

San Francisco Chronicle

'Show Me as I Want to be Seen' examines artistic and gender identity

Written by: Charles Desmarais

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A reproduction of a photomontage by Claude Cahun (Lucy Schwob) and Marcel Moore (Suzanne Malherbe), the frontispiece to "Aveux non avenues." Photo: SFMOMA Library

With "Show Me as I Want to Be Seen," an ambitious exhibition that opened Thursday, Feb. 7, the Contemporary Jewish Museum takes charge of its own image as an intellectual leader.

That declaration follows a spate of shows that, while always professionally mounted, too often veered into the territory of family entertainment.

Not that I am against entertaining art exhibitions — or families. "Show Me" covers those bases, but starts with the assumption that an exhibition must be built around a thesis, solid and serious, even when whimsy is central to the art.

The argument of this show is a timely one: that identity is performed, and that we can resist the efforts of others to define who we are. CJM assistant curator Natasha Matteson, in this, her first major effort for the museum, teases the idea out of the work of 10 contemporary artists by relating it to that of two historic figures.



An untitled photograph from 1928 is credited to Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore. Photo: Don Ross, Estate of Claude Cahun

There have been few more whimsical artistic collaborators than the Surrealists Claude Cahun (1894-1954) and Marcel Moore (1892-1972), and few more earnestly, proudly themselves in the face of a hostile world.

Lucy Schwob and Suzanne Malherbe were both born in Nantes, France. They met as teenagers, becoming friends and then lovers who lived together and collaborated as artists until Schwob's death at 60. Adopting the names Claude and Marcel was the least of their provocations, as the 24 original photographs and nine poster-sized reproductions included in the exhibition attest.

Most of the photographs are of Claude, in drag, masked or adopting otherwise constructed personas — sometimes multiple ones. In one famous picture, Claude poses with a cartoon-style barbell, her face a comic send-up of Kewpie-doll makeup. The figure in the photo embodies diametric stereotypes of the day: both strongman and vampish flapper. A faux-modest shirt, with prominent nipples drawn on a little too high and too wide, both covers the torso and lampoons the very idea of nudity as display.

The photographs are very small, which may suggest that they were private experiments or lovers' secrets until they were uncovered in the 1980s. The larger reproductions, however, are of images that were clearly meant to be public.



Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore collaborated on the photograph "Untitled (I am in training don't kiss me.)" Photo: Jersey Heritage



Claude Cahun's "Self-portrait" from 1925. Photo: Jeffrey Sturges

They are from a book the two published in 1930, also on view, of frenetic photomontages. A kind of visual memoir of Cahun, the book is called either "Disavowals" or "Cancelled Confessions," depending on the translator. It is filled with the contradictions the title implies, with a narrator who shifts from male to female and back.

"Shuffle the cards," she/he writes. "Masculine? Feminine? It depends on the situation. Neuter is the only gender that always suits me."

As a museum of Jewish culture, CJM appropriately considers the art it shows through a cultural lens. Cahun's embrace of her Jewish heritage at a time of rising anti-Semitism was another way in which she bravely

celebrated her distinctiveness and complexity. She was not only out as a lesbian, but out as a Jew in German-occupied Jersey, where she and Moore had moved, and where they were eventually jailed for subversion.

The excellent exhibition catalog includes a conversation with Rabbi Benay Lappe in which the rabbi, clearly a progressive interpreter of tradition, describes the Talmud as “primarily formative.” It exists, she says, to create people “who can sit with contradiction, complexity, ambiguity, uncertainty and paradox; people who are disruptive rather than compliant, challenging rather than conforming.”



Contemporary work includes Zanele Muholi’s “Bona, Charlottesville” (2015). Photo: Yancey Richardson

The Cahun/Moore collaboration would make a worthy exhibition in itself, but the genius of “Show Me as I Want to Be Seen” is in employing that Talmudic idea to create a curatorial fabric with multiple threads and intricate patterns. Even the exhibition layout is purposefully tenuous, with the historic works woven among paintings, sculpture and photographs by 10 living artists who extend or engage with the ideas of their precursors.

The implication is that history and the present are both distinct and one. Adding to the richness, the current art takes off in multiple directions. Nicole Eisenman at first seems the most apt choice of all, with her painted and mixed media images of fragmented figures, her frequent reference to gender and her embrace of queerness. But then the confrontational self-portrait photographs of Zanele Muholi come into view. Intense in gaze, design and black-and-white contrast, wildly various in persona, they might almost suggest a Claudian reincarnation.

