TRANSGRESSIONS – Catalogue Essay
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“There exists no prohibition that cannot be transgressed.”

“Concern over a rule is sometimes at its most acute when that rule is being broken, for it is harder to limit a disturbance already begun.”

--Georges Bataille

Blurring the boundaries of race, gender, nationality, and sexuality has become a common denominator in defining personal identity in the twenty-first century. Exploding previous notions of these categories as fixed and static, artists today are taking an active role in exposing them as mere constructions. Nevertheless, transgressing these boundaries is still a delicate dance, and individuals who succeed in walking the line between identity categories occupy a precarious position. What rules and categories are imposed upon us, and what does it take to break them? The exhibit Transgressions: Transgender, Transnational, Transsexual explores these issues while positing the larger question: what does identity look like at the point of transgression?

For Wendy Kawabata, transgression takes the form of a pool of wrapped kukui nuts in Stemma. Hidden under a façade of intricately wound thread, the kukui nuts speak to the challenges of reconciling a multiplicity of cultural identities derived from eastern and western sources. As the evocative red threadballs spill out onto the ground in a misshapen pattern, so too does Kawabata’s own racial and cultural identity take a heterogeneous form.

As a second-generation American, Sabrina Lee also uses her artwork to explore the nomad’s land that materializes when two disparate national identities collide. One Kind of Rice Feeds Hundreds of Different Kinds of People is a physical manifestation of this attempt at cultural homogenization; however, as Lee suggests, the result is never completely seamless.

Superimposing grayscale photographs of sexualized bodies onto a colorful aquatint in Learning Manhood, Candace Nicol explores how constructs of sexual identities likewise come to override our personal relationships. Nicol’s multi-layered etchings and aquatints are small in scale and frequently contain ambiguous imagery that is difficult to identify – a closer look will often reveal a scene or body part that was unidentifiable when viewed from a distance. In this way, Nicol challenges our need to place sexual identities into neatly defined categories, urging the viewer to take a closer look at subcultures and sexual practices that cannot be squarely placed within any of these “socially acceptable” classifications. Using her provocative imagery to transgress the boundaries of social norms, Nicol posits that sexual identity is anything but black and white.
Like Nicol, Jocelyn Shu uses her chromatic canvases to deviate from the socially constructed categories that often come to dominate our notions of personal identity. Like her own mixed-ethnic background, Shu’s physical canvases and the bodies contained within them are characterized by a sense of fragmentation and dismemberment. Piecing together the canvas with a needle and thread in *Irreconcilable I’s* and layering circular pieces of canvas on top of one another in *Frazzeliciously Delighted*, Shu’s human figures are likewise so fragmented that they deny any possibility of gender, ethnic, or sexual identification. Alternately making additions and subtractions to the painted surface, Shu physically alters her canvases and the bodies that inhabit them to suggest that categories such as gender and ethnicity are mutable constructions.

Adorning her figures with exquisite headdresses and lavish embellishments, Dawn Black draws on various temporal and cultural sources with colorful results. Although the headdresses dominating Black’s canvases are so elaborate that they pose a threat of overshadowing the females’ heads, Black imbues her figures with a sense of stability and power through her use of intricate detail and highly saturated color. Extracting her imagery from media as diverse as Italian Mannerist portrait paintings, popular fashion magazines such as *Harper’s Bazaar*, and encyclopedias of historical costumes, Black uses her trans-temporal female subjects and their culturally loaded headdresses to collapse the notion of identity as historically fixed.

Transgressing the confines of history also forms the underpinnings of Mel Northum’s *Self-Knowledge: Sin*. Northum melds together images from an amalgam of art historical sources, honing in on visual details that fluctuate in meaning and implication when removed from their original sources and placed in a vertical line that extends to nearly seven feet. Although overwhelming in length, Northum nevertheless creates a highly intimate and personal viewing experience by restricting the work to only one inch in height, encouraging the viewer to consider closely each of the squares and the often sexually suggestive imagery contained within them.

Suzanne Long takes a more humorous approach to the theme of transgressions, using her sculptural figures to explore the particulars of labels and stereotypes. Armless, wistful, and scantily clad, Long uses humor in *Bulldyke #5* and *Queen #3* to reclaim terms often considered to be derogatory. However, the stinging implications of these stereotypes remain, as the playfulness of Long’s figures is nevertheless tinged with a sense of melancholy and longing – particularly in *Marry Me Bob!*, where the gaze of Big Boy #2 is clearly not returned by Big Boy #1.

Alternately provocative, defiant, puzzling, and playful, *Transgressions* offers radical new possibilities for defining identity in contemporary American society. Urging viewers to take stock of their own personal identities, this exhibit poses the question: when was the last time you transgressed?