

Detour

A departure from the ordinary



Gender-queer art gets a good name: trans-gression

Artist Lauren Griffin begins new community project

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"When you're not truthful about yourself, your health is affected," says award-winning multi-media artist and community organizer Lauren Griffin about her latest project, *trans-gression*. An artists' collective focusing on gender exploration and stereotypes, *trans-gression* provides support and access to resources for members' projects.

And self-described "gender-queer" artist Griffin knows something about needing access to supplies and resources for her artistic projects and growth.

After growing up and getting a bachelor of fine arts in Syracuse, N.Y. (she was born in Pasadena, Calif.), Griffin moved to New York City. "I lived in a little tiny apartment with people in New York, you know, like everybody does, in a room where you have to fold your bed up to get in and out of the door. In order to do anything outside of that, I would take classes. I had access to a sculpture studio at the School of Visual Arts because I took a night class. I've always been trying to find ways to have access to studio space."

Griffin was a creative child who took lots of art classes and wasn't shy about being playful in her gender expression. "As I was growing up, I always liked to wear men's shoes with a skirt. I loved to weld. I'm really good at math ... [with] the 'boy brain' part of me."

Her parents never trained her to be a professional artist, but they encouraged her to attend the art classes. "I guess I've always been an artist. I used to do ceramic stuff in clay and take classes in the local museum. I would take art classes, from age 8 maybe. My parents never recognized I could be a professional artist. I think it was just one of those things like you take ballet, you take art classes, you take piano ... It turned out I was better at art than any of the other things."

Later, she received a master of fine arts degree in metalsmithing with a minor in sculpture from Cranbrook Academy of Art in Bloomfield Hills, Mich. (home of Aretha Franklin and Lee Iacocca) and, after grad school, a friend suggested she try a stint living in Philadelphia.

Griffin wanted to work with teenagers, and had heard there were many opportunities for her to do artwork here. Interestingly, this would be the city in which she would also come out as, in her words, "gender-queer." In 1997, at age 36, she then came out to herself and her family, she says, at the same time.

"It affected my relationship to myself as an artist immensely. I started doing video work with a theory that children could be empowered by making things they saw on TV rather than just watching it."

This theory would prove to be very effective, in not only building self-esteem in children and teenagers, but in garnering invitation after invitation and several grants to continue her work. Among her clients and project partners were the Sayre Middle School and the Walt Whitman Cultural Center in Camden, N.J., with funding coming from various sources, including

federal media arts program grants. This was her first foray into community arts organizing. Her second came from a Leeway Foundation Arts and Change grant, which funded her "Modern Iconography" weekly workshop series at the William Way Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Community Center. Workshop attendees worked at the center and sometimes at the home arts studio that Griffin shares with her partner, full-time puppeteer Martina Plag. The series, she says, "... ended up being a really interesting exploration about what it means to be female." Griffin's community projects always involve art-making by all participants, not just talking about the issues that brought them together.

Next came *trans-gression*, which was inspired by a few happenings in Griffin's life, beginning with the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, which she has attended for three years. "Every time I went, I became more and more aware of all the variations of what a woman could be. And it was incredible. When I described those women to people, they don't believe me. That's sad."

Another thing that began to inspire *trans-gression* was the documentary "The Aggressives." "That was really liberating to see. I liked the term ... and I thought, that falls into the gender-queer category." Then she discovered books like "Undoing Gender" by Judith Butler and "Third Sex, Third Gender" by Gilbert Herdt, which considers norms that govern gender and sexuality and sexual dimorphism in culture and history, respectively.

In working gender into her artwork, Griffin went

back to what she knows, and what she does well —incorporating community involvement. When asked what her dream is for this new collective, she responds, "I want to find people I can make art with, who want to make art and talk about these things, so that we can grow together."

In September of last year, in time for the Fringe Festival, Griffin made some postcards that read "Artist Collective Forming." She handed them out to people she knew and put them in places like the Fringe (now called the Live Arts Festival) and the Community Education Center. Of those who responded, all but one was by word of mouth. *trans-gression* now consists of six dedicated members: a multi-media artist, puppeteer, singer-songwriter, photographer, playwright and Irish traditional dancer. They've begun individual and group projects and are building a Web site, which will process memberships and dues and be the main form of communication among members. "People are going to be self-ruling," Griffin says. Members will be able to network and meet other collaborators who may or may not even be in Philadelphia. This third artistic endeavor seems to be a quickly growing one for Griffin, like her other community arts projects have been.

But

what is an average day for an out gender-queer professional artist and community organizer?

"I tidy the grounds, do office work and e-mail, I might go to Fleisher for print working, go back home for computer art, photograph at the studio or maybe sew some costumes."

Not a bad way to start an arts movement. ■

