

ARTNEWS

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Trans-ness, Mans-ness, and a Life's Work: Artist and Gallerist Francis Ruyter Tells His Truth

BY *Francis Ruyter* 04/16/19 9:05 AM



Francis Ruyter photographed in New York City, January 2019.
GEORGE CHINSEE

My trans story is an artist story, and an artist story is often a battle to keep the narrative around it from veering too far off the rails. Sometimes that requires revision. Please release any idea of a trans story you might have.

I understood that I was a gay man long before I understood that I was a trans man—and, in fact, my identity as a gay man is more important to me for reasons that will make more sense as you begin to truly understand trans. I never hid my trans-ness, or my mans-ness, but I also never insisted on it being reflected back at me. My attachments to others didn't depend on that.

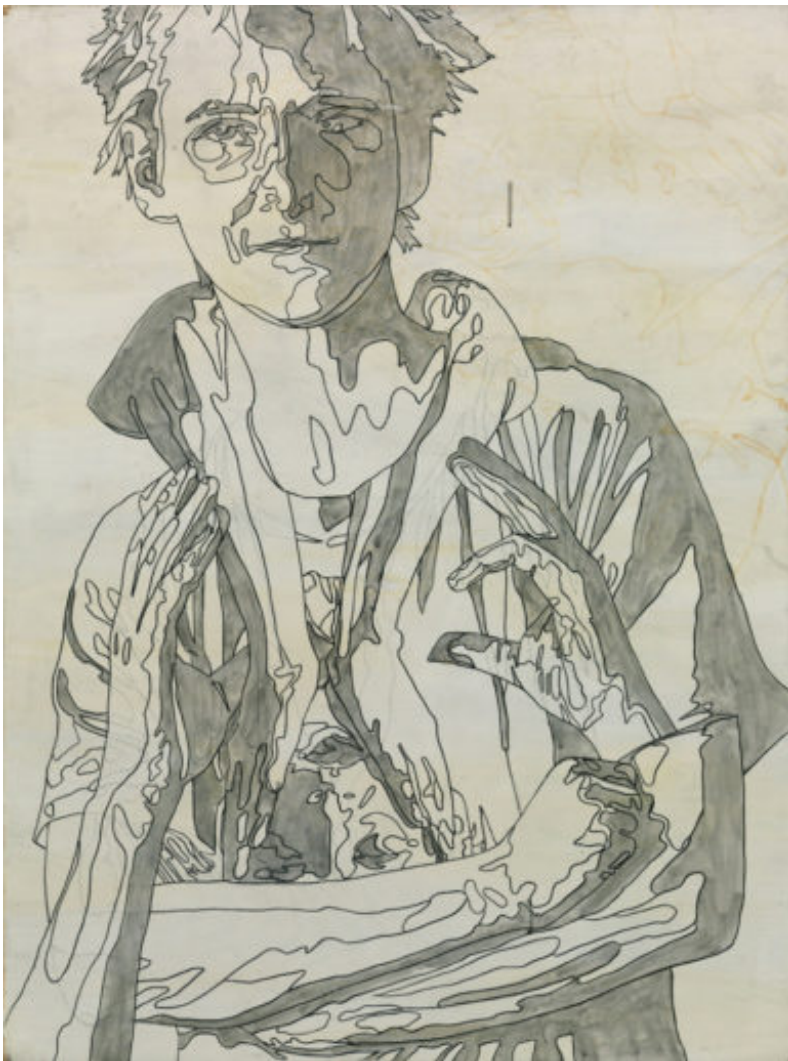
Not long out of college, I became absorbed in the work of Robert Smithson. His landscape of prehistoric lake beds, industrial interventions, and man-made nature got me thinking about systems architecture—authorless networks made up of pictures, signs, satellites, and most important, the invisible infrastructure behind such worldwide webs. One of Smithson's central concepts was of the site (a location outside the gallery) and the non-site (a body of objects and documentation inside the gallery). I wanted to find a space between them, where my being was not limited by the boundary of my skin but integrated fully, and where life and art were not defined by objects.

The decision to physically transition means dealing with the social construction of an entire life. I struggled for more than a year with the email newsletter that would announce my change. A style guide for name and pronoun preferences seemed wrong to me until I realized it could be an opportunity to revise the “historical” image that people have of me attached to a different name and a misunderstanding of my gender. Here is what I finally sent last spring:

There is the issue of historical mentions to consider and I have considered it hard and long. When I refer to myself previous to my transition, I plan to refer to myself appropriately as Francis, as awkward as it might seem. No history is written without the lens of its own present truths. It is deeply important that my entire life as a transgender man be recognized, as that is not something that is only beginning now.

I continued:

There are many things that can be changed, especially if you help me with this. I will begin to undertake the herculean task to try to correct any earlier mentions of me, on the internet, in databases, with collections in which my work is included. But this is difficult, and for me it is not just because of the technical nature of doing so. It will take years I suspect, but it will go better if you help me. For this I will be so deeply grateful.



