

Tobaron Waxman, Gender Diasporist

Shawn Syms interviews Tobaron Waxman

Tobaron Waxman's performance pieces and other cultural production pose complicated questions of identity on multiple fronts. His work contextualizes gender, embodiment and time as systems of inscription, incorporating elements of traditional Jewish texts and philosophy through politics and desire.

Waxman frequently uses his own body in his work, sometimes in pieces involving the cutting and shaving of gendered signifiers such as his hair and/or beard. He has created striking imagery of men together, in varying bodily configurations and states of undress. In addition to performance, photography, video, voice and sound, he also uses the Internet, tissue engineering, biofeedback processing, and choreography. In his work, Waxman examines gender and such issues as consent, sexual representation, conflict and questions of contested national borders and diasporic experience.

This past winter, I engaged in a series of wide-ranging conversations with Waxman about his work and its reflections upon masculinity and gender, race and embodiment, performance and authenticity, and the ways in which the State creates a gender, which have arisen during the past decade of evolving artistic practice.

Shawn Syms (SS): *Your cultural practice seems to me to intrinsically manifest a perspective on masculinity and representation even when this is not the intended or primary focus. One example I find particularly striking is Amidah (2004), featured in Volume One of the Carte Blanche photography compendium.*

Six men engage in the motions of the Amidah or Shmoneh Esrei prayer.¹ They stand together, varying in comportment, age, build and attire. They are also in varying states of undress. It appears that at least one of them may be transgendered. To me, the capture of movement and ritual in an all-male context reflects upon the breadth of ways of being male or masculine.

Tobaron Waxman (TW): *Amidah* was inspired by my thinking when I lived in a gender-segregated environment engaged in religious studies. At that time, I was not thinking about masculinity so critically but rather about the notion of authenticity and the context in which I found myself.

Shmoneh Esrei: Amidah is a triptych – each panel from the triptych references one of the three times of day when the silent prayer is recited. Rather than have a traditional prayer quorum of 10 men in each photo, there are 6 figures, making a total of 18 figures in the composition, for the 18 steps of the prayer.

It's an imagistic response to issues I wrestled with when I was a religious ascetic. I was concerned specifically with embodiment, and the juxtaposition of my own body in that shared context with the bodies of the other men who were around me all the time. The variance in degrees of clothedness is less about what is hidden than the notion of layering itself. I've also made a JavaScript animation version of the central panel – “*Mincha*,” referring to the afternoon prayer time – designed for a Web browser, so it is a one-to-one personal experience².

SS: As I see it, male togetherness – and ways in which it can suggest both commonality and difference – is a recurring motif in your work. The Tisha B'Av/Diaspora NYC series (2003)

¹ The Amidah or Shomeh Esrei is one of the central prayers of Jewish daily worship, recited three times a day. It is structured around eighteen benedictions that are meant to encompass one's material, political and spiritual devotions. Traditionally, it is recited silently and then, if a quorum of ten men is present, is repeated out loud for the benefit of the entire congregation.

² <http://tobaron.com/mincha.html>

provides an example of this. To me, the photographs in this series feel very intimate – one man shaves another’s head, his hand supporting the man’s neck with seeming tenderness – yet it’s a representation of male bonding that reads as emotional rather than sexual.

TW: In my action-based work, the production of photographs expands each of those gestures, functioning as evidence. *Diaspora NYC* documents a ritual of inscription. Two figures mutually inscribe one another, articulating peership and homo-social embrace.

SS: I’ve seen these photographs in a number of contexts – in a gallery space, published online, one of them in my home. To me, they challenge an experience of homogeneity I perceive sometimes when viewing male-centred imagery by queer artists. The work feels more documentary than portraiture. The men are photographed from different vantage points, and different signifiers are revealed in the varying images: a tattooed man has scars from chest-reconstructive surgery; the other man wears a tallit.

Can you share your thoughts with me on how these carefully constructed images reflect upon both New York City and the notion of diaspora?

