

# Gender Diasporist

Shawn Syms interviews Tobaron Waxman

Tobaron Waxman's performance pieces and other cultural productions pose complicated questions of identity on multiple fronts. His work contextualizes gender, embodiment and time as systems of inscription, incorporating elements of traditional Jewish texts and philosophy through politics and desire.

Waxman frequently uses his own body in his work, sometimes in pieces involving the cutting and shaving of gendered signifiers such as his hair and/or beard. He has created striking imagery of men together, in varying bodily configurations and states of undress. In addition to performance, photography, video, voice and sound, he also uses the Internet, tissue engineering, biofeedback processing and choreography. In his work, Waxman examines gender and such issues as consent, sexual representation, conflict and questions of contested national borders and diasporic experience.

This past winter, I engaged in a series of wide-ranging conversations with Waxman about his work and its reflections upon masculinity and gender, race and embodiment, performance and authenticity, and the ways in which the State creates a gender, which have arisen during the past decade of evolving artistic practice.

**Shawn Syms (ss):** Your cultural practice seems to me to intrinsically manifest a perspective on masculinity and representation even when this is not the intended or primary focus. One example I find particularly striking is *Amidah* (2004), featured in Volume One of the *Carte Blanche* photography compendium.

Six men engage in the motions of the *Amidah* or *Shmoneh Esrei* prayer.<sup>1</sup> They stand together, varying in comportment, age, build and attire. They are also in varying states of undress. It appears that at least one of them may be transgendered. To me, the capture of movement and ritual in an all-male context reflects upon the breadth of ways of being male or masculine.

**Tobaron Waxman (TW):** *Amidah* was inspired by my thinking when I lived in a gender-segregated environment engaged

in religious studies. At that time, I was not thinking about masculinity so critically but rather about the notion of authenticity and the context in which I found myself.

*Shmoneh Esrei: Amidah* is a triptych—each panel from the triptych references one of the three times of day when the silent prayer is recited. Rather than have a traditional prayer quorum of 10 men in each photo, there are 6 figures, making a total of 18 figures in the composition, for the 18 steps of the prayer.

It's an imagistic response to issues I wrestled with when I was a religious ascetic. I was concerned specifically with embodiment, and the juxtaposition of my own body in that shared context with the bodies of the other men who were around me all the time. The variance in degrees of clothedness is less about what is hidden than the notion of layering itself. I've also made a JavaScript animation version of

the central panel—"Mincha," referring to the afternoon prayer time—designed for a Web browser, so it is a one-to-one personal experience.<sup>2</sup>

**ss** As I see it, male togetherness—and ways in which it can suggest both commonality and difference—is a recurring motif in your work. The *Tisha B'Av/Diaspora NYC* series (2003) provides an example of this. To me, the photographs in this series feel very intimate—one man shaves another's head, his hand supporting the man's neck with seeming tenderness—yet it's a representation of male bonding that reads as emotional rather than sexual.

**TW** In my action-based work, the production of photographs expands each of those gestures, functioning as evidence. *Diaspora NYC* documents a ritual of inscription. Two figures mutually inscribe one another, articulating peership and homo-social embrace.

**ss** I've seen these photographs in a number of contexts—in a gallery space, published online, one of them in my home. To me, they challenge an experience of homogeneity I perceive sometimes when viewing male-centred imagery by queer artists. The work feels more like documentary than portraiture. The men are photographed from different vantage points, and different signifiers are revealed in the varying images: a tattooed man has scars from chest-reconstructive surgery; the other man wears a tallit.

Can you share your thoughts with me on how these carefully constructed images reflect upon both New York City and the notion of diaspora?

**TW** The tall black-and-white one from the series was shown in a very gay eros-driven show in Chelsea. He's wearing a barber's smock, and under his clothes, typical to a religious person, is a *tallit katan* and this is evidenced by the *tzitzit* (ritual fringes) showing below the smock.<sup>3</sup> In this context, both the *tzitzit* and maleness can exist in variance. I grew up with a lot of privilege, with very few Jews around me, the first generation with real opportunity to assimilate, and first in my family line to not speak our mother tongue. The *Tisha B'Av/Diaspora NYC* series is a portrait of my fantasy of Jewish pluralism, part of what I had hoped to find in New York. It's about being marked. Jewishly, it's about removal of an additional layer.

Basically, Zionism bought and buys into the anti-Semitic tropes about Jewish men caricatured as weak, crouched over

Tobaron Waxman, *Tashtich*, 2009 (with Ben Coopersmith)  
IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST