



## Gender Nonconforming Pioneers

### LITTLE-TOLD STORIES ILLUSTRATE EVOLUTION OF GENDER ROLES

Ria Brodell could have used more queer role models while growing up in Idaho in a conservative Catholic family. But now the Boston-based artist has created a series of works that shed light on gender nonconforming pioneers.

Brodell's collection of paintings, called "Butch Heroes," has been exhibited at a number of art galleries and recently collected into a limited edition book. Through this work, Brodell shares the little-told stories of real but unheralded historic figures—and illuminates how our ideas of gender identity have evolved over hundreds of years.

"Sometimes I wonder, if I'd had these people to look at, how much easier life could have been for me when I growing up," said Brodell. The figures represented in "Butch Heroes," unearthed by Brodell over countless hours of research, come from all corners of history. What they have in common: All were assigned female at birth, but presented themselves in traditionally masculine ways—especially by the standards of their respective, pre-20th century eras. Some had romantic relationships with women. Some embodied transgender or gender-neutral identities. Whatever their differences, they all, in some way or another, could be categorized as "butch"—a word that Brodell, like many LGBTQ activists, views in political terms and wants to "reclaim" from those who would use it as a slur.

"I chose people that I could identify with," said Brodell. "So much of the history that I grew up learning was white male centric, and there's so much that has been left out—including queer history—that is extraordinarily important to understand."

Brodell also chose to depict the subjects of "Butch Heroes" in paintings that resemble traditional Catholic holy cards—those that conventionally feature important religious saints. It's a way of nodding to her Catholic upbringing while celebrating a different set of inspirational individuals.

"It seemed like the perfect format," said Brodell. "Those cards were used as a way to present role models. From Saint Francis to Saint Anthony, you were encouraged to look to them if you needed anything, for their teachings, and for their courage."

Among the very different but still-courageous figures represented in Brodell's whimsical, colorful "Butch Heroes" paintings are Qáñqon Kámek Kláula, a male-identifying Native American warrior who served as a guide and courier to fur trappers and traders; Olga Nikolaevna Tsuberbiller, a trailblazing Russian academic and mathematician; and "Captain Wright," a male-presenting Briton whose death, and subsequent revelation of biologically female characteristics, caused a kerfuffle across 19th-century London newspapers. "Butch Heroes" spotlights about two-dozen

individuals, and its book contains historic background on each.

Throughout the series, Brodell is careful to avoid anachronistically applying modern sex- and gender-related terminology to individuals who aren't here to self-identify and to whom contemporary categories may be ill-fitting or irrelevant. Brodell bases choices like pronoun designation on how the (frequently gender-fluid) subjects presented themselves at various points throughout their individual biographies. Brodell is interested in capturing their personal self-expression, not lobbing labels.

After all, Brodell (whose preferred pronouns are they/them/their) understands that labels are only helpful to a point. Identities evolve.

"I've changed my terminology myself," said Brodell, who has self-identified as gay, as queer and as a dyke at various points in their journey. Today Brodell is most comfortable identifying as non-binary trans and gender-neutral, but acknowledges that these terms have become less important with age.

"To be honest, I don't really think about it a lot," said the artist. "When I was growing up, I really used those terms because I needed to find my community. They were labels, and I wanted to find where I belonged. Today I find myself not using them as much."

After all, if "Butch Heroes" demonstrates anything, it's that fully realized stories can never be captured by any single word. [X]

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