

Gender Defined  
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So much meaning can live in the definition of a single word.

The word “woman” encompasses a myriad of definitions – from physical attributes to the attitudes, dispositions and behaviors associated with womanhood. While definitions may seem to be mere technicalities, their impact on lives of individual women reveals the importance of how gender is defined.

In *Gender Defined*, Schmidt uses Tom Phillips’ Humument technique to manipulate a paper in the Maria de Bruyn Collection of Duke University’s Rubenstein Rare Book and Manuscripts Library entitled *Reproductive health and gender-related terminology defined* (Box 3). Phillips describes the *Humument* process using metaphors of excavation and depth, to explain that meaning is “exhumed” rather than “born out of” the text in this technique (1). *Gender Defined* deftly uses the Humument method to excavate a paper that describes the physiological and sociological definitions of “male” and “female.” Through this process, Schmidt reveals the gender biases that underlie traditional definitions of gender, and specifically what it means to be a woman.

*Gender Defined* comments on themes of female sexuality and power. The text is composed of quotes from men around the world, collected by Maria de Bruyn. It reads, “Gender refers to / women’s bodies / soiled by sex / assaulted / but finally she gives in / to serve and dance to the tune of her husband.” When woven together, these words evoke the image of a woman who has increasingly lost control over her body and sexuality. The phrase “the stain of sex” also appears on the page, suggesting that women not only lack control over their sexuality, but also are tainted because of it. Through repurposing the words of these men, Schmidt reveals the impossible cycle that women are trapped in due to inequalities in traditional definitions of gender.

The exposed text is paired with distinctive imagery that enhances its meaning. Overlaying the obscured text is a silhouette of a boat sailing across a calm sea, with an anchor descending into the depths of the dark water below. The words “gender refers to” rest on the boat, as if painted onto its side. This placement of the words makes an interesting contrast between a boat, a traditional symbol of movement and exploration, and a definition of gender that is not as free. Upon close inspection, this boat is constrained by the anchor that moors it in place, and sinks deeper and deeper into darker water. This anchor loops around the words of the poem that describe an “assault” on women’s bodies, suggesting that, in fact, women lack control over how their own gender is defined and experienced. Without any steering power over their own ship, women “give in” to be servants and entertainers for men.

Schmidt’s incorporation of a vibrant sun-kissed sky in yellows and oranges prompts an interesting discussion of symbolism. In her description of *Gender Defined*, Schmidt writes, “the sun is meant to represent how on the surface,

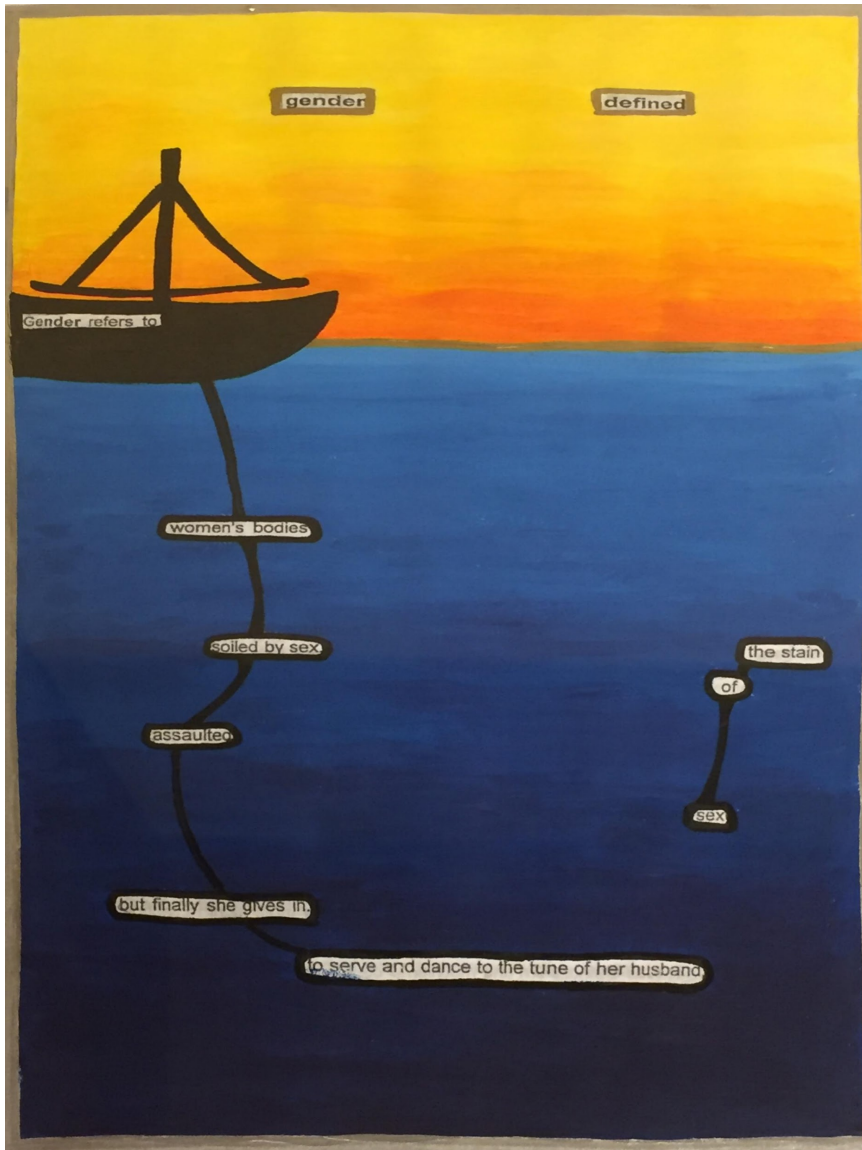
womanhood is described as beautiful and limitless. Yet, this sun is sinking into the water, weighed down by social norms, which trap women in a narrow definition of their gender.” However, viewers may also interpret this as a rising sun, perhaps evocative of a new dawn of consciousness that rejects gender disparities. While not the initial intent of the author, this interpretation offers a semblance of hope for the viewer of a more equitable tomorrow.

Through her commentary on women’s sexuality, and using an HIV-related text, Schmidt draws connections to the global HIV/AIDS epidemic. As the executive director of UNAIDS, Michel Sidibe remarked in references to HIV/AIDS, “this epidemic unfortunately remains an epidemic of women” (2). Schmidt’s piece serves as a reminder of the lack of agency that women face globally in advocating for their sexuality, and the unique risks they face in protecting themselves against HIV infection.

*Gender Defined* only scratches the surface of the complex, and multi-faceted challenge of defining gender and women’s sexuality. However, Schmidt’s use of the *Humument* technique is fitting in this sense. As Phillips states, “the first version [of a Humument] could be regarded as preliminary opencast mining, leaving more hidden seams to be investigated” (1). Through artistry and textual mining, Schmidt has opened an avenue for deconstructing traditional definitions of womanhood, creating a space for continued engagement with narratives of gender definition.

Works Cited

1. Smyth A. Double Act. London Review of Books. 2012 Oct 11;35–6.
2. Noting Progress to date, Ban urges greater efforts against HIV. United Nations News Center. 2010 Jun 9;



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