REFRACTION

CURATED BY BOBB ATTARD
REFRACTION is a celebration of what is usually unseen, forgotten about, or misunderstood, as well as a recognition that the ongoing fight for LGBTIQ+ rights is global.

The platform brings visibility to voices beyond the heteronormative and homoerotic bubbles that we are accustomed to. It also highlights the multitude of experiences faced by LGBTIQ+ individuals from different parts of the world. REFRACTION echoes a sense of strength, resilience, and power; sometimes from the most unexpected places.
“My work consist exclusively of photographic self-portraits that are concerned with my identity as a gay man living with HIV and AIDS. Being HIV-positive in society has lent me a perspective on the human experiences of exclusion, rejection, and stigmatization. The diagnosis twenty years ago ushered in a rebirth. Everything that I thought I was, now I wasn’t. It changed me emotionally, mentally, and physically. Some changes happened within a matter of seconds, while others took a couple of years to fully develop. Though my outer self and my social life were wasting away, my inner self was being reborn and refined. At this point, I began using only myself as a model.

Combining my biographic life events and artistic concepts into something new is how I make my work. The process of creating my art is like a dialogue that I’m having with myself. I try to recast the male nude as something insecure and vulnerable rather than as a figure of strength. Many of my self-portraits are confrontational. Often I look straight at the camera, making direct eye contact with the viewer. I’m an introvert person and I struggle with social anxiety for most of my life, but I want to be seen, and I challenge the viewer to see me. I have dealt quite a bit with the fact that people see me as I am, but experiencing the truth about my body and me, and the ability to remain true to my work, is important to me. The positive reactions have shown me that other people can also find themselves in my work. It isn’t my wish to represent only myself.

I have begun to think about what I will leave behind when I die. I think, we all are tossed about between life and death, and through our lives we steadily descend and finally disappear. Our ultimate destination is death. So through my artistic work I do what I can to make sure I’m still around after I’m gone, that I will live on in my work. This is probably the major motivation for my work. I like the idea that every self-portrait I create is like a single point of a moment in my life, and one day, all these points of moments will form a line which reflects my life. What I truly hope will remain are these self-portraits telling my brief story.”
Robert Andy Coombs grew up in Michigan’s majestic Upper Peninsula where he spent his childhood roaming the great outdoors. He started photographing his walkabouts in middle school and moved on to portraiture in high school. Coombs received a scholarship to Kendall College of Art and Design in Grand Rapids Michigan. During his third year in undergrad, Coombs’ sustained a spinal cord injury due to a gymnastics training accident. After a year of recovery, he returned to KCAD and received his BFA in photography in 2013. Coombs’ photography explores the intersections of disability and sexuality. Themes of relationships, caregiving, fetish, and sex are depicted and explored throughout. Coombs graduated from the Yale School of Art amidst the COVID-19 pandemic and is currently residing in sunny Miami Florida.
“Huma Min Huma? hija diskussjoni fuq il-pronomi li nużaw għall-ġens newtrali bil-Malti. Matul ħames sessjonijiet se nkun qed inhix xa ħaġa waqt li niddiskuti magħkom il-ħajja ta’ kuljum ta’ persuna non-binary, u kif nistgħu nesprimu din ir-realtà bil-Malti. Se nkun qed naqsam xi esperjenzi u hsibijiet tiegħi, u nixtieq nitgħallem mingħandkom fi spazju miftuħ għal djalogu dwar kif indawru l-lingwa u hsibijietna madwar ħajjitna queer. L-avveniment se jkun bil-Malti u jdum 30 minuta.”

“Huma Min Huma? is a discussion on gender neutral pronouns in Maltese. Over the course of five performances I will be sewing a garment whilst discussing the everyday life of a non-binary person, and how we can speak about this reality in Maltese. I will be sharing a few of my experiences and thoughts, and I’d like to learn from you in an open dialogue about how we can put our heads and our language around our queer lives. The performance will be in Maltese and will last 30 minutes.”

