



MING DE NASTY

An exhibition of photographic portraits by Ming de Nasty exploring how LGBTQ+ women self identify

BECKY

When I was young I was a tomboy, for a long time I don't think I ever identified as a lesbian it's just that I was a tomboy. I think it was more acceptable to my family than saying I was gay.

The clothes I wear the way I act, it's just who I am, a boyish female.

I went to an all girls' school so I guess that's where my boyish tendencies blossomed.

As I get older I'm connecting more with my family, as they've got to know me and accept who I am.

For a while when they didn't accept my sexuality. I put on this bravado front and pretended it was all OK but I wasn't really accepting it myself. Now I love and accept who I am. Today I think it's easier to be gay or queer, whatever you want to be It's not all sunshine and rainbows, but it's a lot easier.



CONNIE

I see myself as a lesbian woman, I've always been attracted to women.

When I was younger I thought it meant I had to look and act in a certain way.

I get asked about my sexuality and get told that I don't look or behave like a lesbian.

I just want to be seen as the individual that I am.



JEAN

I identify as a lesbian.

I'm 83 so my history goes back a long way.

My girl friends of age eleven, twelve and thirteen wanted to get married and have babies. I never ever, ever wanted that, never wanted dolls or any of that stuff.

I joined the Navy; there was never any mention of lesbians, though I did have a crush on one woman in my unit. In those days we didn't have the language ... a lesbian?

I was married for three years I got married because that's what you did. On the morning of my wedding day I looked in the mirror and said out loud 'never mind Jean there's always the divorce courts' so I knew things weren't right, you know.



MO

I feel quite ordinary being different is quite ordinary.

I don't feel I have to become a category.

Categories I do think about are more to do with ethnicity and nationality, that's what I'm more engaged with.

I've always felt different but some of that is to do with where my parents were from, where I was from, I've always felt like an outsider.

I can remember in the 80s I'd have definitely said 'I'm a lesbian' I think of myself as generally queer these days. Queer isn't as precise a term as lesbian, queer can apply to aspects of culture it's not just confined to what you do with your body or genitalia. For me it does foster a relationship between your sexual orientation, sexual identity and all those other categories that you might be part of.

I might like to use 'quare', which is an Irish form of queer, a term used over a long time in Ireland.



SARAH

When I was younger I was very much defined by racism. I didn't think about anything else to do with my identity because my race was being so violently put upon me.

When at the age of 15 or 16 we moved out of that situation I started to think about the queer parts of my identity. I realised I'd been very androgynous my whole life and I was lucky that my parents had let me wear whatever I wanted to wear. I'd always worn very 'masculine', as society calls them, clothes.

When I started to explore my sexuality I realised that I was attracted to men and women and anything in between and anybody nice really. I spent a lot of time calling myself bisexual but that didn't really cover it.

I suppose nowadays I'd say I was mixed race, androgynous, pansexual but that's something that's constantly shifting and changing, both with the way I change, and with the way language changes and gives us more ways to describe ourselves and define ourselves. When I ask myself what I want to be identified as... the answer is kind.



JANE

You very much followed the social norms of the 50s and 60s because if you stepped outside of those norms you were either committing an offence as it was in those days or you ended up in hospital for so called 'help'. You basically kept it close to yourself.

I dressed from a young teenager, wore make up and enjoyed being me for many years but then of course there were the social norms where you got married had 2.4 children and a motorcar. You were expected to follow these norms if you wanted to be part of civilised society. I followed the norms but I enjoyed dressing and being myself only when I could, so there were two people, I had to keep the two separate. I was actually quite fortunate; I worked away from home a lot so Jane could be where I was. When I went home I reverted to who I didn't really want to be but had to be.

Sadly my partner passed away and then I had to make a choice. I could be a grumpy old person or I could do something about it. I did something about it; my transition started in 2012 and progressed to where I am today, enjoying life.



SAIMA

I've tried to avoid labels all my life.

There are so many labels out there and by labelling yourself you only get boxed in. There are lots of layers to people.

I'm attracted to women but why should I have to explain this? Straight people don't have to 'come out'. As soon as I understood my sexuality I made a decision of never 'coming out'. If people ask, I tell them.

I find it funny that people always try to work me out and when they find out they always tell me 'but you don't look like a lesbian' to which I always think, well... what's a lesbian supposed to look like?



JAMES

In terms of gender identity I ID as non binary.
I use 'they' and 'them' pronouns.

When I was 14 I actually felt very male and thought I'd transition and become male but over the years I've felt neither male nor female, that's quite exciting it feels really flexible. I use 'they' and 'them' pronouns but because I look very female and was assigned female at birth most people just use 'she'. I'd get annoyed about it but now I realise that policing peoples' language is not useful and other people misunderstanding my gender does not harm how I understand myself.

In terms of sexuality sometimes I use the word bi, it's convenient and people get the general gist. I'd use pansexual but then you have to explain that with some people.

I'm concerned that the idea of bisexuality includes the word for two as in two genders but I don't fall into those categories. I'm also polyamorous and I do see that as part of my queer identity. I see polyamory as opposite to and outside of heteronormative ideas about kinship.



MEESHA

The last couple of years I've felt really comfy with myself.

Recently the word queer seems to fit who I am, it's open and what ever you want it to be. I'm slightly eccentric, so I guess an eccentric queer is what I identify as.



JERALDINE

When I was thirteen I tried on the girl next doors clothes and that was it.

In those days you had to run and hide, run and hide because that's all you could do, you knew that if anyone found out you'd get beaten up and end up in the gutter.

I grew up in a small village, there were four gay people in the village one got beaten up at school and died as a result of his injuries the other three moved away. I stayed there and didn't let anyone know.

I've always known this is who I am, though I didn't undergo reconstructive surgery until I was 71.



AQUILA

I define as trans femme non binary.

At the end of a relationship I realised I wasn't heterosexual and I didn't identify with the gender I was assigned at birth.

I've spent 28 years trying to fit into this box of being 'male' it just didn't work for me; I never really fit in, it annoyed and hurt me so much.

It took a while and years of experimenting but I now define as trans femme non binary, now I present in a more feminine way. After years of wearing jeans when I actually put on a skirt it felt so damn comfortable, it really felt right for me. I love wearing knee length skirts and I like to mix them with the grunge look, hoodies and a t-shirt for an alt femme look.

In the future I see myself as being more confident in who I am. Hopefully I'll get more gender affirming surgery such as facial hair removed and breast augmentation as well.



In a world that requires so many labels individuals are trying their best to be true to themselves in a society that often wants to restrain and normalise. This exhibition highlights the difference amongst Birmingham's LGBTQ+ women and the extent to which their self-definitions are at odds with cis heteronormative expectations.

'I wanted to explore the debate around identity and make portraits that showed people as unique individuals, to give the participants a space to tell their own stories and expose shared experiences'.

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