



**Xpace
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Centre**

2-303 Lansdowne Ave
Toronto ON M6K 2W5
416 849 2864
Tuesday-Saturday 12-6
www.xpace.info

Laurence Philomène and Starchild Stela

it is what it is

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Non-binary

Term used by some people who experience their gender identity and/or gender expression as falling outside the categories of man and woman. They may define their gender as falling somewhere in between man and woman, or they may define it as wholly different from these terms. The term is not a synonym for transgender and should only be used if someone self-identifies as non-binary and/or genderqueer.¹

As I'm filling out my application for graduate school, I come to a box that states, "pick your gender." This sentence reads as an interrogation to me; the demand is so loaded and there isn't a proper option provided.

Gender fluidity, queerness, or flexibility is something that has existed and been recognized in many non-western societies for thousands of years.² However, in parts of westernized culture, the existence of non-binary or genderqueer people is regarded as a new revelation. Only a little over a year ago in June 2016, the Ontario government announced that driver's licenses and health cards would provide the

¹ "GLAAD Media Reference Guide - Transgender." GLAAD, 19 Apr. 2017, www.glaad.org/reference/transgender.

² Diavolo, Lucy. "Gender Variance Around the World Over Time." Teen Vogue, TeenVogue.com, 20 June 2017, www.teenvogue.com/story/gender-variance-around-the-world.

option of 'x' as a gender identifier.³ Following this, on August 31, 2017, the federal government of Canada began allowing an 'x' gender designation on passports and immigration documents.⁴ In May of 2017, Asia Kate Dillon, the first openly non-binary person to play a non-binary character on a major American television series, presented the first non-gendered acting award at the MTV Movie & TV Awards. In that same year, Dillon received the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) Visibility Award, and during their acceptance speech they stated:

Because I was labeled white and assigned female at birth, I am able to wear a suit and it is considered groundbreaking; while my femme friends of colour who were assigned male at birth are ostracized, bullied, and beaten because they wear a skirt or a dress. Because I was labeled white and assigned female at birth, I am praised for declaring that clothing, makeup, and jewelry have no gender; while my femme friends of colour who were assigned male at birth and declare the same are told that there is no safe place for their expression...No one is free until we are all free.'⁵

While these steps feel large in recognizing and validating the representation and general understanding of non-binary existence, representation is still missing in pop culture and media. Furthermore, that which *is* visible is heavily based on aesthetic ideals that do not represent a large portion of non-binary people. Continuously, gender fluidity or non-binary identity is assumed synonymous with androgynous aesthetics. However in this representation, it is not as much about accepting a sliding and continually evolving scale of gender presentation- but more so about accepting a lack of, or opposition to gender as subverting the binary. I believe this ideal stems from a heteronormative anxiety; queerness can be understood as long

³ "Gender on Health Cards and Driver's Licences." News.ontario.ca, news.ontario.ca/mgs/en/2016/06/gender-on-health-cards-and-drivers-licences.html.

⁴ "Canadians to be able to use 'x' option for gender on passports." The Globe and Mail, 24 Aug. 2017, www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/transgender-canadians-to-be-able-to-use-x-option-on-passports/article36087305/.

⁵ hrcmedia. Asia Kate Dillon Receives the HRC Visibility Award, YouTube, 11 Sept. 2017, www.youtube.com/watch?v=uULd1OSM6wY.

as there are undertones of heteronormative narratives. Having fluidity in your gender and sexual identity defies heteronormative logic; therefore, it cannot be seen as valid.

In Laurence Philomène and Starchild Stela's exhibition, *it is what it is*, both artists present a refreshingly honest spectrum of non-binary existence. In a celebration of gender expression and fluidity, Starchild and Laurence have produced portraits of their community and the people around them. These works provide space for visibility--these are portraits of non-binary people existing as themselves. The artists have given the subjects full agency in their representations, either through Starchild's method of asking each person to send them a selfie, or through the collaborative process of Laurence's portraits by co styling them with each of the participants. These processes eliminate the possibility of a sense of voyeurism in the images, creating a level of intimacy that I believe can only exist when a person is truly comfortable in their space.

As a non-binary person who is femme-presenting, this type of representation is crucial to me. I understood androgyny from a young age, but this was heavily tied to aesthetics which were masculine presenting; short hair, strong jaw lines and thin, long bodies. The majority of the time when I would find clothing labeled as 'gender neutral,' what it really meant was masculine- but giving everyone the permission to wear it.

It is seemingly impossible to de-politicize genderqueer and non-binary bodies, because there is such a lack of representation in popular culture. More often than not, the first step in a conversation is having to unpack a collection of terms. You are instantly expected to perform the labour of unraveling intimate details of your life to people you have met five minutes ago. This act in itself becomes political and exhausting.

The environment Starchild and Philomène have created is comfortable and inviting. It is your bedroom, it is your best friend's basement, presenting these portraits as posters hung on a wall like you would of people you hold close to you. These unapologetic images of non-binary people are what I imagine my teenage room would have been filled with had these types of representation existed for me.

There are aspects of each portrait in which I see a glimpse of myself and it is like a warm hug. It is a nod; a stepping-stone to not having to unpack myself every time I state my pronouns.

It is hard to speak to a universal experience, because everyone's narrative navigating the world as a non-binary person is layered and entirely different. I believe that's why work such as this is so important, to highlight the fiercely different bodies and beings that identify as non-binary--to dispel the myth that there is one body, one aesthetic and one universal experience.

-Maddie Alexander