

TOUGH AS NAILS

TRANSGRESSIVE
QUEER
GLAMOUR

*Maddie Alexander
Beck Gilmer-Osborne*

Kim Ninkuru

Danny Welsh

Shellie Zhang

*curated by
Genevieve Flavelle*



Younger Than Beyoncé Gallery is Toronto's newest artist-run centre. A nomadic gallery, it brings the freshest art exhibitions to different neighbourhoods in the city, providing professional exhibition opportunities for Toronto artists under the age of 33. We are currently located in Regent Park, this is our second season of programming.



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Tough as Nails: Transgressive Queer Glamour

Alchemy, drag, flash, haunting, shade, wild, glitter, shame, sex, violence, trash, fame.

Tough as Nails brings five emerging Toronto based artists together to flaunt the glamorous side of queer resistance. Seeking to complicate ideas of marginality, Tough as Nails explores the relationship between glamour and agency. Drawing on the long tradition of self-fashioned glamour as a practice of survival and world making for non-normative people, these five artists take up queer glamour as a defiant expression of marginalized identity.

The artists in Tough as Nails refuse, parody, challenge, and complicate conventional notions of what is considered alluring, and valuable. The artists exploit selfies, porn, fashion, interior decorating, and costuming as avenues to manipulate representation. Positioning queer as dodgy, erratic, and always in an unstable state of becoming, yet also as lived experience and historically defiant politic; queer glamour becomes a site of dynamic slippage, undermining, renegotiation, overstatement, and reinstatement. Tough as Nails investigates the idea of queer glamour as a site of glittering transgression.

Thank you to the artists for their trust, collaboration and incredible work. The faculty and staff at Western University and my peers for their support, assistance, and encouragement, particularly Dr. Kirsty Robertson and Dr. Sarah Bassnett. Additional thanks to Marjan Verstappen, Humbolt Magnussen, Elise Boudreau Graham, Genevieve Walen, and Elisha Lim.

Maddie Alexander

Maddie Alexander is a Canadian artist studying and working in Toronto, Ontario. She began her education studying at NSCAD University in Halifax, Nova Scotia, and is now in her final year at OCAD University to graduate with a BFA in Photography. Her work explores multiple themes including the female bodies' presence in our history and society, breaking down the stigmatization of mental illness, and LGBPTTQQIIAA+ issues. Mainly through portraiture and combining text and image, she enjoys working experimentally by integrating multidisciplinary practices.

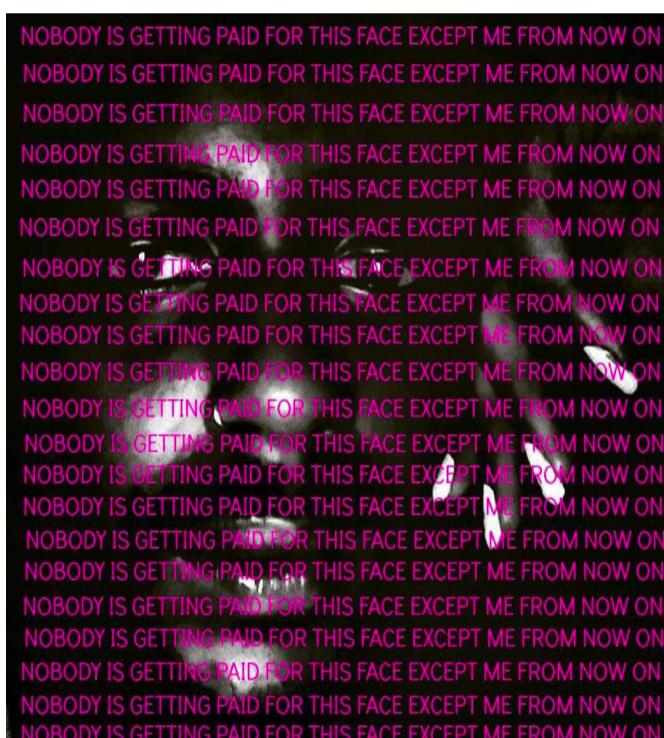
Maddie would like to dedicate her work in this exhibition to the late artist and activist Wendy Corman; Thank you for paving the way for young queer artists of today, thank you for teaching me the power of art as a form of social justice and activism, thank you for helping me find my voice.

