

One common word that appears in discussion about gender affirming care for transgender people, particularly minors, is mutilation. Both The Christian Post, a news organization that describes itself as “the nation’s most comprehensive Christian news website”¹ and National Review, a conservative news source, host articles on their respective² websites³ that use the term mutilation to describe the procedures that fell under the category of gender reassignment surgery. The surgeries that fall under this umbrella include chest masculinization surgery which is often colloquially referred to as top surgery, phalloplasty, and vaginoplasty, all of which involve the removal or heavy reshaping of parts of the body to achieve their goals. The word mutilation, then, is one that serves a strong rhetorical purpose for groups that oppose gender affirming healthcare. Mutilation brings to mind images of butcher shops or scenes from horror movies as opposed to the sterile, medical environments that they almost always occur in, a way to stir up images in the minds of parents that their child may be put under the knife and have their bodies permanently marred.

This imagery is hard to find being shared by transgender people, however, particularly those who have undergone these procedures. In artwork that explores the trans body, gender affirming care in the form of surgeries is seen not as a removal of a fundamental aspect of their personhood but instead often as a positive reconstruction of their bodies that reaffirms their identity and in general has a positive effect on their life. In these artworks, the mutilation

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- 1 “The Christian Post, Inc.” The Christian Post. Accessed April 26, 2022. <https://www.christianpost.com/about-us.html>.
 - 2 Foley, Ryan. “Disney to Air Ad Accusing Americans Who Oppose Genital Mutilation of Kids of Wanting to ‘Tear Families Apart’.” The Christian Post, April 12, 2022. <https://www.christianpost.com/news/disney-to-air-glaad-ad-defending-gender-transitions-for-kids.html>.
 - 3 Smith, Wesley J. “HHS: Castrations/Mastectomies Okay for Transgender Minors.” National Review. National Review, April 1, 2022. <https://www.nationalreview.com/corner/hhs-castrations-mastectomies-okay-for-transgender-minors/>.

narrative is not ignored but rather actively rejected as we see the removal of flesh not as a deconstruction but rather a reconstructive act in the sense of the person's identity.

Yishay Garbasz' *Eat Me Damien* explores what the artist calls the "objectness" of gender.⁴ The artwork is a glass tank filled with formaldehyde. Resting on a transparent platform inside of the tank are Yishay Garbasz' testicles, removed during her gender clarification surgery. Here, sex organs quite literally become an object that can be transformed into something else, in this case a rather pointed critique of Damien Hirst's *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*. Garbasz has said that the work is "mostly not about gender"⁵, but there is an emphasis that should be put on *mostly* rather than the simple statement of "It's not about gender."

In this work, the testicles are quite literally put on a pedestal, elevated. However, this elevation does not function as a symbol of masculine power but rather an emphasis on the absurdity of the biological designation of sex. Two round reproductive glands can be upheld as the definition of power, an essential surge of testosterone that drives the male sex drive and need for power, and we are seeing them for what they are: flesh. More important, we are seeing them as flesh that can be made into something else, into art that functions on more levels than just about gender. It's important to take Yishay Garbasz at her word: The fact that the artwork is about more than gender is important to the message. The art is about more than gender because the body is about more than sex, what parts you're born with.

Julia Steinmetz writes about this work, among others, in her article *Material Enactments, The Transformational Aesthetics of Cassils and Yishay Garbasz*. One sentence stands out in

4 Garbasz, Yishay. "Eat Me Damien." Yishay Garbasz. Accessed April 28, 2022. <https://yishay.com/index.php/2019/08/10/eat-me-damien/>.

5 Hugil, Alison. "Body // Trauma and Identity: An Interview with Yishay Garbasz." Berlin Art Link, August 31, 2018. <https://www.berlinartlink.com/2016/04/19/body-trauma-and-identity-an-interview-with-yishay-garbasz/>.

particular: “*Eat Me Damien* treats the artist’s body parts as a ready-made.”⁶ The trans body becomes a store for artistic material where creation can be born from surgical removal. Surgery becomes ‘mutilation’ in the same way that cutting up a magazines for a collage is ‘mutilating’ the magazine.

We can also see the additive elements of changing the trans body in Cassils’ work, *Cuts: A Traditional Sculpture*, was a six month work of performance art with photographs accompanying that shows his body becoming more muscular through a routine of body-building, a change in diet, and steroids towards the end of the experience. Over the 23 weeks that the performance took place, Cassils, a transmasculine artist, gained 23 pounds of muscle.⁷

Steinmetz analyzed this work in *Material Enactments*. Of *Cuts*, she states that “The artist’s body is a sculptural index of disciplined practices...”⁸ Through this performance, Cassils’ consumption to shape his body into this almost ironic example of masculinity takes the surgery narrative of removal and quite literally supplements it for a consumptive act in which the body is added to. The use of steroids in the performance also works with the parallel of hormone therapy, the use of chemicals to change the hormonal make-up of the body to work flesh into the desired forms.

