

# Ramp Gallery

## Lonnie Hutchinson *Light my fire*

08 - 30 Aug, 2016

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### Body Narratives: nudes by Lonnie Hutchinson

Linda Tyler

A cartoon on the wall of South African painter Marlene Dumas' Amsterdam studio shows a male critic inspecting the work of a female artist. "Your work is surprisingly strong," he says, "have you always been a woman?" In this new body of 30 ink-on-paper drawings, Maori-Samoan artist Lonnie Hutchinson shows her investigations into the gestural approach to depicting the human form which has come to be identified with Dumas' style. Germaine Greer has applauded how Dumas is able to compassionately transform pornographic tropes: "Some people rage that she is adding to her subjects' humiliation and exploiting them in her turn, but it seems to me that her frame of reference includes the rest of us in a single venal culture that lives by prostituting everything, including art," Greer wrote in the *Guardian* in 2010.

Like Dumas', Hutchinson's figures are bold and organic, moving fluidly in poses derived from internet-sourced imagery. They are self-evidently nude rather than naked, conforming to the distinction averred back in the 1970s in the book and television series *Ways of Seeing* by John Berger who wrote that "to be naked is to be oneself. To be nude is to be seen naked by others and yet not recognised for oneself." Long interested in the province of gender, in this exhibition Hutchinson puts the Black Pearl figure familiar from earlier work centre stage. Pearl is no longer stuck in a Polynesian past, but is instead undergoing a fundamental change. S/he becomes a cipher for how an individual sees themselves and wishes to be seen in terms of the categories of male and female, an urgent issue for Hutchinson given the high level of prejudice reported by Human Rights Commission as being experienced by trans people on a daily basis.

In June this year, Jeanine Tuivaiki, a Samoan transgender woman, hung herself at the Catholic church in Taufusi. An outcry ensued when *The Samoa Observer* newspaper printed a picture of her lifeless body on the front page, referring to her as a man. As a lesbian woman, Hutchinson recognises

the harmful impact of discrimination against LGBTQI communities, and feels solidarity with those who reacted to this callous reporting by the media. This year New Zealand celebrates 30 years since the passing of the Homosexual Law Reform Bill into law, diversity has become more visible, here as elsewhere. American gender activist and theorist Susan Stryker declaims, "We are dealing with a heteroglossic outpouring of gender positions from which to speak," and in trans-life as in art, being seen is key. But the ideal is to be seen in a positive way as contributing diversity to society, rather than the Samoan newspaper's damagingly negative portrayal of fa'afafine Jeanine Tuivaiki.

As well as these references to current events and contemporary society, there are other intuitively-derived features that surface in these works, including the use of cigarettes as a prop. New Zealand painters such as Rita Angus and May Smith depicted themselves smoking, deriving their poses from the glamour imagery of war-time Hollywood belles. Once frowned upon in public, smoking became a symbol of female independence in the mid-twentieth century thanks to the movies. Cigarettes were marketed to women who identified with being sophisticated and creative, brave enough to flout societal conventions. Lauren Bacall's gravelly voice, and her provocative posing with a cigarette held up to her face, suggested transgression, a woman who could hold her own in a man's world. Spiralling smoke indicated emotional intensity, while hiding behind an enigmatic smoke screen suggested that the smoker was suspended in a dream state, the kind of reverie conducive to creativity. Now smoking has become literally an outsider activity, excluded and shunned, with smokers relegated to the borderlands, as LGBTQI communities once were.

Transitioning is not about making a journey from A to B, X to Y or vice versa, but rather, hovering in the space between, disappearing and appearing from the haze. Trans is something that exposes gender as a masquerade for all of us. Humans worldwide and throughout history have always manipulated and disguised themselves in order to attain an ideal beauty. Now in western culture, non-trans

women are expected to obey the dictates of the so-called beauty industries, choosing to submit to the cosmetic surgeon's knife to perfect themselves, and conform to an ever more unrealistic image of femininity. Beauty is equated with youth so signs of ageing must be eradicated as aberrant. This architecture of appearances is sometimes only skin-deep. Caitlyn Jenner pouts for Annie Leibowitz's *Vanity Fair* cover, rejoicing in her sex change, but reveals in the interview her continuing loyalty to Republicanism, and intention to vote for Donald Trump, despite the party's appalling record on human rights for LGBTQI communities.

