

LEAH DEVUN

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*Our Hands On Each Other*



WOMEN & THEIR WORK

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JUNE 3 - JULY 15, 2010

AUSTIN, TEXAS

## INDIVISIBLE

"We see ourselves as prime, find our centers inside of ourselves. We find receding the sense of alienation, of being cut off, of being behind a locked window, of being unable to get out what we know is inside. We feel a realness, feel at last we are coinciding with ourselves. With that real self, with that consciousness, we begin a revolution to end the imposition of all coercive identifications, and to achieve maximum autonomy in human expression." – *The Woman Identified Woman*, The Lavender Menace.<sup>1</sup>

Prime numbers are only divisible by themselves and by the number one. One, however, is not a prime number; it is a unit. In referring to themselves as prime, The Lavender Menace use a word rich in meaning, suggesting that they are premiere and excellent in quality and also referring to an important concept in mathematics. In this their aim is clear: autonomy and community, singularity and plurality, unity and multitude. The politics of feminist consciousness-raising, coupled with the language of mathematics, facilitates an imagined unity and a formula for change. *Our Hands On Each Other* is an exhibition where metaphor and reality mix, where the clichés of today are bound to the lived experiences of the past and given depth, where self and community collide. Leah DeVun's work demands that we consider and extricate queer histories, specifically the contributions of intentional feminist communities and lesbian separatists, or else ignore them at our collective peril.<sup>2</sup> While this work may seem to be about the past, it is in reality about a continuing presence and a future. If dismissed, it constitutes an erasure of a people and a history.

<sup>1</sup>This statement was collectively written by members of *The Lavender Menace*, which was a tongue-in-cheek reference to Betty Friedan's comment that lesbian feminists constituted a "lavender menace" to organizations such as the National Organization for Women (NOW). *The Lavender Menace* disrupted the opening session of the Second Congress to Unite Women held on May 1st, 1970, by taking control of the programmatic aims of the conference and by disseminating their manifesto, "The Woman Identified Woman." This was an important instance of lesbians asserting their place within feminist movements while also insisting on a kind of separatism from mainstream and patriarchal culture. Later the group went under the moniker Radicalesbians.

<sup>2</sup>This essay makes use of reclaimed words, queer and dyke most notably. Many groups have reclaimed these terms to disarm violent language and infuse it, instead, with agency.

A partial definition of lesbian separatist communities, land dykes, womyn's lands: these movements/strategies, while having expressed small differences, are bound together by their beliefs and subsequent practices of leaving patriarchal systems in order to develop new woman-centric communities. Some women established small self-sustaining communities in rural spaces, and some of these communities are still in existence.

To accomplish a reading of DeVun's work and the larger historical contexts to which it is indebted and refers, I want to trace a backwards path through the exhibition, from the back wall to the front doors. This maps out the movement from self to community, from community to representation. I end with the question of how the self can be encountered and re-formulated as activist within the mediated spaces of representation.

## PRIME: I/I

DeVun's photographs of young women alone in the woods, interspersed with landscapes of buildings on womyn's lands (that DeVun visited), allude to this language of prime—of indivisibility. The women posing for DeVun are recognizable faces from Austin's queer and lesbian communities. DeVun has asked them, and the viewers in turn, to inhabit the ideals of land dyke communities, shed their inhibitions and clothing and exist within a natural realm. The portraits are documents of a split self. Even though it appears that there is only one person in the frame, each subject coexists with both a contemporary Austin life and the life of a woman living in a lesbian separatist community. We might call it a fiction, or play-acting, but this commingling of the historical and the present in a singular body is no joke. They are themselves but they are more than themselves. They are split and multiplied.

This ideation of self is largely indebted to radical lesbian philosophers including most notably French writer Monique Wittig, who, in *The Lesbian Body*, renders the self split, writing in French *je* instead of *je*.<sup>3</sup> The equivalent of the French *je* is I in English. But splitting the

linguistic sign for the self is not easily accomplished. To split the self linguistically in English, as Wittig has done in French, it must be mirrored and multiplied: I/I. The I/I best describes DeVun's portraits aesthetically and structurally, because to insist on the plumb line from historical, theoretical premises to the present tense acknowledges and engages with DeVun's project as historical and contemporary. This is also why I'm loathe to call DeVun's photographs play-acting (although there is play!), because each subject was informed of the architecture of the project and each carries on the surface or beneath it the split history.