TW: The tall black-and-white one from the series was shown in a very gay eros-driven show in Chelsea. He’s wearing a barber’s smock, and under his clothes, typical to a religious person, is a *tallit katan* and this is evidenced by the *tzitzit* (ritual fringes) showing below the smock.³ In this context, both the *tzitzit* and malenesses can exist in variance. I grew up with a lot of privilege, with very few Jews around me, the first generation with real opportunity to assimilate, and first in my family line to not speak our mother tongue. The *Tisha B’Av/DiasporaNYC* series is a portrait of my fantasy of Jewish pluralism, part of what I had hoped to find in New York. It’s about being marked. Jewishly, it’s about removal of an additional layer.

³ Traditionally, the tallit katan is a garment worn daily by Jewish men underneath their clothes. It is a four-cornered tunic with ritual fringes dangling from each corner.

Basically, Zionism bought and buys into the anti-Semitic tropes about Jewish men caricatured as weak, crouched over, paralyzed, et cetera, and Zionism would renew the Jew – or bring him back to Maccabean glory, which had been all but extinguished in centuries of exile.⁴ Along with many others of my generation, I consider that to be self-hating and a distortion of Jewish history. But this is explicitly a male expression of nation. The hero/victim stuff, especially post-Holocaust, is usually portrayed as a heroic, athletic Zionist man versus a pale, intellectual, Diaspora Jew less-than-man. This paradigm has to be heteronormative, and also points out an erasure of the girls. Because the girl is replaced by the effeminacy of the ‘diaspora-boy’, and for the ‘Israel –man’, the feminine is the land (*Ha’aretz*) itself. My engagement with Yiddish is both contemporary and reverent – it’s about choosing to return to diaspora. Fundamental to my obsession at this time is Diaspora and Place, as a dynamic tension, reflective of each other. One of the names of god in Judaism actually is ‘The Place’. I want the artists I’m collaborating with and the viewers to experience their citizenship of ‘The Place’ as agents of possibility.⁵

SS: I participated in the performance that generated Chimera (2005–2007). A range of men were brought together in a series of underwater embraces. We were in various states of undress, sometimes fully clothed (and in my case, wearing shoes!) while submerged. More than one of the men was visibly trans.

⁴ See this comic by Eli Valley, <http://www.evcomics.com/2008/05/29/israel-man-and-diaspora-boy/>. For an example of Zionist negation of the exilic Jew, see this article by mainstream Israeli novelist A.B. Yehoshua: <http://www.haaretz.com/news/a-b-yehoshua-versus-diaspora-jews-1.187415>. For more on this topic see the chapter entitled “Modernism and Exile: A View from the Margins” in Michael Gluzman’s book *The Politics of Canonicity* (Stanford University Press, 2003) and Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi’s *Booking Passage: Exile and Homecoming in the Modern Jewish Imagination* (University of California Press, 2000).

⁵ The history of Jewish conceptions of space and diaspora is long and complex. One famous reflection on these ideas is George Steiner’s “Our Homeland, The Text” *Salmagundi* 66 (1985): 4-25 and his many other essays about Jewishness and the Diaspora. For a more contemporary view of the issue see *New Jews: The End of the Jewish Diaspora* edited by Caryn Aviv and David Shneer (New York University Press, 2005).

TW: *Chimera* displays an array of masculinities with a definite erotic element. It's a cruising park, underwater. There are some bearish types, some other guys, a couple of FTMs and a couple of mermen. These gestures had to occur underwater, because the point was that at that time, no one believed it was possible for FTMs to have sexual peership with non-trans gay men. They appear "visibly trans," perhaps because of my innovation of an FTM iconography, some wearing chest binders, one with chest scars exposed, and ultimately the mermen in fishtails as a tongue-in-cheek at the 'specialness' afforded FTMs.

SS: In addition to same-sex explorations, your work complicates the notion of the male spectatorship of female bodies as well. Tradewinds Motel (2006) includes a woman gazing at the camera in traditional pin-up style pose and attire, but the photo series queers heterosexuality and upends gender expectations.

Evoking a nostalgic style, the work speaks to both cultural history and personal agency. Some of the images are sexual and could be seen to represent what's traditionally ascribed as a male gaze – i.e., a cisgendered [non-trans], patriarchal gaze – but there's a sensation of support and empathy as well.