Recently, as I lay attached to a morphine drip in National Women's Hospital recovering from a radical hysterectomy, I opened an email from my dentist. "Our hygienist is in the process of medically transitioning from female to male," he wrote, "[the hygienist's] name will stay the same, however please be aware of the pronoun change to he from now on." This was not unexpected (it is a Ponsonby practice) but it did make me think about gender dysphoria, the distress experienced from living with the gender assigned at birth, as well as the process of transitioning from one gender to another. Are FtMs welcome at National Women's, I wondered? Will the hygienist want to undergo the same four-hour surgical procedure that I had just experienced as elective surgery? As Strkyer observes, "the trans-sexual body is an unnatural body. It is the produce of medical science. It is a technological construction. It is flesh torn apart and sewn together in a shape other than that in which it was born."

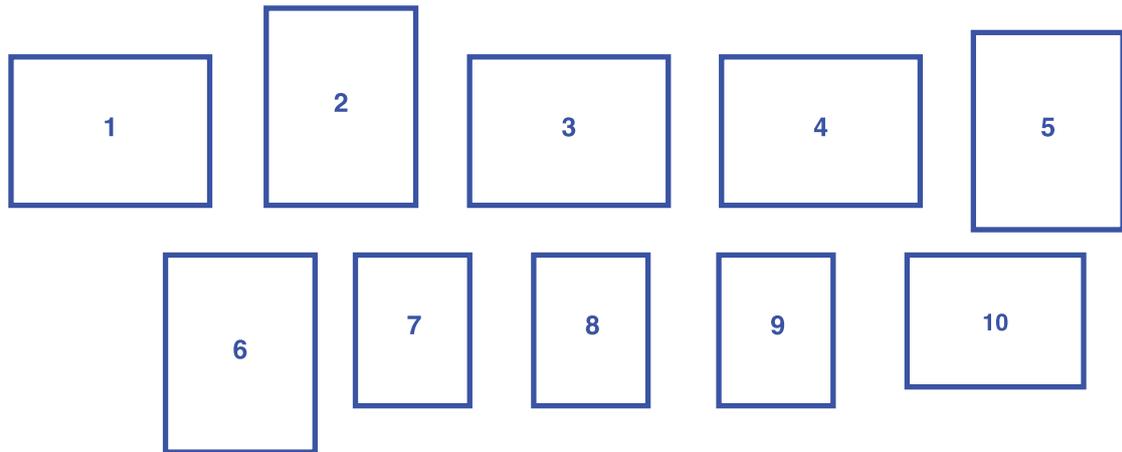
Lonnie Hutchinson shows the body's sexual characteristics to be provisionally constructed. Her quickly applied ink outlines reinforce the sketchiness of gender identity, and the impulse to change. As theorist Jacqueline Rose observes, transsexuality, like all psychic identities, is an exit strategy as much as a journey home.

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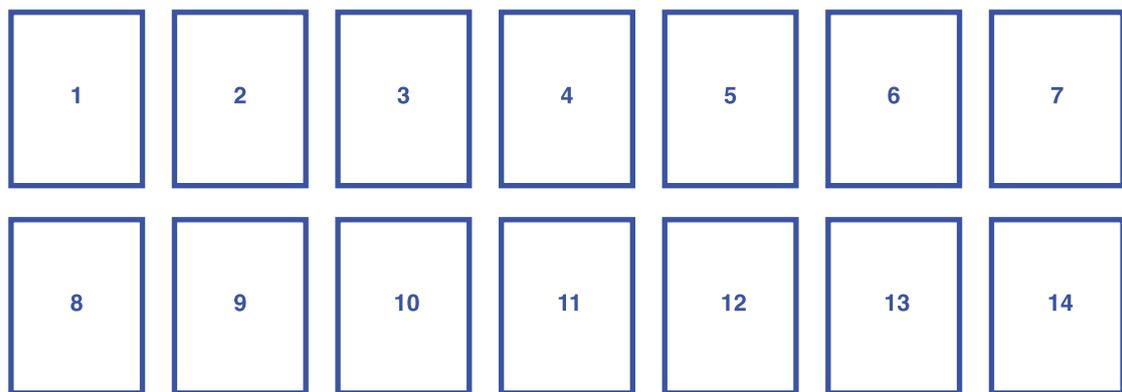
Linda Tyler has been the Director of the Centre for Art Studies at the University of Auckland since 2006, and organised the touring exhibition of Lonnie Hutchinson's work, *Blackbird*, in 2015.

*Light my fire* is brought to Ramp Gallery in association with Spark International Festival of Music, Media, Arts and Design, 2016 #Spark16 #shareinspirecreate

**Midnight en Mass 2003 - 2004**



**The light weights 2016**



Window:  
**Do you like my body**

All drawings - ink and acrylic on rag paper