NOAH FABRI
“For many years I wanted to work on a project related to the LGBTQ+ community in Palestine in order to better understand it and to shed light on this topic. I knew there were many things I didn’t quite understand despite reading about them. The only way to understand these questions was to actually delve into this community and have them explained to me first hand through its “members”. Once I started working on this project I realised that I had many preconceptions and somewhat stereotypes - despite thinking I didn’t have them.

It was when the pandemic hit that I began to think about how difficult it must be for this already oppressed and unrepresented group of people to make things work during such times. Yet working on this project has proved my assumptions to not quite be in their place with regards to this.

Yes, queer people in Palestine struggle greatly. And yes, the pandemic has made things much harder for them. However, since day one of coming out to themselves with their sexuality - and possibly even before - they’ve built incredible resilience.
Mohsin Shafi is an interdisciplinary artist living and working in Lahore - Pakistan. The artist’s work focuses on the intersectional relationships between tradition, modernity, culture, religion, and sexuality, and on the propensity of these ideas to collectively produce and perpetuate institutionalised oppression and domination. Shafi’s practice further takes advantage of personal archives, offering multiple perspectives that reveal entrenched socio-political contradictions in Pakistani society.

The installation in the show consists of two works: The past gets carried with us... its always there which is a moving image still of the artist’s personal belongings.

The second piece is The joy of being detained at AirPort Borders which started in 2015 but turned into an ongoing series. The exercise shaped during Artist’s first ever arrival to United States, where at the Airport it took him more than six hours being interrogated by four different homeland security officers - going through each and tiny bit of luggage in his suitcases - asking cliché questions over and over again to the point where he frustratingly had to say them to send me back to his country.

For shafi such humiliation is common and it happens very regularly at most airports borders may it be U.S., U.K., or in Europe, where he feels almost like a puppet in the hands of the homeland security authorities, each time he travels. The passport project is a sarcastic take on his identity obstacles and is also a way to convert his anger into joyful piece of art which he at times gets to hang shamelessly in public as his dirty laundry.

Shafi says “These are the crux of being Asian, Brown, Muslim and a Pakistani. my works shout out about identity, displacement, diaspora, violence, censorship and oppression. In my process I am seeking to enact healing, rebalance and repair from colonialism. I am interested in the role of art in social change, transformative healing and collective justice.”

MOHSIN SHA菲

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“Denying it Could Make it no Less True is a catalogue of images exploring our relationship to chosen queer family and safety. This work forms part of a collective effort to normalise the queer experience in popular culture.

Being othered is painful; here we examine, cherish, and reimagine that otherness as self-expression that leads not only to catharsis, but offers an example for other queer folks. Pain inspires our work, and the wish for others not to feel it. This work is more than two trans kids exploring identity, it’s a celebration of being authentic in a culture that has consistently taught us to mask ourselves. It’s an effort to show realness beyond queer and trans tropes, instead touching on universal elements of the human experience through relationships.”

ROUX NOEL & ELLE CONANT
HUSS is a Middle Eastern artist based between Cairo and Glasgow, working throughout mediums to explore personal and cultural themes. His discipline involves experimenting with and combining elements such as installation, sculpture, visuals, and audio, to culminate in immersive performance pieces. Huss uses his work as a performance/visual artist to raise awareness of issues facing the Middle East that lack acknowledgement within western society, including racism, ethnocentrism, Xenophobia, and the stigma Arab communities face regarding mental health. Reflecting on his experience in Scotland and the internal conflict it has created surrounding his identity, Huss is producing work that both immerses and educated the viewers.

And The Flowers Have Time For Me is a political performance piece in memory of Sarah Hegazi, an Egyptian activist who was arrested, imprisoned and tortured in Egypt after flying an LGBTIQ+ flag at Mashrou’ Leila’s concert in Cairo (a queer Lebanese band whose lyrical subjects include homosexuality, inter-faith love and feminism). The piece include snippets from Mashrou Leila’s live music, used with the band’s permission.
Imad Zoukanni is a Moroccan visual artist, from painting to drawing illustrations and making self-portraits, he considers art as an expression of what is produced by his own experiences. Imad is an artistically and culturally independent person, who tries very hard to create a unique identity throughout his work, while fighting hatred with love and peace to achieve equality in his community as well as in the outside world.

