

SOCIAL STUDIES

The Queer Indigenous Artists Reclaiming a Fluid Sense of Gender

Colonialist conceptions of gender have long sought to erase more expansive views. But a new generation is making work that honors their cultures' beliefs on their own terms.

By Ligaya Mishan
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THE PHOTOGRAPH FRAMES what appears to be a female figure, naked and glossed with oil, against a backdrop of pale rose brown, just a shade darker than the model's skin. Long, dark hair cascades over the breasts and, where the viewer might expect the genitalia to be, the model grips the great rack of a caribou, the skull cupped like a codpiece and the antlers jutting out, beams spread nearly four feet wide and reaching in height from mid-thigh to the tip of the model's nose, with 15 points on each side.

Both the artist, Dayna Danger, and the model, Adrienne Huard, are Indigenous, based in what is today Canada — Danger, 35, is Métis, of Anishinaabe (Saulteaux) and Polish ancestry, and Huard, 34, is Anishinaabe and a registered member of the Couchiching First Nation — and the antlers evoke tribal traditions of hunting in which no part of the animal is wasted, with bones, horns and antlers repurposed as tools and sacred objects. But the tension in this image, a 2017 portrait from the ongoing series “Big’Uns,” comes from a more cavalier approach to hunting, as sport. Body parts are reduced to trophies; the antlers' imposing size testifies to the prowess and virility not so much of the animal as of the hunter who bagged it. (There's a visual pun, too: a look askance at the vulgar slang of “rack” for breasts.)

The artist toys with these tropes, only to upend them. Huard's gaze is frank, refusing the role of prey — no power is ceded to the viewer. The antlers suggest a crown, mischievously shifted from head to nether regions. On a caribou, antlers are weaponry, to be wielded in combat; here, in proximity to the reproductive organs, they retain a sense of battle readiness while hinting at the possibility of a more intimate encounter, functioning, at least theoretically, as a strap-on, albeit one of such ornate and absurd proportions as to subvert mainstream notions of what constitutes sex as a biological category, and even the act itself. (The profusion of the branching antlers calls to mind the Japanese artist Katsushika Hokusai's 1814 woodblock print “The Dream of the Fisherman's Wife,” of a woman in the many-armed embrace of two octopuses.)





Lukas Avendaño's "Mi Cabello. Mi Raíz." (2011). Photo: Edson Caballero Trujillo

Still, this isn't a straightforward narrative of female empowerment. Both Danger and Huard identify as Two Spirit, an Indigenous term rooted in precolonial conceptions of gender and aligned with queerness in its most expansive sense. An English translation from Anishinaabemowin (an Indigenous language of North America that is also known as Ojibwe), Two Spirit came into formal usage after an intertribal L.G.B.T.Q. gathering in Winnipeg in 1990. While it can be understood, literally, as the coexistence of masculine and feminine spirits in one person, it has a broader meaning, encompassing the many terms used and passed down over centuries by different North American Indigenous cultures as markers of gender fluidity and liminality: of identity not anchored in a fact of birth or a judgment rendered at one moment in time but ever in process. Armored with caribou antlers, the figure in Danger's photograph reads as male and female at once, yet neither, becoming something more.

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TODAY, A VIEW of male and female as either/or is believed by some to be an abiding divide, biologically given, yet it is arguably of only recent vintage. While most societies in history have had fairly clear-cut gender roles, customarily articulated through a division of labor, it has not always been sex, as a matter of anatomy, that determined membership in one category or the other, nor have the particulars of

physiology prevented movement between categories over the course of a life. In Sumerian texts from the second and third millenniums B.C., the earliest written records of human civilization, the powerful goddess Inanna-Ishtar presides over both sexuality (coded as feminine) and war (masculine) — one of her hymns includes the line “When I sit in the alehouse, I am a woman, and I am an exuberant young man” — and she wields the power to turn men into women and vice versa, explicitly invoked in a later Akkadian passage about her attendants, “whose manhood Ishtar changed to womanhood to strike awe into the people.” This kind of transformation, when done by humans, didn’t necessarily require a change in body; it could be accomplished by the bestowing or withholding of objects, as in infancy rituals in which a child’s gender was not presumed fixed at birth but instead conferred and fortified through gifts: an ax to instill martial spirit in a boy, a spindle to coax artistry from a girl.