## COMMUNITY: I, I

It is not enough, though, to insist upon a split self, because many women in radical lesbian and lesbian separatist communities fostered a sense of community that cemented political aspirations to live off the grid of capitalism, of patriarchy, of convenience. While Wittig's split self is useful in considering a kind of multiplicity within, another rendering is needed—one that acknowledges collectivism and retains a sense of singularity. This could be rendered as I, I, as a corollary to Wittig's I/I. This at once acknowledges the multiplicities of individuals while keeping each one discreet yet relational. The comma is a rhetorical and physical distance, a small roadblock surmountable by a shared sense of political strife. It is not only in the organization of people/bodies that the I, I makes sense.

There is a shack in the middle of DeVun's exhibition, entitled "*Unfinished Project*," that was added to on opening night and on each subsequent day of the exhibition. Building community was taken to mean literal building by lesbian separatist and land dyke communities. The accommodations lesbian separatists built, represented in some of the photographs in the show, were rustic assemblages of used and discarded pieces of construction. Spaces of social communion were built from the bits and pieces of other communities, resituated and used for the communal and individual experiences of eating, sleeping and

<sup>3</sup>Monique Wittig, *Le Corps Lesbien* [*The Lesbian Body*] (*Les Éditions de Minuit*, 1973). Wittig's narrative is complex to describe as she switches from first-person adulatory poetry to lists of body parts. Peter Owen's

1975 translation rendered the *j/e* as I and split in the case of the possessive *m/y*. For me, to simply italicize I does not do justice to the splitting of the *je*, so I propose an alternative in this essay.



## LEAH DEVUN

### EDUCATION

- 2004 *Ph.D.*, Columbia University, New York City, NY  
(with *Distinction*).  
1996 *B.A.* University of Washington, Seattle, WA.

### SOLO AND TWO-PERSON SHOWS

- 2011 *Femininity Constructed*. Satellite Space Gallery. University of Texas San Antonio, San Antonio, TX.  
2010 *Our Hands On Each Other*. Women & Their Work, Austin, TX.  
2009 *Your Heart is Not a Museum*. Domy, Austin, TX.  
2009 *Beauty Knows No Pain*. Houston Center for Photography, Houston, TX.

### SELECT GROUP SHOWS

- 2009 *New American Talent 24*. Juror: Hamza Walker, University of Chicago, Arthouse at the Jones Center, Austin, TX.  
2008 *Transitions*. Big Medium, Austin, TX.  
2008 *Big Show: Annual Juried Competition*. Juror: Aram Moshayedi, Curator, LA><ART, Lawndale Art Center, Houston, TX.  
2008 *Recent Work: Glassell Studio Photographers*. Museum of Fine Arts Houston, Glassell Studio, Houston, TX.  
2007 *TRANS: A Juried Exhibition*. Juror: Leonie Bradbury, Montserrat College of Art, Atlantic Works Gallery, Boston, MA.



*"In This Place Wimmin Come 1st"*  
Mixed Media Lightbox, by Leah DeVun, 2010.

- 2007 *Texas Heat*. Lexington Club, San Francisco, CA.  
2007 *The Cowboy and the Pegasus*. Curators: Justin Polera and Gonia Rejnowska, Queer Fest Midwest, Chicago, IL.  
2007 *Fotoshow*. Bow & Sparrow Gallery, Chinatown, Los Angeles, CA.  
2007 *Photography: A Self Portrait Show*. Austin Figurative Gallery, Austin, TX.  
2007 *Miniature*. Ghost Gallery, Seattle, WA.  
2006 *Día de los Muertos*. Bath House Cultural Center, Dallas, TX.  
2006 *Casting Off: Eyes on the Horizon*. Lyndon Event Space, Austin, TX.  
2006 *Big Show: Annual Juried Competition*. Juror: Dominic Molon, Associate Curator, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, Lawndale Art Center, Houston, TX.  
2005 *Small Works for Big Change*. Orchard 47 Gallery, New York, NY.