Francis Ruyter, *Untitled (Embrace Foundation)*, 1993, marker, acrylic and gesso on wood panel.
COURTESY THE ARTIST

I would rather not write this in first-person; I do so only for the sake of legibility. I don't believe in ideas of a singular self. Selves, authentic or not, are fleeting, not fixed.

My work has always led me. I do not mean “my work” in terms of the individual objects that get filtered down to a gallery show or a booth in an art fair—increasingly inadequate means through which to get to know an artist. I mean everything that I do. I have little interest in art as a machine for identity-signaling or self-expression. I think there are more important functions for art that run deeper and relate to processes of self-generating integrity and world-building—that recognize the imperative to attempt to improve the world we live in. One aspect of my work has been developing programs and concepts for galleries. I have negotiated varying degrees of visibility for myself in these pursuits. In 1994 I collaborated on a project in Washington, D.C., that would later

come to be known as Team Gallery in New York. In 2003 I moved to Vienna, Austria, where I knew only a handful of people and did not speak the language, to open a gallery called Galerie Ruyter. In 2010 I started a program in a gallery I named • (a bullet point that I encouraged people to call whatever they wanted). My intention with • was to exhibit mostly women artists, without announcing as much. It proved to be a life-changing experience and a big step for me in what turned out to be an unraveling of years of self-censorship and deferred shame.

I don't want to map a trans experience onto a "career" experience, but wherever you go, there you are. No matter the terms, from 2006 onward, life started shifting for me in powerful ways. That year, I returned briefly to Team Gallery, this time to show my second-ever series of self-portraits, titled "I Am a Camera." People know my paintings as large-scale serial treatments of photographic subject matter with flat, bright areas of color contained by black lines. For the Team show, I replaced those bright colors with a gray-scale treatment in order to address the absurdity of art as a soul-baring, expressive exercise. Ironically, the results had an emotional impact on others that many of my color works did not. In 2009, in the wake of the global financial crisis, I began working with photographs commissioned by the United States Farm Security Administration during the Great Depression in the 1930s that documented the fallout of an economic disaster while also creating both real and fictional aspects of the American identity.

In 2012 I visited Le Corbusier's Modernist chapel, Notre Dame du Haut, in Ronchamp, France. I'd been thinking about building a series of conceptual stages in my • gallery, and I found a version of what I'd been picturing in the chapel: a perfect Gesamtkunstwerk containing a series of integrated stages in the form of altars. Despite its thick walls and roof, the building functions as a membrane between outside and inside, site and non-site. It roused in me a desire to make work outdoors, away from gallery contexts and other enclosed spaces. I kept thinking of my work stuck in the ground, like Robert Smithson's mirror displacements.



Francis Ruyter, *Alfred T. Palmer: Conversion. Automobile industry...*, 2018, acrylic on canvas.
MANUEL CARREON LOPEZ/COURTESY THE ARTIST

My work predicts what is coming for me, always so clear in hindsight. In 2013 I traveled to Miami for the city's many art fairs and had a kind of revelation. I had been thinking a lot about art's cultural functions and an idea I had to work with art in a refugee camp. I wanted to experience what art in its barest form can do, to understand better my intuition that it serves a basic human need.

I had tents on my mind, like those in the Bidi Bidi refugee camp in Uganda and in Dadaab and Kakuma, Kenya, and others rising up in the Middle East, in Europe, and around the world. In Miami I came upon tents covering many of the more than 20 different art fairs throughout the city, all of them seeming like one big mass, even with great divergence inside (one fair for art from Brazil, for instance, and another for Kuala Lumpur). Under the tents, so many products of individual artistic expression—not to mention gallery programs and the identities of the fairs themselves—were neutralized. I realized a tent could be the kind of mirror displacement tool I was looking for. All of this happened in parallel with my increasing need to physically transition.

Some of my most recent artworks are the result of experiments in trying to use a tent form to move from two-dimensional paintings to 3D objects that would represent a specific photograph. I suspect that, in light of my transition, people might read them as an attempt to destroy or erase what came before, as a revision of my history. I suppose that is preferable to some kind of facile narrative

in which paintings get “looser,” or the artist finds “freedom” in brushstrokes. Every show is a battle to reclaim one’s previous work. It’s a bit like the little revisions that we all mentally make to old relationships to help manage current ones. I feel as if I am fighting hard to save my life’s work. In April, in a presentation curated by Mohammad Salemy at Franz Josefs Kai 3, an exhibition space in Vienna, I will show new pieces alongside ones dating to 1993, when I had my first solo gallery exhibition. Perhaps there it will become apparent that it is all part of a continuum. What will next take form remains to be seen. That form might transition to something else, or it might remain in the very act of transition. It might not want to identify itself.

Francis Ruyter is a painter and gallerist who lives in Vienna, Austria. He has presented more than 30 solo gallery shows since 1993, and his work is in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Le Consortium, in Dijon, France, and many others. He has also produced more than 30 exhibitions of other artists’ work since opening Galerie Ruyter in Vienna in 2003, and he is a cofounder of Team Gallery in New York. Collaborative work with other artists remains a high priority.

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