Kent Monkman's "Honour Dance" (2020). Collection of the Hirshhorn Museum, image courtesy of the artist

While it’s commonly understood that Inanna-Ishtar was a goddess, in Sumerian, the word for god is unsexed, and third-person pronouns do not delineate male from female. Such linguistic neutrality persists in a number of modern tongues whose third-person pronouns lack a masculine or feminine inflection, among them Armenian, Bengali, Farsi, Finnish, Hungarian, Yoruba and most Turkic and Austronesian languages. A “she” distinct from “he” did not appear in written Chinese until the early 20th century. And although in English the singular, gender-unspecified “they” is now considered controversial, it has a literary lineage going back at least as far as Chaucer in the 14th century; William Shakespeare and Jane Austen deployed it at will.

Nevertheless, there is a notable stinginess in English when it comes to describing gender, certainly compared to the largess of Indigenous languages. The (non-Native) Native American studies scholar Will Roscoe has found evidence of public acknowledgment of people who could not be classified as male or female in more than 150 North American tribes, each with their own vocabulary and nuances. Some terms speak directly to the idea of duality, as variations on “man-woman” (or “not-man-not-woman”), like the Crow *bote* and the Shoshoni *tainna wa’ippe*; others rely on elision and evocation, from the Navajo *nádleehé* (“one who is transformed”) to the Osage *mixu’ga* (“instructed by the moon”) to the Cherokee *asegi udanto* (“other heart”).

Among the Zapotec on the Isthmus of Tehuantepec in the Mexican state of Oaxaca, *muxe* (believed to be derived from the Spanish *mujer*, “woman,” or the Zapotec *namuxe*, “shy”) is a name long given to those identified as male at birth who express feminine traits. Some have their femininity embraced by their families when they are still children, and accordingly are taught what is customarily considered women’s work: cooking, embroidery, flower arranging. It’s important to note that a *muxe* is not a man who becomes a woman but a

separate gender category, with a range of meanings and roles specific to Zapotec culture and impossible to define outside of it, as well as with certain strictures. While muxes have traditionally taken romantic partners, if they so chose — not other muxes but often men who are socially coded as heterosexual — they are expected to forswear marriage and care for their aging parents.



Avendaño's "Requiem para un Alcaraván" (2016). Photo: Mario Patiño

In the 2012 dance piece "Réquiem Para un Alcaraván" ("Requiem for a Stone Curlew"), the Santo Domingo Tehuantepec-based muxe anthropologist, choreographer and performance artist Lukas Avendaño enacts ceremonies from which muxes have historically been excluded, including a wedding for which, blindfolded by a bridal veil, Avendaño selects a groom from the audience. Onstage, Avendaño glides in a voluminous skirt, hair swept up in braids interwoven with ruffled silk, chest bare. (Other Mesoamerican peoples, the Mayans and the Aztecs, had their own rituals in which male priests or members of the elite would costume themselves in skirts and no shirts to imitate — and thus channel the powers of — a goddess or gender-ambiguous deity.) As Avendaño, now 44, told T Magazine last year, "I don't want the viewer to think that what they are seeing is a man trying to appear like a woman."

IN THE WEST, until the 18th century there was essentially only one sex, the American historian Thomas Laqueur argues in "Making Sex: Body and Gender From the Greeks to Freud" (1990). That sex was male; metaphysically and medically, a female was understood to be simply a "lesser" male, with inverted reproductive organs, tucked out of sight. The shift to a two-sex system might be partly explained by scientific progress in mapping the human body, but in "The Biopolitics of Feeling" (2018), the gender studies scholar Kyla Schuller proposes that the enforcement of a male-female binary had a larger purpose: It supported the project of Western domination by consigning the gender fluidity observed in Indigenous societies to an earlier stage of evolution. The binary was prized, then, not because it was natural but the opposite — because it represented a cultural achievement, integral to and even a prerequisite of civilization.