This connection to the sculptural is not lost on other artists, such as Holly Silius. Holly Silius worked on a series of stone body casts from Lio Mehiel, an artist and actor from NYC. Lio Mehiel had top surgery, and the body casts depict the before and after of this procedure. Mehiel stated in an interview with Yass Magazine that “[Phantom Feel is about the radical celebration of

6 Steinmetz, Julia. "Material Enactments: The Transformational Aesthetics of Cassils and Yishay Garbasz." *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 5, no. 2 (2018): 268-274.

7 “Artwork: Cuts.” Cassils. Accessed April 29, 2022. <https://www.cassils.net/cassils-artwork-cuts>.

8 Steinmetz, Julia. "Material Enactments: The Transformational Aesthetics of Cassils and Yishay Garbasz." *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 5, no. 2 (2018): 268-274.

rendering a trans body in stone.”⁹ I want to draw a connection to a quote that is commonly attributed to Michaelangelo (though, I should note that there is no real evidence that he said anything like this.) “Every block of stone has a statue inside it and it is the task of the sculptor to discover it.” Steinmetz also makes this connection in her work: “This formal structure, foregrounding the materiality of the body and the labor through which it is made and remade, is the armature on which the sculptural body art of both Cassils and British-Israeli artist Yishay Garbasz rests.”¹⁰

Through literally casting the trans body in stone, we can see how gender affirming surgeries become less mutilation and more the work of the sculptor with a chisel. In terms of the stone sculptures, the breasts seem to have literally been chiseled away in the before and after of what Mehiel’s body looked like before and after their surgery. Even though the casts are made of cement, an element of fluidity still remains through the scars that undercut Mehiel’s pecs where the tissue was removed for his top surgery.

J. Jack and Judith Halberstram’s book, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, they explore the concept of surgeon and artist as both working in similar spaces. “The surgeon and the painter both consider themselves to be sculpting flesh, albeit for different purposes – the surgeon to approach perfection, the painter to disturb it – but both still insist on using the body as the ground or canvas for their new creations.”¹¹ If we can see the surgeon and artist both using the body as the ground for new creation, then the transgender artist

9 Spirus, Dr. “All Bodies Should Be Represented in Stone – New Series of Body Sculptures Inspired by Top Surgery.” YASS Magazine, February 17, 2022. <https://yassmagazine.org/2022/02/17/all-bodies-should-be-represented-in-stone-new-series-of-body-sculptures-inspired-by-top-surgery/>.

10 Steinmetz, Julia. “Material Enactments: The Transformational Aesthetics of Cassils and Yishay Garbasz.” *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 5, no. 2 (2018): 268-274.

11 Halberstam, J. Jack, and Judith Halberstam. *In a queer time and place: Transgender bodies, subcultural lives*. Vol. 3. NYU press, 2005.

has a unique stake in using their body as canvas, both to achieve perfection and to disturb it. I use the term trans body throughout this paper not to imply that the trans body is not normal, or imperfect, but rather than the body of a trans person is often defined as its own both for the purposes of self-identification and also as a proverbial battleground in which battles are fought. Insurance companies, for example, hold the right to say if gender reassignment surgery is a medical necessity or not¹², and there are often hoops to jump through to achieve medical care such as required psychological examinations and a formal diagnosis of gender dysphoria.

The three artists discussed do not only use their artwork as an examination of personal expression of the trans experience, but they also serve the purpose to forefront the idea that changes to the body can be beneficial, that removal is *not* mutilation but a way for expression and further comfort in your own skin. As more legislature is passed to make it more difficult for trans people to become athletes, to use the bathroom that aligns with their gender, to change your ID marker, to get medical care as a minor, the affirmation that the body is something that can be changed only becomes more important.

Viewing the trans body as sculpture sends a message: the transformation of the body is not a negative. The term mutilation is a misnomer, the body is not being disfigured or damaged, but rather being changed, and that change is something that can hold countless positive effects for trans people. To create art that centers this idea is an act of protest in itself as being trans only becomes more politicized, a declaration that gender reassignment surgery is not a life-altering mistake that permanently changes you who are, but rather something that augments who you are.

12 Gonzales, Gilbert, and Carrie Henning-Smith. "Barriers to care among transgender and gender nonconforming adults." *The Milbank Quarterly* 95, no. 4 (2017): 726-748.