Kim Ninkuru

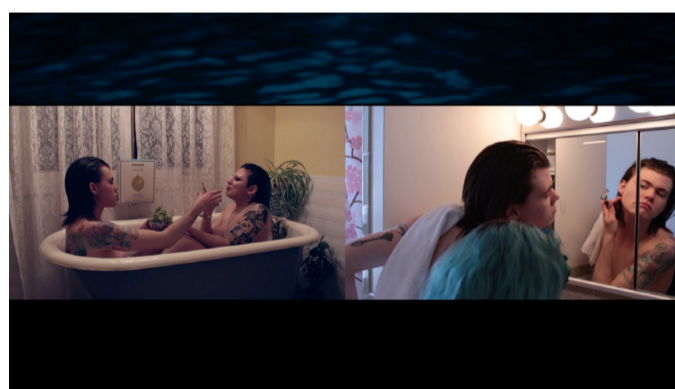
Kim Ninkuru is a performance artist from Bujumbura in Burundi based in Toronto. Using spoken word, voguing and visual art, Kim tells stories about being a black queer gender non-conforming body irl and url. You can find Kim on instagram (@black-supremacist) where they use self-portraits inspired by afrofuturism and r'n'b music to document their thoughts and tips on how they're surviving white supremacy. Their work promotes being petty and carefree as an act of self-love and self-care.

Danny Welsh

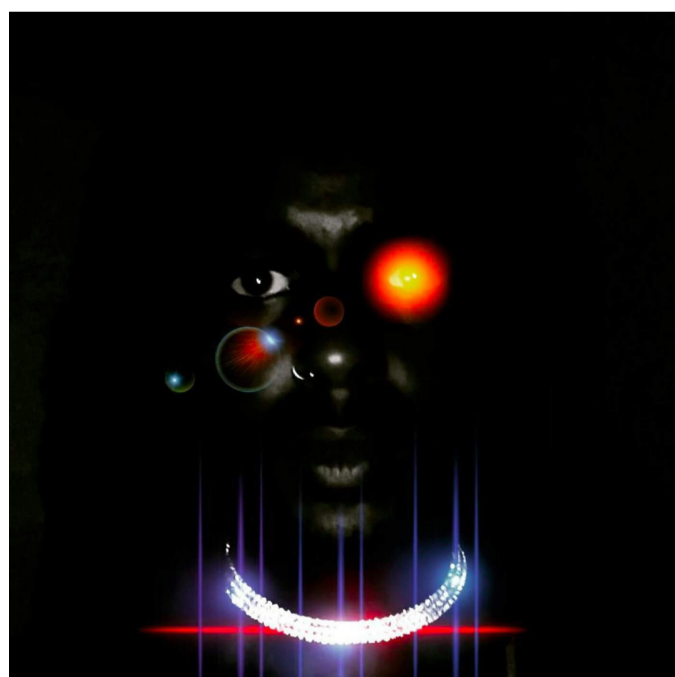
Born in Markham, Ontario, the masking and suppression of Danny's truthful spirit, personhood, gender identity and sexual orientation was a daily occurrence. Drenched in sourced imagery and found objects, Danny's sculptures are revealing of difficulty during early stages of development. His desire to create anecdotal sculpture is directly affiliated to character performance, childhood folklore, and superstition. He views his sculptures and performances as physical manifestations of his inner multiplex of lucid ego-states. Currently twenty-one years of age, Danny finds himself at Western University pursuing a Bachelors of Art Major in Visual Arts.



Kim Ninkuru, *Nobody Is Getting Paid For This Face Except Me From Now On*, digital photograph, 2016



Beck Gilmer-Osborne, *POLISHED*, video installation, 2016.



Kim Ninkuru, *Operating*, digital photograph, 2016.

Beck Gilmer-Osborne

Beck Gilmer-Osborne is a queer identified and award-winning visual artist currently working in Toronto. Their work focuses on tensions, absences, and power in relation to fluctuating gender identities. As artist and subject, Beck explores and interrogates the potential of their gender identity/ expression to serve as tools for gender deconstruction and revision. Beck's current (ongoing) body of work is unpacking issues around interpersonal relationships and how they are affected by mental illness.

