The diverse American artists of Taking Up Space, working from the 1970s to the present, consider questions of identity and the boundaries of personal and public space through representations of the human form. Every figure, whether the artist’s own or that of a loved one, explores intimacy. Daniel Heyman’s Tattoo series captures ephemeral moments of relaxation and companionship between the artist and his lovers during a summer beach trip; the men are exposed on the beach, and yet they appear comfortable in both their nudity and their sensuality. By comparison, Francesca Woodman’s Untitled, from the Space series, depicts her own naked body from a voyeuristic camera angle. Though she appears trapped in a glass display case, her hand emerges cautiously, suggesting her looming escape. What kind of space do their bodies inhabit, and how do they cross their respective social boundaries?

Through these works of art we access private aspects of the artists’ experiences and the complex relationships they have with the self. The direct eye contact we have with Marisol, through her Self-Portrait, encourages a recognition of the internal struggles we all face. Her reaching hands call out to us, fingers interlocked. The turmoil she experiences, however, is neatly enclosed within the outline of her face in profile. By breaking the fourth wall, she invites audiences into an emotional moment that is often kept private from the rest of the world.

As human beings, we construct our sense of self as we move physically and emotionally through the events of our lives. Through his photomontages, John O’Reilly explores these acts of self-construction, and the internal conflicts that often arise. In Dogtown, he expresses his personal relationship with queer identity, his domestic environment, and the physical landscape of the place he calls home. Sexuality, gender, and the relationship we develop with our identity is self-constructed. There is no singular path to understanding oneself.

Perhaps we can call upon queer theory, an area of scholarly study developed in the late twentieth century, which aims to “transgress conventional understandings of gender and sexuality,” and to disrupt binary-based boundaries. Through this theoretical lens, the human body is not only subject to change over time, but also becomes a fluid character that can cross socialized borders of both sexuality and gender.

Our society imposes binary restrictions on the body and dictates our lives based on differences (male vs. female, gay vs. straight, black vs. white, etc.), rather than with an understanding of the spectrum upon which we all move about the world. Here, we must be open to thoughts of uncertainty and change—no one person holds the authority over self-identity. We are physical beings shaped by the accumulation of knowledge, emotion, and events, and live in a reality that shifts by the millisecond. To live freely in this chaos, we must allow ourselves to take up space, as our identities flow and change.

The artists included in this exhibition emphasize this concept of fluidity, allowing their
Look to Martine Gutierrez’s *Real Dolls* series, where she depicts herself traversing spaces of feminized gender expression, sexualized female bodies, and shifting racial identity. As a self-identified, non-binary transgender woman, she often expresses her own fluid movements across gender binaries in art. In this series, she performs hyperfemininity, presenting herself as four different sex dolls. She adds varying racial markers to her “dolls,” such as skin color. In crossing these boundaries, she introduces complicated conversations about sexualization, racial and ethnic identity, and appropriation. Does she have the authority to generate these conversations in this way? Where do we draw the line in art?

Taking Up Space reshapes the way that we view the human body in its constant state of formation, transformation, and reformation. How do you express your identities?

Milanne Berg ’24  
Homma Family Intern

NOTES
CHECKLIST


Martine Gutierrez, American, born 1989. Ebony 3, from the series Real Dolls, 2013, archival inkjet print. Purchased through a gift from Mr. and Mrs. Joseph H. Hazen, by exchange; 2014.25.11

Martine Gutierrez, American, born 1989. Mimi 1, from the series Real Dolls, 2013, archival inkjet print. Purchased through a gift from Mr. and Mrs. Joseph H. Hazen, by exchange; 2014.25.13


BIBLIOGRAPHY


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