

The many selves of gender-bending artist and Nazi resister Claude Cahun

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Claude Cahun (Lucy Schwob), "Self-portrait," c.1925. (Courtesy collection of Leslie Tonkonow and Klaus Ottman)

Who was Claude Cahun? If the French avant-garde artist and writer of the first half of the 20th century were still around, she might reply to that question one way one day, another way the next.

It wasn't that Cahun, who was born Lucy Schwob in 1894 in Nantes, France, was aiming to be coy, elusive or *je ne sais quoi*.

Rather, in her wry photographic self-portraits, on which she collaborated with her longtime lover, Marcel Moore, as well as in her body of writings — the most famous of which is "Disavowals," her graphic, surrealist memoir — Cahun was making a point ... well, many points.

Namely, she was advancing the notion that individuals possess multiple and layered identities that are in constant flux — selves that assert themselves, retreat and sometimes reemerge in new forms.

In Cahun's case, those many selves included woman, artist, writer, lesbian, intellectual, daughter of a Jewish newspaper publisher, niece of two members of the French Jewish intelligentsia — symbolist writer Marcel Schwob and Orientalist David Léon Cahun — political activist and anti-fascist, in no particular order.

She embodied the idea that who someone was at a particular moment could shift internally and externally to reveal someone else, partially or entirely. You could start out as a butch lesbian, transform yourself into a femme boy and subsequently embrace an androgynous mix of butch and femme.

Cahun was queer light-years before the concept and identity of queer were established, said Natasha Matteson, an assistant curator at San Francisco's Contemporary Jewish Museum and the curator of the museum's new show "Show Me as I Want to Be Seen." The exhibit features more than 20 works by Cahun and Moore, along with 60 or so pieces by 10 contemporary painters, photographers, sculptors and video and animation artists who likewise address the notion of the ever-changing, sometimes amorphous sense of self.

"Cahun was making art for the future," said Matteson. "She had a complex understanding of self" that manifested in her and Moore's creations of "more fluid gender expressions."



Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore, "Untitled," 1928. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Gift of Robert Shapazian. © Estate of Claude Cahun. Photo/Don Ross.

In images and photomontages that often call to mind the self-portraits of Cindy Sherman, a Jewish American photographer who explores ideas of female representation, Cahun appears as a waif, a coquette, a dowdy matron, a sailor, a Buddha, a tough boy and a dandy.

But do not conflate who Cahun was on the gelatin print with who she was in person, said Jennifer L. Shaw, a professor of art at Sonoma State University and the author of "Exist Otherwise: The Life and Works of Claude Cahun."

There was, Shaw said, a "distinction between the photographs and the lives" of Cahun and Moore, whose given name was Suzanne Malherbe.

In their private lives, Claude remained Lucy; Marcel reverted to Suzanne. But as artists, they kept pushing the envelope.

"Cahun was very much challenging norms," continued Shaw. "She was very interested in the many social norms that boxed women in and kept them from being creative."

Cahun's interests extended beyond the role of artiste provocateur. She and Moore were ardent anti-fascists and waged campaigns against the Germans on the Nazi-occupied island of Jersey, where they had settled in 1937. Some of their political activities were akin to agitprop theater, as when Cahun and Moore posed as hausfrau and distributed flyers and notes throughout the island urging the Nazis to defect.

Eventually, the two were arrested – at least in part because Cahun had not, as required, registered as a Jew with local authorities – and they were imprisoned and sentenced to death. However, the Germans conceded defeat before their death sentences could be carried out.

Cahun died only nine years after World War II at 60. Shaw argues that the war and imprisonment had taken a physical and psychological toll on her. Moore, two years her senior, committed suicide in 1972.

Cahun and Moore are not as well known in the United States as, say, their contemporaries Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, because very little has been written in English about them, said Shaw. But the contemporary artists participating in "Show Me as I Want to Be Seen" are entirely familiar with their work; some of them even view Cahun and Moore as artistic muses.

Queer-identified painter Gabby Rosenberg, based in Los Angeles, said that she discovered the work of Cahun and Moore as an undergraduate at Hampshire College and immediately "gravitated to it." Their focus on the nonbinary aspects of gender has inspired her in her own work, including the painting "Private Crowd," one of her pieces in the show.

In "Private Crowd," two figures seem to be huddled together, perhaps clutching a third figure in their arms. But in fact, said Rosenberg, 26, they are not individuals at all. They are a warm-colored representation of the body's intestines, articulating her interest in "the visceral feelings that come from not being part of the normative."

Another young artist in the CJM show, Isabel Yellin, who also works in Los Angeles, said that her dystopian blobs of rubber, fake leather and other synthetic materials address negative feelings we ascribe to ourselves that often stem from what our culture and society tell us we should be.

"Our brains can't help but see ourselves in the other," said Yellin, 31.

San Francisco-based artist **Davina Semo**, 37, addresses the transformation of self at a highly conceptual level, taking broken glass, concrete and other discarded objects and bringing them to life in highly evocative pieces such as "She Needed Silence to Function: She Needed It Both for Work and Rest," another work in the show.

"It's reclaiming material that has become trash," said Semo.

While Rosenberg, Semo and another participating artist, Nicole Eisenman, are Jewish-identified, and Yellin identifies as half-Jewish, none of the artists said they were consciously or overtly addressing the concept of their Jewish selves in their work.

However, in a conversation with CJM curator Matteson that is published in the show's catalog, Rabbi Benay Lappe, founder of queer-identified Svava: A Traditionally Radical Yeshiva, said that the transformation of the self is an essentially Jewish concern.

"Even the word *halachah* – it means movement, or walking – is a worldview or practice-in-process," Lappe said. "It's meant to be understood as constantly in motion, always evolving."