

Art that Slows Down How We Assess Gender

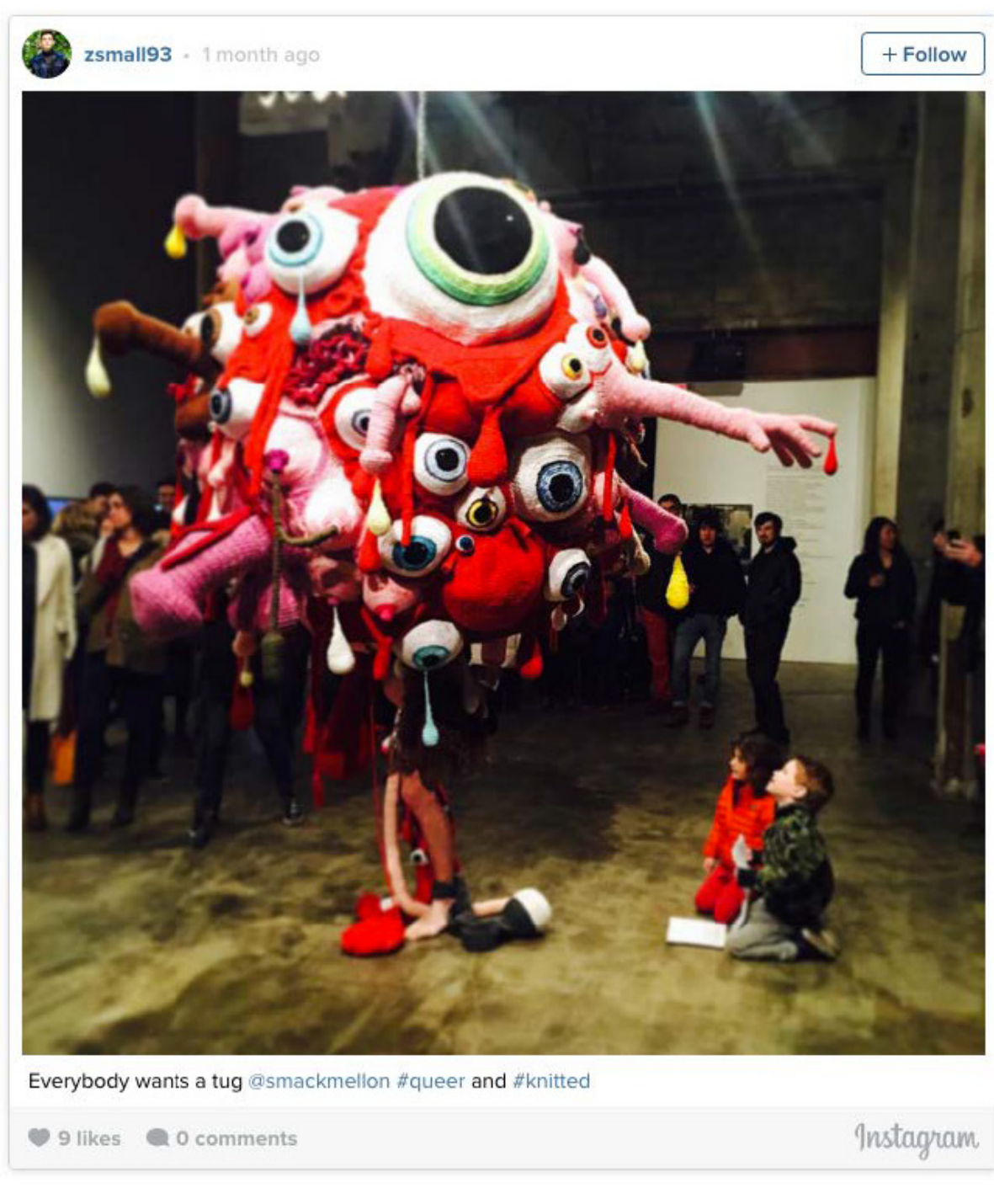
by Zachary Small on April 4, 2016



Zackary Drucker and Rhys Ernst, scene from 'She Gone Rogue' (image courtesy Smack Mellon)

