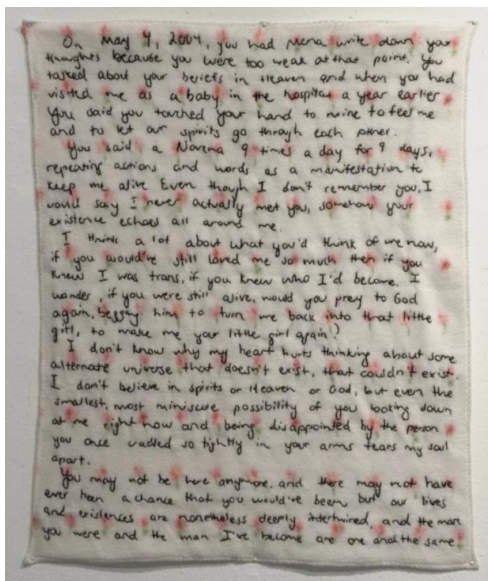


Date: 2022

Medium: oil on canvas

Dimensions: 46 x 61cm (both pieces above the same dimensions)

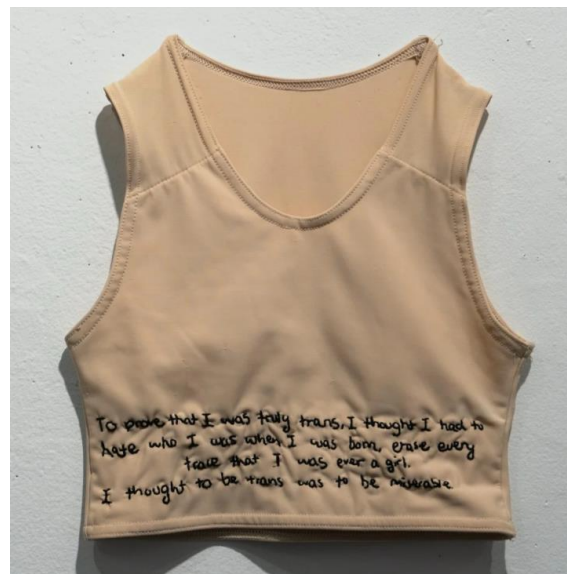
Artist 3: James Schaffer



Date: 2025

Medium: embroidery on blanket

Dimensions: 24" x 28"



Date: 2025

Medium: Embroidery on garment

Dimensions: 12" x 13" x .5"



Date: 2025

Medium: embroidery on quilt

Dimensions: 37.5" x 48"

Artist 4: Carson Stachura



Date: 2023

Medium: photography

Dimensions: size unconfirmed



Date: 2023

Medium: photography

Dimensions: size unconfirmed

Artist 5: Cassils



Date: 2011

Medium: performance, sculpture, video

Dimensions: size unconfirmed

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