

The New York Times

May 22, 2019

Inspired by Virginia Woolf, Curated by Tilda Swinton

by Ted Loos



Tilda Swinton can boast of many achievements, having performed in more than 70 films, including “Michael Clayton,” for which she won an Oscar in 2008.

In a way hers is the broadest of careers, stretching from her salad days of the 1980s working with the acclaimed independent director Derek Jarman to her appearance in this year’s [“Avengers: Endgame.”](#) which is already one of the highest-grossing movies of all time.

But until now Ms. Swinton, 58, has never organized an art exhibition.

The show, “Orlando,” which opens Friday at the [Aperture Foundation](#) and features nearly five dozen photographs by 11 artists, is Ms. Swinton’s first foray into art curation.



Thomas/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Aperture Foundation, New York

of “Orlando.”



“Untitled” (2009) by the Swiss photographer Walter Pfeiffer, who is known for his images of free-spirited youth. Credit Walter Pfeiffer and Art + Commerce; Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ProLitteris, Zurich

The works, some commissioned especially for the project, tackle the themes of identity and transformation explored in Virginia Woolf’s 1928 novel, “Orlando” and Sally Potter’s 1992 film adaptation, whose lead role was a breakthrough for Ms. Swinton.

“She has a great eye,” said Ms. Thomas, who photographed two subjects — her partner and muse, [Racquel Chevremont](#), and the performance artist [Zachary Tye Richardson](#) — and then corresponded with Ms. Swinton via email to select images for the show.

Ms. Swinton spoke energetically about her work during a visit to New York last month. These are edited excerpts from the conversation.

How did this get started?

I had been in conversation with Aperture for a while about doing something, and we came around to this idea

Curating is new for you, yes?

I curated an exhibition of experimental film at the ICA London a long time ago. I’ve also curated film festivals quite regularly. But nothing on the walls until this.

Discussions of gender are so prevalent now, more so than when you did the film “Orlando.” Did that naturally lead you back to this story?

I think that’s the Trojan horse of “Orlando”-ness — both the film, but more important the book — is that it’s all about gender-bending. And it really isn’t.

So what’s it about?

It’s about inevitable, perpetual change being the only thing that we can rely on, and it’s about identity being positively negligible. It’s a properly revolutionary book. I propose hypothetically that had Virginia Woolf continued this book for another thousand pages, Orlando could easily have turned into a mouse.

And yet the story is so poignant in the way it deals with the male-to-female transformation:our protagonist waking up one day as a woman and carrying on.

Gender identity is one aspect of it. And [Woolf] deals with it so beautifully and wittily and playfully and profoundly. But it's so importantly about class, too, and that's a taboo that nobody talks about, ever.



Top: Zackary Drucker's 2019 portrait of Rosalyn Wiseman. Credit Zackary Drucker and Luis De Jesus, Los Angeles

Right: "Nicole eyes shut," from 2019, by Elle Pérez, a New York-based photographer whose work is also featured in the Whitney Biennial. Credit Elle Pérez and 47 Canal, New York



You seem to inspire gender-fluidity — in [“Suspiria”](#) last year, you played both male and female roles. Why do directors think of you for that?

Well, I very often instigate it. So I have to take a certain amount of responsibility. Don't blame them! [laughs]

Where does that come from?

I'm really interested in transformation — especially what I call the precipice of transformation. And for me it's very often just as exotic to play a bourgeoisie housewife, as in "[The Deep End](#)," who is looking after her family and suddenly finds herself being drawn to this gambling blackmailer. Or for that matter in "Julia," playing a totally avowed alcoholic becoming a mother, in a way.

So what were the nuts and bolts of the putting the exhibition and the issue together?



Lynn Hershman Leeson's "Roberta Getting Ready to Go to Work" (1976) portrays Roberta Breitmore, Ms. Leeson's alter ego in a multiyear performance piece that lasted throughout the '70s. Credit Lynn Hershman Leeson and Bridget Donahue, New York

It was an invitation that I sent out to some people that I thought might respond. And very gratifyingly, every single person was able to respond, except for one person who was just too busy.

Who dared to be too busy?

Hilton Als, my friend. We'll get him next time. For the others, I sort of set this trail of bread crumbs through the forest, and they picked them up and sent in their portfolios. And then we curated them together.

What were the responses like?

In a way it was a validation of the project because no one said, "Orlando' what?" Everybody said, not only, "Oh, yeah," but, "Oh, my God, that's my favorite book. That's the book that inspired me."

You know a bunch of these artists, but especially Lynn Hershman Leeson.

She's an old collaborator and friend. We met when she wrote to ask me to work with her. I immediately said yes. And we've made five films together. The first was "Conceiving Ada," about Ada Lovelace, daughter of Lord Byron, who is now recognized as the first ever computer programmer.

Leeson is famous for having a whole other identity, correct?

I don't think Cindy Sherman would mind me saying, Lynn did it a long time before [Ms. Sherman's early photographic series] "Untitled Film Stills." Her alter ego, [Roberta Breitmore](#), was a very living thing. She had a public life, she had a P.O. Box and Social Security number and I think even a passport. But she didn't exist.



What you in art that

I love what Sepuya] so grateful shows than just aspect to there's And for him



surprised terms of the resulted?

Paul [Mpagi did. And I'm because he there's more the gender the book — race, too. to say,

Paul Mpagi Sepuya's "Untitled" (2019) deals with the depiction of the Moor in Woolf's "Orlando." Credit Paul Mpagi Sepuya and Team Gallery

Paul Mpagi Sepuya in a photo commissioned for the project. Ms. Swinton said, "I'm so grateful because he shows there's more than just the gender aspect to the book — there's race, too." Credit Paul Mpagi Sepuya and Team Gallery

"Yeah, there's this barbaric racism, too" was meaningful.

There's a particularly fraught moment related to race in the novel but not in the movie, right?

He's referring to the gesture that Orlando does early on — this so-called innocent noble child. And he's just bored, like playing with a punch ball, which happens to be the wizened head of a Moor that some ancestors brought back from the Crusades.

Paul Strand's "Mrs. Archie MacDonald, South Uist, Hebrides," 1954. Strand took pictures of the Hebrides, where Ms. Swinton spends a lot of her time. Credit Paul Strand Archive/Aperture Foundation

Do you collect art?

I'm not really rich enough to collect what I'd like to collect.

What would that be?

[Paul Strand.](#)

Good segue — you've also curated a sidebar show of his modernist photography, since Aperture controls the Paul Strand Archive.

I said to Aperture originally: Paul Strand is my way of indicating to people that I'm interested in the landscape of the spirit. And it so happens that Strand, apart from being a great artist, [did this Hebridean series](#), and I half-live in the Hebrides. I know that landscape very well, and I don't know of any other artist who comes close to seeing the Hebrides in the way that I see it.

Did you grow up there?

More or less. We've been there every single year of my entire life at least once, and I go there as often as I can, maybe four times a year.

Maybe identity is a canard, as you've suggested, but aren't we all just looking for ourselves in art?

Look at Mickalene's work. She got to the bottom line: *Everyone* is Orlando, that's the thing.

It sounds as if the book has as much meaning for you as the film you starred in.

I think I felt a bit sheepish about liking the book because I thought maybe it was for very boring, literal reasons, like the fact that I also had been brought up in a big house with lots of paintings on the wall of people who look rather like me, with mustaches or ruffs. But millions of other people who've read that book feel the same way. It doesn't really matter where you grew up or what your gender identification is or what your life is like.