At the center of [Smack Mellon's](#) Dumbo gallery, [Gil Yefman's](#) knitted wrecking ball of genitalia and bodily fluids hangs from the ceiling. The eerily supple and so pliant-to-the-touch installation is titled "Tutum," which, when translated into Jewish law and modern Hebrew, means "unclean" or "stupid." More literally, the word refers to a person whose sex is unknown or hidden. Adorned with woolen eyes looking outwards, the work reflects the onus of androgyny — the humiliation of "searching" for someone's gender — back onto society. The cultural code has been effectively switched.

Like the other 10 artists featured in curator Alexis Heller's exhibition, [SIGNAL](#) ([SIGNAL](#)), Yefman attempts to free queerness from social codes. And, as with the majority of contemporary art, subversion and appropriation are the de facto tools for dismantling hierarchy. In this media-diverse exhibition, artists unite in their desire to slow down judgment and avert the quick visual assessments of gender discrimination. Counterintuitively, technology is often used as an intermediary of this slowdown — a hack for queer resistance.



Everybody wants a tug @smackmellon #queer and #knitted

[Chelsea Thompto's](#) "Trans Effigy" is a clever play on code switching, whereby we must decipher the meaning of her work from one of our earliest computational languages: binary code. (Thompto used this code for the exhibition's title, [SIGNAL](#), which translates to "SIGNAL.") In her piece, she provides us with a decoder key to translate the binary system back to English; in exchange, we are asked to meditate on technology as a risk-and-reward system. Although the internet is based on a binary language, it has ironically carved a path for gender queerness. Blogs, forums, and social media outlets have become arenas of queer power and agency — for better or worse. "Trans Effigy" asks us to contemplate how our digital infrastructure has created a space for all, even if at the risk of exposure and violence.

