

Victoria Cantons

People Trust People Who Look Like Them

Bruised, sombre, full of hurt, yet zinging with life and radiating happiness. The visceral emotions conveyed in Victoria Cantons's painting series, *Transgender Woman*, present a woman both agonisingly scrutinising and loving herself. She is smiling, her eyes are sparkling; she is a vision of hope and an icon for the modern era. We meet her with short hair, long hair; coated in make-up or bruises; with an unflinching gaze that directly meets ours, and at other times is barely even there. In the latter, her eyes appear worn, tired, almost closed and exhausted – not just by surgery, crying, or the violent pain of being hooked to a drip, but by the constraints of society's rigid binary categories and the unnerving awareness that people trust people who look like them.

Who are 'them' anyway, and who decides the human default? Why should we even question how others behave, look and be in public and in private? Thrusted into our space, the faces in these images present a woman and her truth. Chronicling a story of a life, they show memories of happiness, of pain, and of getting to know oneself. They reveal a time that was once spent being called 'Anthony' during the day and 'Victoria' at night; a time, before hormones, when she would go to the MAC make-up bar at Selfridges on Oxford Street to feel glamorous, to feel herself. They represent the face that once spent hours in front of a screen, writing daily blogs that dealt with the journey of transitioning, and the person who led their community in fighting for trans rights. They unveil a time when she thought she would lose everything – job, money, security, family – if she revealed who she really was; they ask, *Am I enough? Am I beautiful?*, and show a life, in the words of Cantons, that 'felt calamitous... but in retrospect it was a gift'. But most of all they show a transformation from a to b; a past, present and future; a body that has been longing to be in its rightful place; perhaps a moment of relief and a knowingness that this them.

There is nothing passive about the *Transgender Woman* series. They are large, bold and claim their place, and enter into a dialogue with centuries-worth of artists depicting and transforming themselves. From Artemisia Gentileschi's bold portrayal of herself as Saint Catherine of Alexandria, a martyred saint liberated by divine intervention (1616–17), to Maria Lassnig's acid-coloured 'body awareness' paintings that show a figure dealing with deformity. A self portrait shows an artist both understanding who they are and how they wish to be remembered. Painted as opposed to photographed, these works make us think about the 'act' of painting, what it means to apply each stroke, a stroke charged with meaning.

Transgender Woman speak for all of us – in our ways of trying to reinvent ourselves for the sake of fitting into society – but especially those in the trans communities, in history and now, who society has belittled and dismissed. These paintings speak loudly from a community who share love and compassion, like every human should. Holding vulnerability and power, they teach us to imagine a better and more inclusive future, and in the words of Cantons, 'a dream to recreate the world anew tonight'.

Katy Hessel, 2022