TW: I was in a relationship with a sex worker. *Tradewinds Motel* was a response to a story she shared about erotic modelling she'd done under unpleasant circumstances. I photo-edited the only image she liked from that photo shoot, giving it an affect first of the 1920s, then the 1930s and finally the 1960s, because she enjoyed nostalgia from these periods. And we engaged in a shoot of our own together. I used the camera on a Palm Pilot, creating images that felt fleeting, tracing the memory of an erotic liaison.

The images are grouped in an old-fashioned family-style mat board, as a queer approach to thinking about kinship and chosen family. The images of her, plus those of us together at the hotel, surround an image of her bedside night table with flowers on it. The piece was a collaboration. We reinscribed agency onto a representation that had been made of her. Looking through the ovals in the mat are variations on an image of herself she likes and had a say in, in which she sees herself the way she wants, portrayed as historical evidence. If

any prints are sold, proceeds are split between her and a peer-run sex-worker solidarity project of her choice.

SS: Your creation of your work does not occur in a vacuum, of course – we all exist in relationship to state apparatuses. Some of your work reflects upon this critically. In Still Life: Israel Eats Itself (2008), a nude man applies a black substance to his skin, then scrapes it off and eats it. The soundtrack is in 5.1 surround, an electro-acoustic composition that includes your field recording with an Israeli veteran with PTSD.

TW: The masculinity that is being dealt with in *Still Life: Israel Eats Itself* uses the example of the experiences I had in Israel – masculinity in Israel as a way to talk about the state and the relationship of gender to power and hegemony.⁶ In this piece, the human body is an analogue to landscape, land occupation and “Holy Land.” It’s concerned with the place at which the human body becomes the subject of a state, and citizenship makes moral and ethical claims upon our bodies.⁷ *Still Life* is a 4D portrait of a gendered identity invented by and then cannibalized by the state.

Originally performed as a live artwork in a 5.1 surround sound environment, the work now exists as a video derived from documentation shot on Super 8 and surveillance camera. The imagery references the black paintings of Goya, the scatalogics and “Eye” of Bataille and the Chassidic concept of *klippah* – the shell that both nourishes the physical world and gives it its shape while necessitating its own shedding in order to access truth.

Unpacking experiences with gender is a thread that runs through much of what I do. I critically consider what I have access to now versus in the past in relation to masculinizing

⁶ See *Jews and Gender: The Challenge to Hierarchy*, edited by Jonathan Frankel (Oxford University Press, 2000) and *Israeli Women’s Studies: A Reader* edited by Esther Fuchs (Rutgers University Press, 2005).

⁷ See Louis Althusser “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (Monthly Review Press, 1972).

my own appearance: how much of that is determined by me and how much by other people, in terms of the eye of the beholder and larger systems of power, living in a misogynist culture and patriarchal structure.

The man whose voice we hear on the audio track was telling me about having served in five wars for the State of Israel. He and the State were almost the same age – it was 2006 —he was 60 yrs old. The more of his story he told, about this war and that war, about parts of his body and mind that were destroyed by them, the more he began to stammer and unravel, until it became clear that he had basically forfeited his entire virility to the State, with little to show for it but his gasps at the Zionist promise.

SS: The notion of crossing borders – of states, of identity categories, of external perception – is a key theme of your current project-in-progress, Fear of a Bearded Planet. The title appears to suggest a Public Enemy reference, which is fitting given the ways the performance intervention concerns both gender and race.

TW: For *Fear of a Bearded Planet*, I sat for souvenir portrait artists, wearing the same outfit each time. When they inevitably ask me where I'm from, I ask them to guess. Each time they draw me as a stereotype of "Jew" – a range including a few Shylocks – or "Arab" – Arab as mostly Muslim fundamentalist/terrorist caricature. The project includes anecdotal text about where I was in the world and what was said each time I was read as Muslim, by a variety of people, including cops and customs agents. I thought it was successful because of its ambiguousness, indeed in the most accurate likeness, made in London during a residency in Berlin, all my Berlin-based colleagues thought I was Turkish. The work includes covert photo documentation of the sittings, and a postcard project based on a visit to the Israeli checkpoint at Bethlehem with the advocacy group *Machsom Watch* in 2006.