For Indigenous artists, retrieving precolonial conceptions of gender can be a way to repudiate a colonial legacy of debasement and erasure. This might take the form of parody, as when the Canadian-born Siksika (Blackfoot) Two Spirit artist Adrian Stimson performs as his alter ego, Buffalo Boy, a reimagining of the 19th-century hunter and showman Buffalo Bill Cody, whose popular Wild West revues promoted stereotypes of Indigenous peoples as ruthless warriors collecting scalps. Stimson, who is 57 and lives in Alberta, Canada,

introduced Buffalo Boy in 2004 at Burning Man, the annual countercultural festival in Nevada, in an outfit of cowboy boots paired with fishnets, a buffalo-hide G-string and corset under a fringed vest, a long string of pearls and a sparkly disco cowboy hat. Buffalo Boy is both a lampooning and subsumption of the cowboy myth, recalibrating frontier notions of manhood.





Adrian Stimson's "Shaman Exterminator" (2004), from the series "Buffalo Boy." Courtesy of the artist

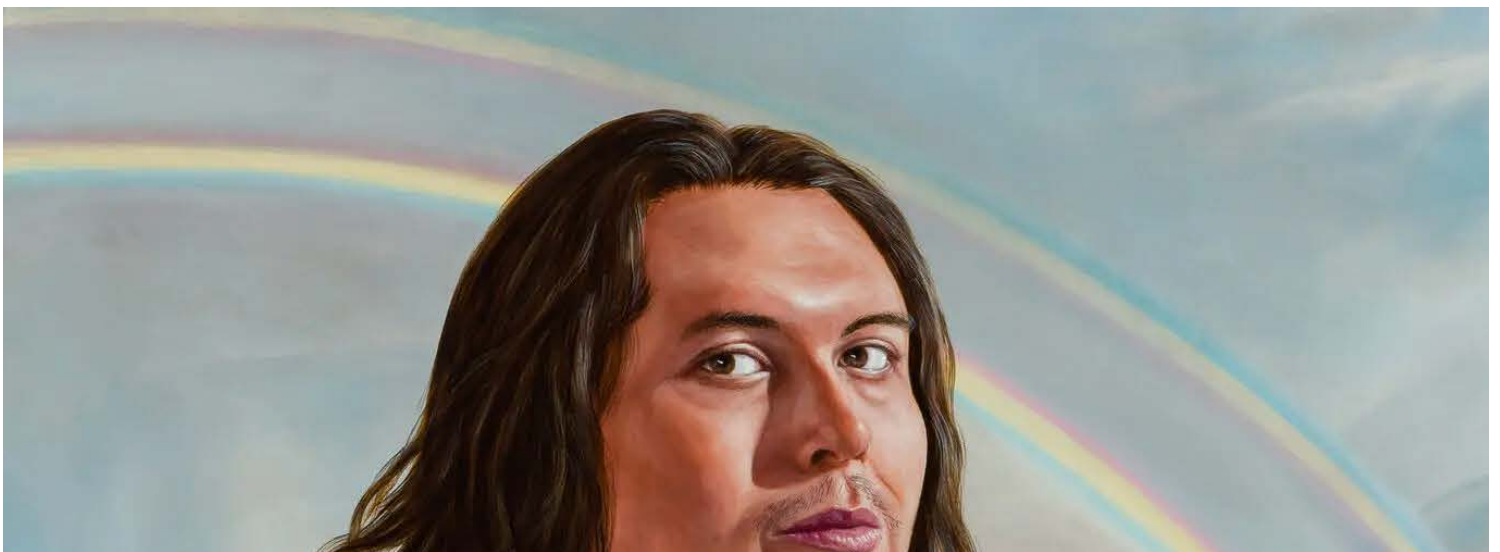




Stimson's "Buffalo Boy Stand" (2004) from the same series. Courtesy of the artist

Another figure who cannot quite be categorized as man or woman, at least by modern Western standards, recurs in the work of the Cree Two Spirit artist Kent Monkman, based in Toronto. In performance and in paintings, Monkman, 57, morphs into Miss Chief Eagle Testickle, strapping and strong-jawed, lipsticked and rouged, striding on stilettos through epic landscapes that allude to works by 19th-century Romantics. She (as Monkman refers to her) is resplendent, sometimes adorned in a grand feathered headdress but otherwise naked, with her penis arcing blithely upward or hidden by a slither of cloth.

