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MAGAZINE

CULTURE



"Choose Your Gender." Photo courtesy of gallery.

Artist Vonne Napper Imagines a Gender Reveal Without the Gender Binary.

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Balloons. Bright colors. Gift bags. Starting July 27, [Transformer's](#) gallery will be outfitted like a gender reveal party for community artist [Vonne Napper's](#) new exhibit.

But the room won't be coated in shades of bubblegum pink or powder blue. Sure, it'll be gendered, "but in the best of ways," Napper says.

As for what that means?

"Not in the binary, that's for sure," Napper laughs. "Very open and fluid and free-feeling. Very just unlimiting and colorful. It makes you warm inside and makes you hopeful, but it also makes you think."

Napper's display "[Choose Your Gender](#)" is a satirical take on the expectations of the gender binary. They developed the exhibit with the support of Transformer's 19th annual [Exercises for Emerging Artists program](#), an initiative to support local up-and-coming artists. The show will be on display at Transformer from July 27 to August 6.

The concept of the gender reveal has more than enough problems to mock, according to Napper.

"You can't be serious," they insist. "You're actually putting this gender on this baby who has yet to be born. And in the same breath, you're mixing up their sex and gender."

The exhibit blossomed out of their own reckoning with their identity as a transmasculine and nonbinary person — with a push from Transformer. When they began the Exercises for Emerging Artists program, Napper says they were locked into the mindset of "objective" art. A mentor helped them break out.

"It sounds like you have something to talk about personally," the mentor told Napper.

That hit a chord. So, Napper began working on two pieces that interrogate the assumptions of gender essentialism woven into a gender reveal.

While Napper was cagey about revealing details too early, they did say one artwork would be a quilt made of baby's clothes and the other a collage. Among the pieces they're manipulating for the collage is an image of themselves doing the duck walk, inspired by the "[Wonder Woman of Vogue](#)," [Leiomy Maldonado](#).

Meanwhile, they're putting a twist on the classic gift bag. Instead of celebrating the reinforcement of gender norms, Napper wants their gifts to prompt new questions for visitors: "What is your gender or what gender are you performing today? Was it your choice? How's it make you feel?"

The project isn't just based on Napper's own experience. They also put out a call for submissions to the question "What's your gender?"

Napper doesn't want to pretend they know how everyone experiences gender. And they don't just want responses from trans and nonbinary people; they're hoping cisgender people will reflect on their genders, too. Those reflections will be woven into the exhibit for visitors to "listen in."

Napper aims for both parents and youth to visit "Choose Your Gender." To parents and prospective parents — especially people planning a gender reveal party — they have one message:

"You can still celebrate this life that's coming into this world, but you don't have to place this expectation."

And to youth — especially trans and nonbinary youth being targeted by anti-trans laws — Napper wants to offer hope.

"Ultimately, it is your choice," they say. "You are the one in charge of your life. You're the one that has this powerful voice to speak up. You know about your presence, about your existence. So don't ever forget that you can choose your gender so much as you can choose the paths you take in life."

"Choose Your Gender" will be on display at Transformer from July 27 to August 6. The opening reception is at 2 p.m. on July 30.

Transformer: 1404 P St. NW, DC; transformerdc.org // [@transformerdc](https://twitter.com/transformerdc)