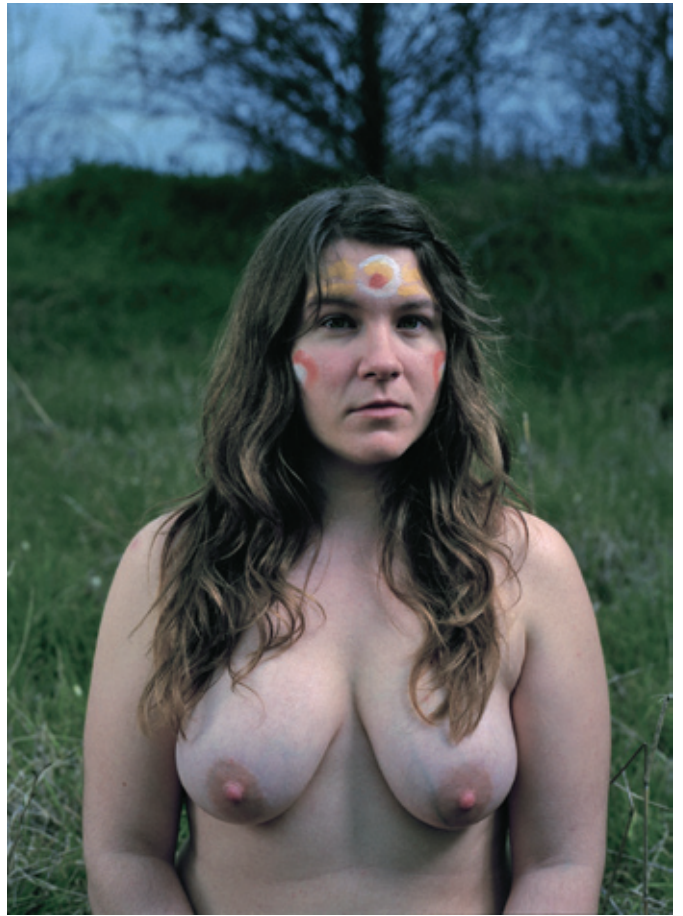
### SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY

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Andy Campbell, "Heads in the Sky; Feet on the Ground: Leah DeVun's Very Intentional Exploration of Lesbian Space," *Austin Chronicle* (June 4, 2010): 14-15.  
Emily Weerts, "Leah DeVun and Hannah Montana Have More in Common Than You'd Think," *Austinist* (May 15, 2010).  
Katie Anania, "Critics' Pick: Leah DeVun and Levi Dugat," *Artforum.com* (October 13, 2009).  
Katie Smither, "Your Heart is Not a Museum," *Dallas Art News* (September 21, 2009).  
Kate Watson, "2009 Fall Preview," *Glasstire.com* (September, 2009).  
Wayne Alan Brenner, "New American Talent: The Twenty-Fourth Exhibition," *Austin Chronicle* (August 7, 2009): 68.  
Dan Boehl "Artist's Space: Leah DeVun," ...might be good 124 (June 19, 2009).  
Laura Lark, "The Point Almost Poked My Eye Out," *Glasstire.com* (March, 2009).  
*"Transitions," Cantanker 6 (2008): 13.*  
Kilian Melloy, "'Trans' is the Watchword at New Exhibit by Atlantic Works Gallery," *EDGE Boston*, (December 4, 2007).  
Randi Hopkins, "Jury's Got the Verdict: 'Trans' at Atlantic Works," *The Phoenix* (December 9, 2007).  
William Henderson, "Transitory Spaces: 14 Artists Explore Meaning of Prefix," *Newsweekly* (December 6, 2007).





*"Sinister Wisdom"* by Leah DeVun, Chromira Print, 40" x 30", 2010.



*"Women In Sunlight"* by Leah DeVun, Chromira Print, 40" x 30", 2010.



*"Lesbian Land"* by Leah DeVun, Chromira Print, 40" x 30", 2010.

## Women & Their Work

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 Photos by Anna Donlan and Leah DeVun.  
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Known for its pioneering spirit, embrace of artistic innovation, and commitment to Texas audiences and artists, Women & Their Work is now celebrating its 32nd anniversary. Presenting over 50 events a year in visual art, dance, theater, music, literature, and film, the gallery features on-going exhibitions of Texas women artists and brings artists of national stature to Texas audiences. Since its founding, Women & Their Work has presented 1,847 artists in 264 visual art exhibitions, 112 music dance and theater events 14 film festivals, 23 literary readings and 418 workshops in programming that reflects the broad diversity of this region. Nationally recognized, Women & Their Work has been featured in Art in America, ArtForum and on National Public Radio and was the first organization in Texas to receive a grant in visual art from

the National Endowment for the Arts. Women & Their Work reaches over 1,800 school children and teachers each year through gallery tours, gallery talks with exhibiting artists, participatory workshops, in-school performances, dance master classes, and teacher workshops.



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