Part of Monkman's project is reclamation and rectification. Histories of Indigenous peoples, in North America and in much of the world, have long been told and controlled by outsiders — that is, by members of the very groups responsible for decimating and dismantling Indigenous communities. Gender fluidity shocked colonialists, who were already predisposed to think of Indigenous peoples as culturally backward and in need of civilizing, as justification for vanquishing them. When the 19th-century American painter George Catlin depicted a ceremonial dance that honored a Two Spirit person, he saw only "a man dressed in woman's clothes," he wrote in 1841, adding that this was a "disgraceful degradation." The curator Shirley Madill, writing in "Revision and Resistance" (2020), points out the contrast with Miss Chief's exultant entrance in the 2002 painting "Portrait of the Artist as Hunter," on horseback and in high heels, chasing a cowboy whose unbuttoned shirt flaps in the wind and who is naked from the waist down save for chaps. The backdrop is battle and violence, but the cowboy's risqué attire — an iconic look of the gay leather underground since the 1960s — hints that the projected sexual encounter will be consensual. And so the scene, rewriting the encounter of conqueror and conquered, is erotic, comic and menacing all at once, and gleefully triumphal.





Kent Monkman's "Teddy Syrette" (2021). Courtesy of the artist

IN SOME INDIGENOUS cultures, gender-liminal people were not only welcomed but accorded elevated status, in the belief that their ability to move between states of being gave them privileged access to the spiritual world and was evidence of supernatural powers. The Filipino American filmmaker Isabel Sandoval's forthcoming feature "Tropical Gothic" (projected to be released in 2023) revolves around a *babaylan*, or shaman, a role that in the Philippines was historically taken by women but also open to men if they committed to living as women, donning female clothing and sometimes taking husbands. The setting is the island of Cebu in the 16th century, shortly after the

arrival of the conquistadors, who claimed the territory for Spain, naming it after their crown prince and later king, Philip II. After a Spaniard seizes the babaylan's land, she pretends to be possessed by the man's dead wife. In the script, the babaylan's back story is not made explicit, but Sandoval, who is trans, plays the role, "so that informs the interpretation," she says. As in her previous film, "Lingua Franca" (2019), which was set in Brooklyn and included dialogue in Tagalog and Cebuano, she is not making art with the assumption of an outsider's gaze and a need to explain.

And "Tropical Gothic" is more than a period drama. Sandoval, now based in New York, recalls that when she was growing up in the '80s on Cebu, schoolchildren were punished if they were caught speaking Cebuano. Colonialism is not an artifact to be examined dispassionately, as if enshrined in a museum; it continues to this day. Its most insidious form may be a kind of internalized colonialism, in which, under foreign rule, a decimated and demoralized people are taught to demean their own traditions and ultimately turn away from them.

To recover the past, then, can be an act of resistance. In the animated short film "Kapaemahu" (2020), directed by Hinaleimoana Wong-Kalu, Dean Hamer and Joe Wilson, an ancient *mo'olelo* ("oral story") is given new life, recounting the voyage of four healers from Tahiti to the Hawaiian Islands many centuries ago. Like Wong-Kalu, who narrates the film, and the dancer and singer Kaumakaiwa Kanaka'ole, who composed and performs the chant in it, the healers were *māhū*, "not male nor female ... a mixture of both in mind, heart and spirit," as the film puts it. They brought knowledge of how to ease pain and cure illness and were welcomed and beloved. When the time came for them to depart, the grateful community hauled four boulders to the beach at Waikiki, in what is now Honolulu; the *māhū* infused the stones with their spirits, then vanished.



Monū's "AO' Kakala (Tryptich)" (2021). Courtesy of the Nomadic Art Gallery and the artist

In 1941, the stones were threatened by the construction of a bowling alley, and in the decades that followed, they were moved several times, with attendant news stories that subtly erased the gender fluidity of the *māhū* as told in the original *mo'olelo*, which was collected by the folklorist Thomas G. Thrum from a telling by James Harbottle Aalapuna Boyd. (Boyd was a colonel of the Hawaiian Kingdom before its overthrow in 1893 and husband to Helen Mani'iailehua Cleghorn, a half sister of Princess Ka'iulani, the last heir to the throne.) As the Pacific Islands studies scholar Teoratuuaarii Morris has documented, where Boyd identified the *māhū* as explicitly "unsexed by nature," with "feminine appearance, although manly in stature," a journalist in 1963 described them more evasively, as "handsome, kindly and soft-spoken," and later, in the 1990s and early 2000s, they were referred to outright as "men." "Kapaemahu" corrects the record with its woodcut-like animation, abstract yet expressive, and in so doing affirms the stones — now protected and honored on a platform in Waikiki, albeit with no mention of the *māhū* — as part of an ancestral landscape.

