

Art, Gender, and Ice Hockey

In the last several years, race, gender, and identity issues have become a part of public discourse and popular culture like never before. From celebrity transformations to characters on popular television shows, transgender people are being acknowledged as a part of the fabric of everyday life and culture. However, although appearing in the mainstream media is a somewhat recent phenomenon, transgender people have existed throughout history. As with many social movements, the visual art world has often been a supportive place for non-binary and transgender people to express their ideas and advocate for their rights. In fact, artists have explored, questioned, challenged and celebrated gender identities throughout history.

Pop Art, Frankenstein, and Ice Hockey

Taylor Bystrom is a transgender male artist who explores gender, identity, and hockey through his bold, brightly-colored, Pop Art influenced paintings. He seeks to promote positivity and acceptance through his work, advocate for transgender rights, and ease the struggles of others who feel they do not fit in to traditional gender roles. He considers Pop Art painter Roy Lichtenstein (1923–1997) to be his main influence, but there are strong suggestions of the work of Keith Haring in his work as well. Bystrom's paintings are also influenced by the iconic mythology of Frankenstein, which he includes in his imagery. His lifelong interest in ice hockey and ice skating permeates his work, seen in repeated motifs of hockey sticks, uniforms, and other symbols. He is committed to emphasizing the NHL's campaign of "Hockey is for Everyone."

A graduate of Northern Arizona University, Bystrom's journey as an artist began in 2010 while working for an "art and wine" studio where he cleaned paint brushes. Watching the lead artists teach others to paint inspired Taylor to begin creating work of his own.

Historical Connections

Sharing personal stories through art was not truly a viable goal for artists until the late 1900s, when the gender and ethnic revolutions of the 1960s empowered artists to begin critiquing society, race, gender, and power. Gender identification and discrimination were addressed by many artists in the 1970s, such as Sylvia Sleigh (1916–2010) and Martha Edelheit (b. 1931). In the 1980s, the anonymous collective The Guerilla Girls, who are still active today, confronted gender discrimination in art galleries and museums, challenging them to show more work by women artists. During the AIDS crisis in the 1980s, many artists advocated for gay rights and AIDS awareness through their art, including Keith Haring (1958–1990) and David Wojnarowicz (1954–1992).



Top: Contemporary artist Taylor Bystrom. Bottom: Taylor Bystrom, *New Year New T.* 30 x 40" (76 x 102 cm) oil on canvas. Photos by Fontaine Rittelmann. Images courtesy of Taylor Bystrom and Fontaine Rittelmann.





Taylor Bystrom,
Helmets Off! Gloves
Off! RESIST!. Oil on
canvas. Photo by
Fontaine Rittelmann.
Image courtesy of
Fontaine Rittelmann
and Taylor Bystrom.

ARTIST Q&A**SchoolArts: Tell us about your artwork.**

Taylor Bystrom: I mostly work in 2D. Many of my paintings call upon the traditions of sign painting. Most are large and flat with eye-catching embellishments. I also have produced a series of color prints that focus upon repetition of patterns of “T”s, a letter with significance to me.

SA: What's your story?

TB: When I was a child, I drew pictures of the way I wanted to look—short hair, jeans, T-shirts, and tattoos—but I was not taken seriously. Like many other members of the LGBTQ+ community, my story involves being dismissed or rejected by others. The sadness and confusion of my early years have made me into a stronger, resilient, and compassionate adult.

SA: What brought you to art?

TB: Stereotypical gender roles in a pink-and-blue world are often confining and difficult to overcome. Art gives voice to those things that sometimes are difficult to say out loud. My art is therapeutic and helps me to better understand myself while helping others get through similar circumstances.

SA: What is the most important message that your work conveys?

TB: Art has become a way for me to communicate and to help others. I am a transgender man who vocally advocates for global human equality and tolerance. The goal of my art is to help bridge a sometimes uncomfortable gap; to be visible for those who can't be seen for who they really are.

SA: What is the significance of hockey players in your work?

TB: Ice is symbolic for me in a few ways. Ice is beautiful because it offers two opposing experiences. As a skater, there is the sensation of gliding on ice. Conversely, skating on ice offers the risky experience of falling. Ice demands the uniform; the cold demands a change. The freedom is in the armor and the warm bulkiness of the pads, a change of body, if you will. A lot of my work is the result of collision in my life and portraying my figures on ice. There's a nice breakdown between overlap and collision.

SA: Could you tell us a little about what your future holds?

TB: I have found that many people are afraid of what they do not understand. I have frequently spoken to groups. During these talks, the audience asks questions that I answer with frankness and honesty. Speaking openly to people is one of the best ways to promote social acceptance. I hope to start speaking on a wider scale in the future. In the meantime, as advocate for LGBTQ+ youth, I often donate my artwork to help raise funds for those who find themselves in less than ideal situations.

SA: What can art teachers do to better support their LGBTQ+ students?

TB: Art teachers can help their LGBTQ+ students by provid-

ing safe spaces for them to talk about and show their work. The most thoughtful thing one of my professors did for me was give me a platform to tell my story my way. When I am able to show my artwork and talk about my life experiences, there is a feeling of being understood exactly the way I intend to be heard. The teachers who have listened to me and have seen me cry have made the biggest impact on my life. I have had so many teachers rally behind me during struggles when I have needed their mentorship the most.


DISCUSSION

Begin with a discussion of traditional gender roles. Start by showing pink and blue squares, and ask students what they represent. When students respond with male/female or boy/girl, ask them how they learned this concept. Then show them images of stereotypically male and female toys, clothing, etc. As a class, create a list of stereotypical gender behaviors and personality traits. Then ask, “Do you fit perfectly into one of these categories? Which items on this list do you identify with? Which ones do not represent you? How do these ideas about gender affect people's behavior?”

Explain that gender stereotypes are an oversimplification of reality and that gender itself is much more complex. Most people identify with aspects of both lists. Many people identify with and feel comfortable with the gender they were assigned at birth, but many others do not. Art is a safe space for exploring ideas about gender, and only you can determine where you belong on the gender spectrum.

Next, show work from a variety of artists that challenge gender stereotypes, such as Frida Kahlo's *Self Portrait with Cropped Hair*, and J.J. Levine's *Alone Time*, a series which features models portraying “male” and “female” versions of themselves in the same photograph. After some discussion, introduce students to Taylor Bystrom's work.

STUDIO EXPLORATIONS

- Create a self-portrait that challenges gender stereotypes.
- Create a list of gender stereotypes that are untrue or you find personally offensive. Create a poster or meme that challenges these stereotypes using, drawing, painting, collage, or digital media.
- Choose a television advertisement that contains gender stereotypes. Working in a small group, create a parody video which reverses or challenges the stereotypes in the original ad.
- Create a series of symbolic paintings, drawings, sculptures, or videos that reflect your own perspective on gender and gender roles. 

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RESOURCES

www.transequality.org/

www.jjlevine.com/alone-time/