“My two art works are illustrations describing the joys of gay sex between men. Human sexuality includes the physiological, psychological, and social aspects of sexual feelings and behaviors. In many societies, a strong link between nudity and sexuality is taken for granted.”
Kristian Chalakov is a young illustrator from Plovdiv, Bulgaria. Known for his style and aesthetic that combines elements from Bulgarian/ Balkan folklore, communist propaganda imagery, pop culture and above all queer culture.

His art is all about telling stories, creating characters, bringing representation to marginalized groups and their experiences across his home country Bulgaria. Playful, symbolistic and traditional with a unique personal touch. I am adding few of my illustrations that combine traditional folklore with a modern queer twist.
“The biggest problem faced by people from the LGBTQ+ community is exclusion resulting from a lack of acceptance. Both on the part of society and sometimes directly resulting from this lack of self-acceptance. Contemporary gender theories encompass many of the concepts of + in the acronym LGBT, which led me to the need to explore the non-obvious stimulus centers of the human self.

The other pole of the lack of love and acceptance, obverse to the reverse - is Anima Mundi, the soul of the cosmos, or more cozy my own name - lovebug.

As I am a supporter of healthy interpersonal relationships and a promoter of mental health, I will start with principles that I would like them to be heard through everything I come out to the world with.

To create a healthy relationship it is good to have a healthy, stable psyche, I think many psychologists will agree with me on this point (no matter how much culture seems to romanticize and perpetuate in the collective unconscious the theme of romantic crazy destructive love in the style of Sid Vicious and Nancy). I would even go so far as to say that relationships with ourselves reflect our relationships with other people, and the human psyche is an extremely complex and constantly researched phenomenon. In order to have a healthy psyche, the conditions for harmonious personality development must be ensured. According to C. G Jung, in order to ensure this development, the presence and balance of the elements Anima and Animus were required.

In order to have a good psyche, conditions for a harmonious development of the personality must be ensured. According to C. G Jung, in order to ensure this development, the presence and balance of the elements Anima and Animus were required.

All existing genders and sexual orientations are the spectra of the permutation of a man and his anima and the woman and her animus. They encompass each other. Surround and have or hold within.”
I exploit my unadulterated access to the deepest emotions embedded beneath the surface, only to explore the whispered secrets of dreams and desires. This is my burden, my struggle constant, in hopes to validate the “I”.

I question the blurred edges between identity and the intentions of identity. Attempting to capture what I see and record their frail existence, only to return and relive. Hoping to make the viewer see reality through the fiction of my eyes. Where nothing is as it is and everything is as it isn’t.
Lin Zhipeng (aka 223) is a photographer and freelancer writer based in Beijing. Created in 2003, his blog “North Latitude 23” where he published everyday pictures accompanied by short texts received millions views and made him famous among the web community.

Lin is a leading figure of new Chinese photography emerging in the last decade, popularizing his work originally via social media and other online platforms as well as his self-published zines. Lin’s work has come to reflect and define a certain zeitgeist of the post-80’s and 90’s generation of non-mainstream Chinese youth. Amidst an otherwise conservative and often closed traditional society and cultural background, Lin’s photographs act as a collective not-so-private diary of a young generation wishing to escape the pressures from a high-stakes society and play within its limits. Faded flowers tangled with flesh tones, myriad patterns mixing with an emotional ambiguity of both love and chaos, fantasy and eroticism. 223’s works are saturated with a soft sense of carefreeness, a playful innocence, and a certain optimism amidst a hedonist lifestyle going against the expected pleasures and entrapments of the middle class dream.

