



*tanya* (2008) by Lola Flash is part of her "epicene" series, which the artist describes as "girls who look like boys and vice versa." Image courtesy Lola Flash. Copyright © 2008 Lola Flash.

## Androgyny

by Tina Gianoulis

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Created by combining the Greek words for man (*andros*) and woman (*gynaika*), androgyny describes the blending of male and female characteristics within a single individual. Though the term "hermaphrodite" is sometimes given as a synonym for androgyne, androgyny is generally understood today to be a psychological blending of gender traits, while hermaphroditism describes those who possess some of the actual sex organs of both genders.

Androgyny has long been embraced by strong women, soft men, members of queer communities, and others who do not easily fit into traditionally defined gender categories.

### The Androgyne as a Divine Union of Earthly Principles

Some cultures have revered the androgyne as a divine union of earthly principles, and many religions have worshipped gods that represented the combination of male and female. The Greek god of wine and sensuality, Dionysos, was believed to be androgynous, as was Hapi, the Egyptian god of the Nile. Practitioners of the Voudoun religion of Africa, South America, and the Caribbean honor the androgyne Obatala as the creator of humankind and the bringer of peace.

The Vikings worshipped the valkyrie Bruennhilde, the androgynous daughter of Wotan, king of the gods. Hindu, Christian, and Wiccan religions all have deities or demi-deities with androgynous qualities.

### Distinctions between Sex and Gender

To understand androgyny, it is important to explore the differences between sex and gender. An individual's sex is generally considered to be a physical construct. In other words, in most instances a person's sex is either male or female, depending on the sexual organs present in the body.

For many centuries, in most societies, male and female have been the only acceptable options when determining an individual's sex. If one's physical sexual characteristics were ambiguous, this fact was either hidden or altered in babyhood by doctors who often "chose" a sex for hermaphroditic or "intersex" children. During the latter part of the twentieth century, many people whose genital organs were not clearly male or female began to speak out and demand the right to claim their intersex identity.

While sex describes the physical body, "gender" describes the social role of an individual, based on sex. Although specific gender roles vary from culture to culture, most societies have clear definitions of what is women's behavior and what is men's behavior. Many of these definitions claim to have a basis in physical reality. For example, women give birth and are therefore supposed to be more nurturing and dependent; in ancient times men were hunters and are therefore supposed to be more aggressive and independent.

Gender is an important characteristic in most societies, and communities enforce most gender rules quite

strictly. One of the most important facts to know about people is their gender. One is expected to dress and behave in ways that are gender appropriate. The punishment for deviation from gender role expectations can be quite harsh, from ridicule to ostracism to harassment.

### **Challenging Gender Roles**

Many people have found themselves stifled and limited by the rules governing gender identity, especially when those rules seem to contradict an inner reality. Consequently, social movements have arisen to challenge narrowly defined gender roles and expectations.

One of the most important of these movements was the women's liberation movement of the 1970s. Feminists such as Carolyn Bird, Charlotte Bunch, and Robin Morgan challenged the idea that women were "naturally" more passive, emotional, and weaker than men.

In 1971, feminist psychologist and Stanford University professor Sandra Bem introduced the concept of "psychological androgyny" to describe those men and women who did not fit into traditionally defined gender roles. In 1973, lesbian feminist author June Arnold, writing under the penname "the Carpenter," questioned assumptions about gender in *The Cook and the Carpenter*, a novel that did not reveal the gender of any of its characters, using the gender-neutral pronoun "na" instead of "he" or "she."

Lesbians and gay men of the 1970s gay liberation movement embraced the idea of androgyny because it allowed them to express gender traits that had previously been forbidden to them. Many dykes cut their hair short, wore flannel shirts and heavy work boots, took classes in car repair, and trained to work in the construction trades, while at the same time developing a new pride in their identity as women. Gay men showed their feminine side by experimenting more publicly with make-up and drag.

### **Mainstreaming Androgyny**

By the 1980s, androgyny had spread from the gay and lesbian communities into the mainstream. Male glam-rockers such as David Bowie and Boy George crossed gender lines with big hair and heavy eye make-up, while rock diva Annie Lennox wore a crew cut that would have made any androgynous dyke proud.

Straights copied the celebrities, and soon straight men gathered around bathroom mirrors to check their make-up, while young straight women buzzed their hair and put on Doc Martens. By the 1990s a "dyke chic" had developed on many college campuses, and a new lesbian catch phrase asked, "Why just dress like a lesbian when you can be one?"

### **Expanding the Definition of Androgyny**

During the 1990s a mood of gender questioning swept over the glbtq community. No longer content to move from the male/female dichotomy to the gay/lesbian dichotomy, young queers began to search for broader terms in which to define themselves. They began to expand the definition of androgyny to include not only those who blended male and female gender characteristics, but also those whose gender was impossible to determine and those who refused to identify themselves in traditional gender dichotomies.

Many sought purposely to confuse the world's perception of their genders. They created a term "gender fuck" to describe the act of manipulating and confounding the world's perception of their gender.

Gender fucking might include wearing an evening dress with a full beard, or a t-shirt with the legend "Boy Dyke."

However, while "gender outlaws" may now be more prevalent in urban societies, the social construct of gender is still quite strictly enforced. Those who challenge it do so at great personal risk.

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## **About the Author**

**Tina Gianoulis** is an essayist and free-lance writer who has contributed to a number of encyclopedias and anthologies, as well as to journals such as *Sinister Wisdom*.