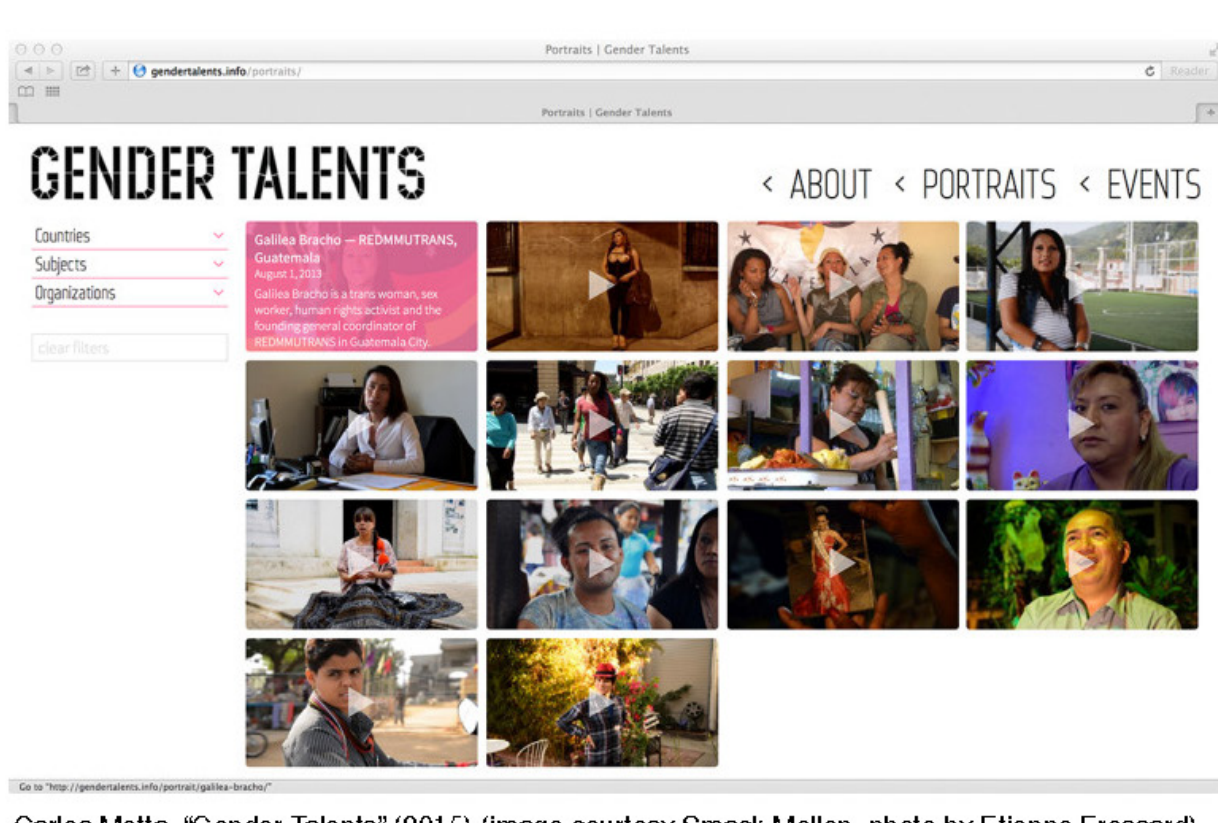


Chelsea Thompto installation view (image courtesy of Smack Mellon, photo by Etienne Frossard) (click to enlarge)

Less subtle but equally powerful are [Carlos Motta's](#) video portraits of transgender and intersex activists, called *Gender Talents*. Motta's profiles from around the world emphasize that gender self-determination isn't a Western phenomenon at all. By exhibiting these short documentaries together, Heller prompts a discussion of international intervention and the quest for genderqueer security and acceptance that can reach across borders and lift an impoverished population.

If Motta looks across borders, then [Rhys Ernst](#) and [Zackary Drucker](#) reach across time. Their fictional film, *She Gone Rogue*, explores transfeminine archetypes to tell ancestral (or trans-cesstral, rather) lessons about creating one's own chosen family. Although *She Gone Rogue* can be a disorienting watch, it reflects the winding path of self-identification, creating a multiverse instead of a single universe for the complex narratives of queerness.

[Cobi Moules's](#) figurative paintings are another alluring fixture of Heller's exhibition. His series, *Bois Just Wanna Have Fun*, beautifully renders the artist's trans identity through a multitude of bodies. Dressed as Boy Scouts, Moules's many selves wander through idyllic landscapes ripped from the Hudson River School. Until recently, the Boy Scouts excluded gay children and adults from their ranks; [the group still discriminates](#) against transgender members. Reacting against his conservative Christian upbringing, Moules portrays himself as infinite and accepted. The verdant tranquility of his paintings subverts the notion that transgenderism is unnatural, integrating Moules into the sublime landscapes of nature.



Carlos Motta, "Gender Talents" (2015) (image courtesy Smack Mellon, photo by Etienne Frossard)

The artists of *SIGNAL* make the case that gender can be the site of resistance rather than the site of discrimination. What becomes foggy is the way technology — a force for activism as much as oppression — might improve the lives of genderqueer people. [Young Joon Kwak's](#) "Excreted Venus" represents the bifurcated havoc and opportunity that digital architectures create. Her Venus looks as if it were ripped through digital time and space, emerging as a metallic Pompeian fossil. The figure's formlessness suggests the ability to remold our classic conceptions of femininity and beauty. The question remains: Who gets to do the original molding?



Cobi Moules, "Untitled (Lake McDonald)" (2012), oil on canvas, 21" x41" (image courtesy Smack Mellon, photo by Etienne Frossard)

[SIGNAL](#) ([SIGNAL](#)) continues at Smack Mellon (92 Plymouth St, Dumbo, Brooklyn) through April 17.