Their writing/work has been published in exhibition catalogues and CRIT magazine, Wayves Magazine, The Coast, and The Globe and Mail. After receiving a Governor General's Silver Academic Award in 2015, Beck continues to make meaningful connections between their artistic and academic interests. They are a volunteer at the Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives where they are pursuing their interests in learning transgender histories, refusing to contribute to cauterized queer and trans narratives, and encountering ghosts.



Fuscia, wearable sculpture 2016, Danny Welsh

Shellie Zhang

Shellie Zhang is a Toronto-based artist who was born in Beijing and raised in various parts of China, the United States, and Canada. Her practice addresses the cultural intersections experienced through her identity as a first generation Chinese-Canadian woman. By uniting past and present iconography with the techniques of mass communication, language and sign, her work aims to deconstruct notions of tradition, gender, identity, the body, and popular culture while calling attention to these subjects in the context and construction of a multicultural society.

She has exhibited at venues including WORKJAM (Beijing), the OCAD U Student Gallery (Toronto), Buddies in Bad Times Theatre (Toronto), the Living Arts Centre Gallery (Mississauga), Videofag Gallery (Toronto), and the 2014 Feminist Art Conference (Toronto). Recently, she was the focus of Fairchild Television's New Maple series, which highlights the work and lives of immigrant individuals. She is a recipient of grants such as the RBC Museum Emerging Professional Grant and awards such as the University of Toronto's Student Engagement in the Arts Award.

Tough as Nails: Transgressive Queer Glamour

Genevieve Flavelle, Curator

alchemy, drag, flash, haunting, shade, wild, glitter, shame, sex, violence, trash, fame

Tough as Nails investigates the idea of queer glamour as a site of glittering transgression. Glamour, often equated with wealth, access, and agency, has a somewhat slippery definition. Like queer it can be defined in relation to certain practices and signifiers but, ultimately, it remains open to interpretation. Glamour is both a simple and complex way of relating to mainstream society as a queer outsider. Queer glamour originates in attitude and life experience, often in over attachment to popular and high culture, as well as the fragmentary, and the marginal. Queers often embody glamour through an embrace of experimentation, disruption, and excess. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick famously wrote, appropriate queer practices such as camp, make visible the ways in which queer “selves and communities succeed in extracting sustenance from the objects of a culture—even a culture whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain them”¹.

Self-constructed glamour has a long tradition in the history of queer life. Photographs from as early as the late 19th century document non-heterosexual/non-normative couples, friends, and communities dressed up in their finest, most whimsical or daringly avant-garde attire. These photographs portray subjects as they wished they could be, or perhaps actually were in their private worlds. A selection of these photographs depict well-dressed same gendered couples, while others depict subjects crossing gendered boundaries, wearing extravagant costumes, or some combination of the three. Both public and private photographs made by members of queer communities, and made by outsiders, create a fascinating timeline of queer life in which glamour stakes a claim. From Brassai’s documentation of the early 20th century lesbian communities in Paris; to the iconic pre-stonewall photograph taken by Weegee of a person flaunting rather than hiding the charge of cross-dressing—playfully posing for the camera as they step out of the doors of a police wagon; to the 1980s New York underground ball scene famously documented in Paris is Burning; queer glamour is visible, embodied, and imbued with resistance and desire.

The use of the term transgressive comes from this opening up of ways of thinking about glamour as a practice of queer resistance to the normative. In this exhibition queer is positioned as dodgy, erratic, and always in an unstable state of becoming, yet also as a lived experience and historically defiant politic. In this way queer is a site of dynamic slippage, and a strategy of undermining, renegotiation, overstatement, and reinstatement. Glamour is positioned as a queer practice of survival in a society that is hostile to those whose genders and sexualities do not fit the norm. Queer glamour is reclaimed as the product of a defiant expression of marginalized identity, trauma, and resistance.²

Drawing on the long tradition of self-fashioned glamour as a practice of expression, survival, critique, and world making for non-normative people Tough as Nails investigates the relationship between queerness, glamour, and agency through the work of five emerging artists. Queer glamour is taken up as a strategy of embodying, creating, and occupying identity in an active and performative manner, with a particular focus on glamour as a practice of resistance and resilience—the queer alchemy of turning the bad into something else.