Naming himself “No. 223” after the police character in Wong Kar-Wai’s movie Chungking Express, Lin also adopts a sense of the Hong Kong director’s poetic and dreamy atmosphere as well as the loneliness and mystery of many of his film’s characters. Lin Zhipeng offers his point of view on an alternative youth spirit and culture in an often conservatively Chinese cultural context. His spontaneous photographs portray a young generation who indulge in love and life, oscillating between jubilation and deep melancholy, playful sexuality and often just the simple human need to be loved in an otherwise indifferent and ever-changing society.
Roxman Gatt is a performance and multi-media artist who explores sexuality, identity, gender and consumption within his practice. Recently, the artist has been working with themes of humanising and interacting with consumer objects, making the inanimate iconic and fetishised. He is also interested in documenting and archiving trans and queer experiences and has recently started working on a project in Malta called Rosa Kwir. This project revolves around alternative notions of masculinity, bringing together stories of Maltese trans men, non-binary & LBQI masc- presenting people. Roxman has an MA in Visual Communication from the Royal College of Art and was selected for Bloomberg New Contemporaries, ICA, London, and Bluecoat Liverpool (2016).
“In past years, the whole project was going through observation and research of something that makes us human- emotions. From grief to hysteria and all the way to numbness, makes us a whole package of a wet roller coaster. Each event in our life makes us grab more load on our shoulders and one more weapon of self-destructive behaviour, since there are unwritten notes in every part of my hometown saying: “Whatever you are, it’s your fault”. This project will always be a work-in-progress- same as love in the galaxy, same as us humans... we shall go in eternity!”
Lau works as an independent photographer and visual artist. He finds the main themes of his work in the streets, developing authorial projects with an emphasis on gender and sexuality issues documenting the LGBTQIAP+ scene. He participates in two photography study groups, at Barraco Cultural, taught by Marco Antonio Filho and Tiago Coelho, and at Foto Síntese, taught by Fernando Schmitt.

"On our trans, transvestite, non-binary bodies symbols of monstrosities and abjection are built. Prejudice, violence and hatred of the “different” fall on us. These social constructions try to put us in the place of less human, based on cis-hetero-normative notions (the idea that only cisgender and heterosexual bodies are valid and human).

They forget that, just like cisgender people, transvestites and transgender people also feel affection, and more importantly, they also need to receive affection in return.

So is my question: “Who loves us? Who is willing to help us cure this evil of loneliness, forgetfulness and abandonment?”

TransAfetos emerged from confrontations I felt when I was in a relationship, always putting myself in a place of comparison and feeling insufficient to be with someone.

TransAfetos is a manifesto to all this problem.

I seek within these photographic essay to show the various possibilities of feeling loved, desired and creating bonds like any other person.

In these spaces I look for welcoming and love!"
Aural Androgyny is a genderless sonic sculpture that resonates explicit sound bites from local viral videos.

It can be played as a musical instrument.

The mannequin responds in vulgar slang phrases that are used colloquially and which question LGBTIQA+ nuances in Malta.

Taken from an absurdist humour approach, Aural Androgyny is an object that is a nothingness, non-binary, meaningless and ironically non-beautified sonic sculpture that challenges from a socio-cultural standpoint the Maltese views on sexuality, pleasure and fluidity.

It insults and mocks the person upon touching it transmitting directly my personal annoyance with the subject. To address the disillusionment of such issues, today particularly within Malta, I invite the audience to touch the artwork rather than just GAY-zE at it.”

Due to COVID-19 Safety Restrictions, the installation sound will be looped.
ARTISTI | ARTISTS

Samar Hazboun
Leart Rama
HUSS
Kristian Chalakov
Mohsin Shafi
Elle Conant & Roux Noel
Imad Zoukanni
Roxman Gatt
Robert Andy Coombs
Dirk H Wilms
Lin Zhipeng (aka. No 223)
Daphne Sammut
Agataukoxxx
Noah Fabri
Lau Baldo
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Il Qalbata Kreattività