ANTHROPOLOGISTS CAUTION THAT acknowledgment of gender variance in Indigenous cultures did not always imply inclusion. Historical documentation of Indigenous lives pre-contact is incomplete. To romanticize the lost past is to risk another form of exoticization, casting Indigenous peoples as beatifically wise ancients — the archetype of the noble savage — and thus depriving them of dimension and a stake in modernity. Today, members of Indigenous groups who do not conform to the gender binary may experience discrimination and abuse even within their own communities. In Polynesia, feminine-expressing males are often targeted as sexual partners for men who identify as straight and, as the Amsterdam-based cultural anthropologist Niko Besnier has written, they may be harassed or subjected to

violence and treated as “discardable and exploitable.” The *hijra* in India, whose intersex nature was long revered under Hinduism and who were given a place of honor in the Mughal courts from the 16th to the 19th centuries, now live mostly in poverty, excluded from mainstream society.

Nor has inclusion always led to openness. Gender-liminal people have sometimes been forced into roles so prescribed as to end up reaffirming a male-female divide. In traditionally patriarchal Albania, families without sons might deputize a daughter to become a son, effectively freeing her from her femininity — in a ritual in which she becomes a “sworn virgin” — so she could take on the role of heir and future head of household. These sworn virgins have dressed and behaved like men, smoking, drinking alcohol, wielding weapons and defending the family’s honor, and have been recognized and respected as such; yet this vesting with male power has not extended to their being allowed sexual partners. Even societies that ostensibly welcomed fluidity typically had economies structured around a binary, manifest in the partitioning of labor into male and female, which, the cultural anthropologist Gayle Rubin argues in “The Traffic in Women: Notes on the ‘Political Economy’ of Sex” (1975), functions as “a taboo against the sameness of men and women, a taboo dividing the sexes into two mutually exclusive categories, a taboo which exacerbates the biological differences between the sexes and thereby creates gender.”



Stimson’s “The Shaman Exterminator Playing on the Playa” (2004), from the “Buffalo Boy” series. Courtesy of the artist

Some queer Indigenous artists set their own terms of identity by flouting such taboos. The Kanaka Maoli (native Hawaiian) and māhū artist Lehuauakea, who is 25 and based in Seattle, makes *kapa* (bark cloth), a craft historically practiced by women: In myth, Hina, the mother of the demigod Māui, needed more time in the day so her *kapa* could dry, and so Māui captured the sun and ordered it to move more slowly across the sky, at least for half the year. Men were tasked with harvesting the materials and shaping the tools. But Lehuauakea takes on both roles, carving their own *ohe kāpala* (bamboo stamps inscribed with geometric patterns) and stripping the bark off *wauke* (paper mulberry) trees, then beating and hand-printing and painting it in earth pigments, plant dyes and wildfire charcoal.

The Tongan artist Sione Tuivailala Monū, 28, who identifies as *leiti* — an intentional shortening of *fakaleiti*, which means “in the manner of a lady,” collapsing the distance between acting or posing and actually being — likewise draws on a female tradition: *nimamea’a tuikakala*, the fine art of flower design, which Monū didn’t have a chance to learn as a child because it’s taught to girls. Monū creates elaborate cloud shapes and regal masks that extend past the face and the top of the head, each densely thatched with synthetic blooms, some in neon

brights and powder pinks, others evoking the small red *heilala* or white whorled *tiare*. Strands of iridescent beads dangle below. In the Tongan diaspora (Monū lives in Canberra, Australia, and Auckland, New Zealand), plastic has become a culturally acceptable material when fresh flowers and plants are unavailable, a testament to the human capacity for adaptation and how crafts are kept alive despite changes in circumstance, be it separation from home or environmental decline.

The work is nostalgic, rich in affection for the crafts of aunties of yesteryear, but not static nor trapped in mourning for the past. Instead, it holds out the promise of reinvention — of identity constructed over time, from whatever tools are at hand, out of whatever resilience is required. There is something joyful in Monū's masks, which are less disguises than glorious fantasies. Put on a mask and you make of yourself art, in an ongoing act of creation. You can become anyone; be no longer hidden but revealed.

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