Staring viewers down with a laser eye, **Kim Ninkuru’s** work literally challenges viewers with a dare “to confront the difficulties of difference and erasure.” Ninkuru’s work *Fight Me* is an ongoing series of live and video performances that reclaim black queer art. The artist invites anyone outside of the community who’s profiting off the work of black queer artists to get into the arena and fight them. The work is a dare: A dare to get into the arena. A dare to show us what you’re really made of. A dare to let go of shit that doesn’t belong to you. A dare to apologize. A dare to see what we create as art not as a costume. A dare to look at the damage you cause.³

The work’s direct address asserts the immediacy of the appropriation, marginalization, and erasure of black queer artists. In the visually stark black and white video Ninkuru’s face flickers in and out of the frame, lit by a single candle over which they hold, with long manicured fingers, the blade of a knife. In the short video Ninkuru employs a calm voice that conjures a forceful incantation, a seductive call to arms. They assert, in a prefiguring of Beyoncé’s recent call to get into Formation, that there is “no excuse, no delay, today is the day I’ll get my way because bitch I’m about to slay”⁴.



Shellie Zhang, *LaLa*, digital wallpaper, 2016.

A series of four self-portraits titled *Petty Hurts* continues to take up themes of appropriation while also documenting Ninkuru’s lived experience of surviving and thriving despite living in a hostile world. The portraits draw on the glamour of high fashion but are made with DIY ethos. In one portrait, text covering the entire frame reads “Nobody is getting paid for this face except me from now on,” creating a filter that claims ownership and agency over the artist’s face, protecting the subject from those that would exploit for profit the work or body of an artist without their consent. A personal assertion of power is communicated through the positioning and adornment of the artist’s body. Ninkuru names this as a practice of “weaponizing of the self,” recognizing that for many queer and trans folks, the body is the first site on which resistance is negotiated. Glamour becomes both armor and weapon.

Similar to Ninkuru’s use of characters, such as the afro-futuristic galactic queen whose floating head pierces the viewer’s gaze with a laser eye, **Danny Welsh’s** performance practice employs the use of characters to negotiate different themes. Three masks, *Fuchsia*, *Emperor*, and *Marionette*, created originally for performance pieces, are illustrative of Welsh’s varied and inventive practice. Each piece is a wearable sculpture that is stitched, glued, or tied together from found, salvaged, and appropriated materials. While each piece stands on its own as an object, the wearable sculptures beg performance. The mannequin heads on which the masks rest gesture to the absent body of the performer, both past and future enactments of the pieces are evoked.

Emperor, constructed from a plush emperor penguin, embellished with beaded silver fringe and decorated with smaller penguins, references forms of play; character performance, childhood toys, and something unnamed—whimsical, yet sexy. *Fuchsia* is composed of a string of plastic flamingos formed into a crown and might be read as a reference to John Water’s infamous cult classic *Pink Flamingos*. Water’s influential trash glamour aesthetics and DIY production methods certainly make him a precursor to Welsh in the tangled genealogies and familial relations of queer artists. Welsh’s characters, and the various elements of their costumes and performances, are composed from a mash of cultural, material, and historical references that are jocular yet complex, and most often compellingly bewildering. Welsh revives forgotten and discarded objects, recomposing rejection and shame into queer glamorous anthropomorphic assemblages that negotiate new narratives both on the body of the performer and in the very materials of their construction.

1. Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky, 2003, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, Or, You’re so Paranoid You Probably Think this Essay is About You”, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, (Durham: Duke University Press), 150.

2. My conceptualization and discussion of transgressive queer glamour is indebted to Jon Davies’s graduate work on transgressive glamour. Jon Davies, “Trash is Truth: Performances of Transgressive Glamour,” (Master Thesis, University of Toronto, 2004).