The two Bay Area artists included could not be more different in approach. Rhonda Holberton, who lives and works in Oakland, makes a particularly strong showing with works that make coldly poetic use of video and digital media. San Francisco-based Davina Semo seems a counterintuitive choice, with her cast-concrete, steel and similarly tough objects. But by the time we encounter them in the gallery, we have so totally put our faith in the exhibition that we grant to these eccentric abstractions shattered, spiky personalities of their own.



“Untitled 11” (2011) by Nicole Eisenman is featured in the Contemporary Jewish Museum show. Photo: John Berens, Susanne Vielmetter Projects

In an odd way, it is the work of Young Joon Kwak — whose little-girl-fantasy “Singing Mirror (II)” (2016) in pinks, glitter and fur invites viewers to reimagine their selves — and of the rising star Tschabalala Self — whose canvases are as much applied as they are painted — that most thoroughly proves out the central ideas of the exhibition.

I’m not a fan of either artist, whose work I find annoyingly, if self-consciously, simpleminded. Yet in the context of “Show Me as I Want to Be Seen,” their approaches work. The exhibition is anti-critical in that sense, asking us to engage it not on our terms or by some universal standard, but on the ever-shifting ground of context. The instability of that terrain is something we surely know from our own experiences, but rarely recognize in others — that we are not one self but many, none of which alone define us.

Or, as Claude Cahun famously wrote, “Under this mask, another mask. I will never be finished removing all these faces.”

“Show Me as I Want to Be Seen”: 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Thursdays-Tuesdays; closed Wednesdays. Through July 7. \$12-\$14; free 18 and under. Contemporary Jewish Museum, 736 Mission St., S.F. 415-655-7800. <https://thecjm.org>



Isabel Yellin’s “Erin/Heather” (2017). Photo: Night Gallery

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Davina Semo, "She Was Determined That One Day She Would Live According to Her Own Inclinations" (2018). Photo: Jessica Silverman Gallery



Tschabalala Self's "Perched" (2016) is among the contemporary works. Photo: Elizabeth Bernstein, Kate Werble Gallery



Gabby Rosenberg's "Lights Off: Self Hunt" (2017). Photo: Steve Rimlinger



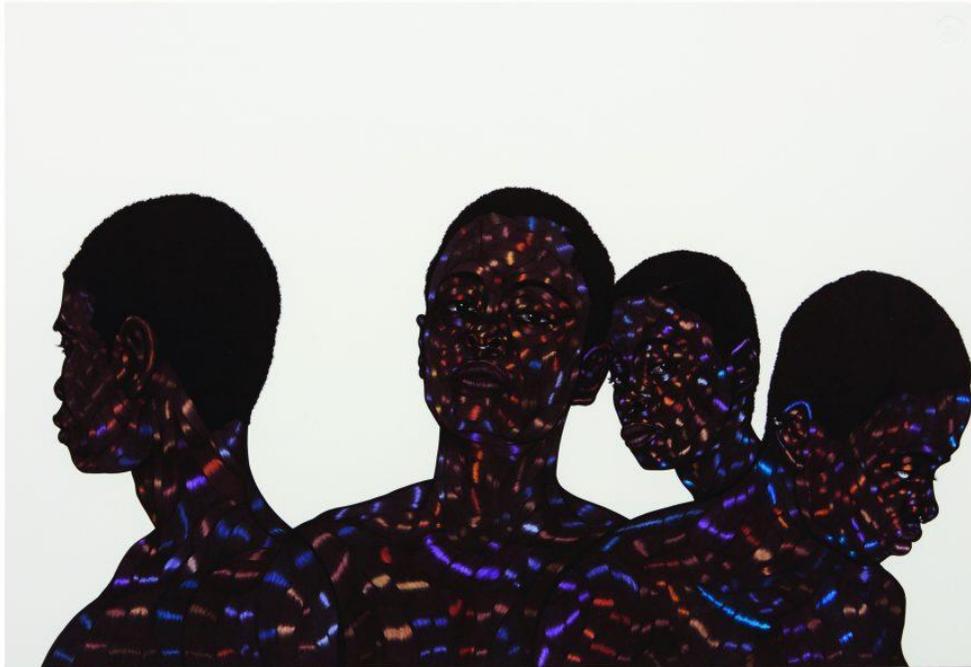
Rhonda Holberton, "Still Life" (2017) Photo: CULT|Aimee Friberg Exhibitions



Hiwa K, "Pre-image (Blind as the Mother Tongue)" (2017, video still) Photo: KOW, Prometeo Gallery di Ida Pisani



Young Joon Kwak's piece, "Hermaphroditus's Reveal I" (2017). Photo: Pingpongpaw, Commonwealth and Council



Toyin Ojih Odutola, "My Country Has No Name" (2013) Photo: Toyin Ojih Odutola, Jack Shainman Gallery

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