SS: In at least one of the caricatures, the creator sketched the Twin Towers in the background.

TW: *Fear of a Bearded Planet* is a reveal of the fractured violence of racialization, and it traces and catalogues these experiences and critiques the notion of "passing." The salon-

style installation of portraits results in a collective portrait of the Semite, and I can compare the function of the Semite in the European conscience to the Islamophobia indicated in the drawings from New York⁸. In London, Paris, Berlin, Vienna, when I travelled for work, and in Toronto and New York countless times – to be in different places during things like the second invasion of Iraq versus revolutions in Tahrir Square produced totally different portraits.

For much of the past decade, I've been moving through the Western world frequently mistaken as an ambiguously raced Semite. This has played out in various ways, and includes being mistaken by Muslims from the Arab world as an Arab Muslim. These exchanges begin with a Muslim man looking at my face and seeing something that reminds him of home. I would engage, and say *Assalamu aleikum*. If it happened in Toronto they would say "...no where are you really from?" They would assume I was Muslim, and then ask: "Egypt, Jordan, Palestine...?" Or sometimes, Kashmir. In that moment, I get to enjoy for a fleeting moment feeling like a welcome son; I never had that before in my whole life. I think of bell hooks' essay "Eating the Other"⁹ – white men fetishizing black bodies, and wearing signifiers of blackness as a way to have access to something more dimensional. And it was part of my critical thinking around my own potential racisms. It was very nice, to feel a fraternal embrace from men, who are not necessarily thinking critically about their own gender. So they're not thinking critically about mine. They see someone that they think they have kinship with because they think we are both reverent of the same god. Privilege means I am the one who gets to decide when the relationship shifts. On the one hand, I want people to be comfortable with me, I want to be able to tell someone, yes, I'm an ally. But it's important that it's understood that I'm not in the same set of circumstances as that person, that I'm coming to them as an ally with my own set of privileges. And then I come out to them – as Jewish, and against the occupation of Palestine. Then we have another conversation, usually ending in physical contact: shaking hands and an embrace. Once in

⁸ indexing the experiences of the frames thru which we apprehend (Butler, *Frames of War*) the figure of the Semite.

⁹ hooks, bell 1992. *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (South End Press)

Brooklyn, an elderly Yemeni man approached me on the platform, waiting for the subway. We sat together on the train, and, for about 20 minutes he told me about his childhood, how his family and a Jewish family lived together in a shared house, before 1948. We held hands and cried.

When this happens in public, it is witnessed. It's a beautiful political moment. These experiences with men are dimensions of gender that I couldn't have learned from the feminism or queer theory I had been exposed to before masculinizing my own appearance. I didn't understand this male vulnerability until I was in it.

SS: Your own body also figures prominently in much of your other work. In Tashlich (2009) for instance, you shave your head and beard while immersed in a body of water, your motions fluidly represented via long exposure. It strikes me that this performance for a photo seems to engage many of the elements present in some of your other work – from the representation of a masculine body, to the aspect of shaving as a gesture of removing a layer from your bodily self, to the action taking place in water, documenting a time-based action. What can you tell me about the significance of this performance, from a political perspective and otherwise?

*TW: Tashlich is a ritual at the beginning of the New Year, when one symbolically empties their pockets into a stream. It's a way of attempting a clean slate for the new year, admitting to how flawed we are, but committing to trying again. Also out of respect for the religious world I was no longer participating in or representing, I felt I ought to let go of this signage. That performance in the lake involved cutting off the oldest parts of my beard, over seven years' worth of growth. Riffing on the ritual of *tashlich*, following a traditional meditation, I put myself into the stream, and left that signage behind. The racialized experiences catalogued in *Fear of Bearded Planet*, were happening as often as few times a week for years. But my shock, at for example having my beard inspected for explosives in an airport, was also an expression of entitlement. *Tashlich* was in part a commitment to deal with my own privilege and be more politically effective in the world, a white person informed by those experiences.*

SS: You have extensive experience in vocal work, as a performer and teacher. But this practice has long seemed very separate from your other artistic work, despite your early background in theatre. But in the performance piece RED FOOD: Songs of unrequited love, death and transformation (2012), you shave your head, then your beard, then apply pale-faced makeup, followed by a live vocal performance sitting with soup kitchen patrons eating a menu of red foods garnished with edible gold. The various elements of your performance practice appear to be coming together again, including your voice.