3. Ninkuru, Kim, “Artist Statement”, 2016.

4. Beyoncé’s triple release of *Formation* as a song, video and Super Bowl performance in February 2016 sparked a huge amount of discussion of black activism. In the song *Big Freedia*, the Queen of Bounce music, announces on behalf of herself and Beyoncé, “I did not come to play with you hoes/I came to slay bitch”. The song unapologetically asserts as Zandria Robinson states that, “To be successful, there must be coordination, the kind that choreographers and movement leaders do, the kind that black women organizers do in neighborhoods and organizations. To slay the violence of white supremacist hetero patriarchy, we must start, Beyoncé argues, with the proper formation.” Robinson, Zandria, February 7, 2016, “We Slay, Part I”, *The Southern Negress*, Web, <http://newsouthnegress.com/southernslayings/>.

In **Beck Gilmer-Osborne's** work the body grounds conceptual, verbal, and physical negotiations of identity. *Polished* documents on video Gilmer-Osborne and their partner Benjamin DaSilva occupying a claw footed bathtub discussing love, identity, substance abuse, and their consumption of SSRIs for anxiety and depression. Taking inspiration from Plato's Symposium in which a party of men lounge about while attempting to define love, Gilmer-Osborne and DaSilva recline in a bathtub drinking wine from a box and eating grapes while attempting to unpack their thoughts and feelings about transgender love. They discuss how love intersects with mental illness, and how love is affected by previous trauma and abuse. Like the grapes that escape Gilmer-Osborne's grasp throughout the conversation, many thoughts and narratives are brought up and left to float unresolved. Gilmer-Osborne and DaSilva enact a confessional style of conversation but each meets the demands of listener/audience for the other and thus the demand is not placed on the viewer. Rather, viewers are witness to how, for many queer and trans folks, recognition and support is most often facilitated through community and romantic relationships.

Polished is a portrait of transgressive, yet mundane, queer life. Through a split screen, the video jumps to Gilmer-Osborne and DaSilva sharing a mirror while shaving in the bathroom. Shaving is a daily ritual that has the capacity to be performed normatively and non-normatively as Gilmer-Osborne and DaSilva demonstrate by shaving different parts of their faces. If gender is performative, is shaving off the hair above your eyes any different from shaving the hair off of your lip or jaw? Is one more transgressive or absurd than the other? Both Gilmer-Osborne and DaSilva identify as non-binary trans and perform their genders in non-normative ways through daily practices such as what they choose to wear. Like in Ninkuru's and Welsh's works, the body is staged as a site on which glamour is negotiated as a practice of mediating identity and the challenges that the artists face both internally and externally.

Taking up the visual significance of queer couplehood and the tensions between internal and external display **Shellie Zhang's** work playfully critiques the commodification of gender and race through parody and the appropriation of appropriation. *LaLa* is a wallpaper pattern based on a tie design produced by luxury French fashion house Hermès featuring a whimsical depiction of Chinese culture appropriated from Chinese embroidery. In *LaLa* Zhang reimagines the pattern with two female figures and the Chinese character (pronounced: lā) meaning lesbian or a woman who loves women in Chinese slang when the character is doubled. *LaLa* reclaims and openly queers the appropriated design through a cheeky and declarative mantra, which uses repetition as a form of affirmation. Through a queer appropriation of an appropriated pattern *LaLa* resubjectifies a cultural caricature through desire.

Zhang's second work *Neapolitan Dreams*, installed for this exhibition over a second colour installation of *LaLa*, examines the notion of "flesh tone" as a colour. Zhang deconstructs the process of seeking an ideal skin colour and eschews the idea of a single prefabricated shade as neutral. Each canvas is named by the colour's code and the paint surface of the "skin" is untouched by wrinkles, scars or marked by life in any way. The skin is not "real" in any sense, and while the piece does allude to bodies it is through a uniform abstracted ambiguity. The mounds that rise in the center of each piece can be read as nipples, clits, or the tips of penises emerging from the the flat surface depending on the viewer's erotic attachments. Installed together *LaLa* and *Neapolitan Dreams* create an array of playfully charged contrasts; textiles are both worn on the body and used to decorate interior spaces, wallpaper is a covering and adornment of interior space while clothing is a covering and adornment of the body's exterior. A pattern appropriated from clothing is worn by the wall, while abstracted bodies and skin remain exposed. Zhang's work negotiates queer representation with a whimsical twirl by queering the boundaries of the body as a site of both exterior and interior decoration.