There was a period of many years when, both because I was religious and because I was in the process of changing my gender, it was painfully obvious that audiences were looking **at me**, rather than at the work. So I started taking pictures of other people's bodies. And I made sound projects separate from portraiture, and photographic prints installed with sound for motion-detection playback. My impulse to do live and gestural work became more about stillness or photographing a gesture. By "gesture," I mean both the choreographed performance and also a welcoming that is present and therefore presented. A gesture, in this sense, to the other person resists ingesting and spitting them out, as in "Oh, I know you, because I have the same in me."¹⁰ To articulate is to limit. In a long exposure, the image of people is never fully static, it's by default an empathic move. By synthesizing live art in stillness with my voice work, I am bringing my body back.

My new project involves bringing my own body back into the work, mainly as a vocalist. I've been developing a curriculum for the FTM voice, derived from the various schools of training I have enjoyed, Western and non-Western. The voice is the place where all your symptoms, everything that's going on with you, is immediately apparent. My goals with this include a theoretical text, as well as more case studies with more people on the FTM spectrum, and ultimately to be able to take this curriculum to any male-identified person. I've already had a few non-transmen express interest in doing this voice work with me,

¹⁰ *Otherwise than Being and Totality and Infinity*. Levinas's notion of the encounter with the face-of-the-other as that which is not containable in ontology, but instead as conceived within the realm of metaphysics overlapping the physical and finite with the beyond of the infinite. The Other is the infinite here and neither be entirely known nor assimilated by me.

which made me think that I could develop a larger project around vocal production as both an artwork in itself and a method of critical enactment. This spring, I performed my first-ever solo vocal performances in about 10 years, in memory of queer and FTM friends who had died or committed suicide in recent years, and the femme widows they left behind to deal with the shatter, coinciding with the tenth anniversary of the passing of my father. The repertoire was all material from the Jewish Diaspora, some from Central Asia/Eastern Europe, some Yiddish, some secular and some liturgical chant – but all of it engages ideas of physical transformation predicating destiny in some way, via motifs of unrequited love, death and transformation. I'm singing in my mother's first language: Yiddish. My interpretation of the songs engages queer utopia in relation to Jewish concepts of destiny, longing and the messianic.

I'm thinking about what the messianic is, via the Derridean concept of the future to come, as unpredictable (*le futur* as opposed to *l'avenir*)¹¹. So I think this work will take the form of live installations, as I've done before for camera, but with voice. Voice, as it relates to time and presence, performance as an effort to stretch out a moment, and photography in empathy with the gesture itself¹². This parallels a Jewish way of talking about time, thinking about the continuous present and an experience of time that is not linear but is simultaneously forward-advancing¹³. To resist moments of before and after.

¹¹ See *Futures: Of Jacques Derrida* by Richard Rand (Stanford University Press, 2001).

¹² concerning the empathy with the gesture itself is my own thinking, and not Levinasian as he speaks very little if actually against empathy. He does speak quite a bit about the 'gesture' - the call to the other as a response to an originary 'gesture of welcome' and this is in both *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being*. This gesture is entirely embodied for Levinas and focuses the importance back onto the body as a form of transcendence within immanence.

¹³ See *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* by Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi (University of Washington Press, 1982). See Lubavitcher Rebbe's, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson's, "Letter on Time" (1947).

Shawn Syms has written about culture, gender and sexuality for over 20 years for publications including the Literary Review of Canada, Spacing, the Globe and Mail, The Rumpus, Fuse, Broken Pencil and two dozen others. His writing on body politics has included explorations of drug-use harm reduction and the criminalization of sexually transmitted infections. His literary fiction was shortlisted for the Journey Prize and his writing about queer trans men has been widely cited, and translated into French.

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