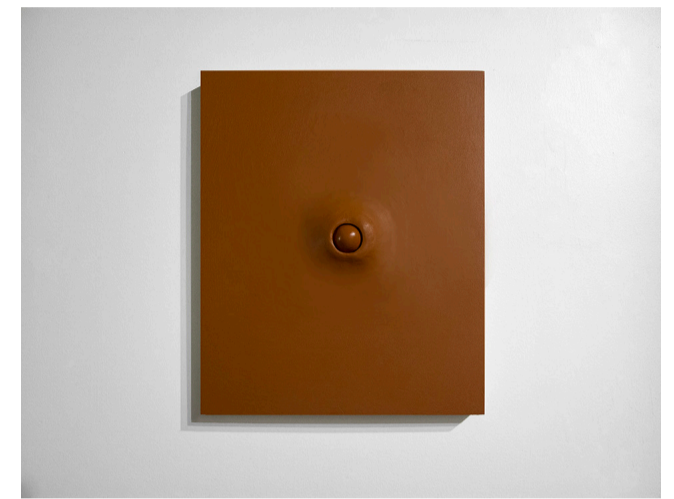
Continuing the subject of lesbian representation **Maddie Alexander** takes on dominant culture's fetization of lesbian/queer women's sexuality with *Girl on Girl*. Using multiple porn stills overlayed with text and installed in a grid, Alexander has created a commanding intervention. *Girl on Girl* combines found imagery from "lesbian porn" aimed at heterosexual men with text written by the artist. Installed as multiples in a grid, the repeated images mimic the dominance and proliferation of these types of images, overwhelming the viewer's gaze with the cheaply reproducible low images. Like in Ninkuru's work, Alexander's text creates a filter through which the viewer's consumption of the image is challenged. Through text Alexander gives voice to both the internalized and externalized stereotypes that she has experienced as a queer identified woman. One image of two white feminine porn stars kissing reads "YOU'RE SO PRETTY, YOU DON'T LOOK LIKE A LESBIAN" this statement can be read as both a homophobic outsider's unsolicited opinion and also as an internalized voice that may be questioning how one can identify as queer when one does not "read" as queer. Another image reads "EVERYMAN'S FANTASY", making the intended male consumer present and the constructed fantasy of the image explicit. *Girl on Girl* breaks the scene of these idealized images by questioning the spectators' assumptions and interrupting their artifice. Alexander does not tell us these images of girl on girl sex are wrong but rather struggles with the exalted glamour of these images and their effect on her personal sexuality and movement through the world as a queer woman. The work does not shy away from explicit desire and like Zhang's work, *Girl on Girl* is simultaneously serious, cheeky and playful. By connecting these images to experiences of queer shame, violence, and erasure, Alexander transforms these images into productive sites of confrontation and questioning.

At times the artists in *Tough as Nails* use strategies of interruption and confrontation—queer claws come out as representation becomes a hotly negotiated site of resistance and rebellion. The claws are also at times lovingly manicured and glitter coated with resilience through the use of love, play, and humour. Queer glamour is a multifaceted tradition and practice of critique, survival, resistance, world making, and "visualizing and inhabiting otherwise".⁵ In the works of these five artists the tradition of queer glamour as a practice of creative expression and negotiation is extended in new directions. Lived experience and artistic practice overlap in the works in this exhibition, illustrating both the personal and politically transgressive potentials of queer glamour.

5. Getsy, David J, "Introduction", *Queer*, Whitechapel: Documents of Contemporary Art Series, ed. Getsy, David J., (Cambridge, MA : The MIT Press, 2016), 15.



Maddie Alexander, *Girl on Girl*, digital photograph, 2016.



Shellie Zhang, *Neapolitan Dreams*, (detail) acrylic, egg, and cardboard on wood, 2015.



Beck Gilmer-Osborne, *Medicine Cabinet* from *POLISHED*, video installation, 2016.

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