

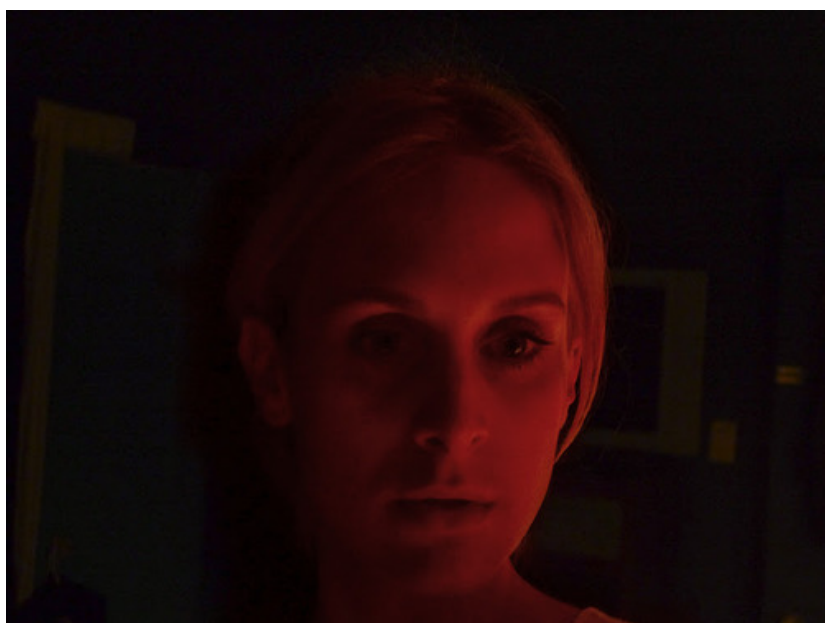
LUIS DE JESUS LOS ANGELES

2685 S La Cienega Blvd, Los Angeles, CA 90034  
T 310 838 6000 | F 310 838 6001  
gallery@luisdejesus.com | luisdejesus.com

# ARTslant

## Transitioning Through a Love Affair

by [Andrew Berardini](#)



[Post / Relationship / X](#)

Zackary Drucker, Rhys Ernst

Luis De Jesus Los Angeles

September 13 - November 1, 2014

Have you ever fallen in love?

Her face is open, unselfconscious, laughing. Framed by wash of blonde hair, the light sheen of sweat settles on her skin and both eyes beam, full of trust and free of tension. Here is unalloyed happiness on the face of a full-grown woman, a joy one rarely sees in adults. Of course, she's looking at her love, the man holding the camera. As a love-story between this couple unfolds in scattered pictures, videos, and poems read aloud (each word a thud, but so carefully chosen), so does another story. Our woman over the course of the courtship has been changing physically. As has her man. Both are transgender and are transitioning.

With sections previously shown in the *Made in LA 2012* and the Whitney Biennial, Zackary Drucker and Rhys Ernst's current exhibition at Luis De Jesus captures in scattered pictures and videos the rise and fall of their years-long love affair, a relationship that ravel and unravels whilst both more fully transition into their true genders.

A broken romance of spiritual refugees sent into strange territories by identity and desire. I remember this well from early Gus Van Sant films but have rarely seen captured since so movingly. The political portent of their mutual transitions adds a layer of contemporary meaning given the increasing awareness and slow-moving equal recognition for transgender people, but the works work not because of this but because the story is authentically romantic, a heart-wrenching tale seen through the Vaseline lens of a dream. Even if sometimes maudlin or cliché in its imagery—Ernst looking pensive in a field of daisies—somehow the earnestness of the feeling and the skill

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with which it is captured supercede this. And, of course, those moments only punctuate rather than define a nuanced history in pictures.

Each photograph or snippet of video, often taken by one of the other, reveals their changing bodies as they become who they are together. Teenagers feel something like it every day, but rarely do teenagers have the aesthetic range of fully realized artists, able to deftly capture the realizations of owning a new body—the hormones here not from puberty but those taken to reassign gender—and discovering that with another person.

I feel like a witness, but curiously not a voyeur, to some deep human event in their lives, that each of us only have so many times. I see such deep affection rare enough that I feel gratitude in being privy to their experience together if only for a few rooms, a couple of videos, and 62 photographs that sweep through their union and break. Not unlike Nan Goldin's *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* (1986) the intimacy allowed evaporates that feeling of distance. Despite whatever differences we might find between ourselves and the actual subjects, those pictures become our pictures.

I have so few photographs of my own adolescence and young adulthood, my friends and I in various states of unstable identities, substance abuse, wreckless happiness, love affairs, and struggle, that I adopt Goldin's pictures as my own. Her friends and lovers were not mine, but she captured their humanity with such rare intimacy, it was not hard for me to find my truth in hers. Perhaps I have such few documents of my own forlorn love affairs, and none of my snapshots so artfully made, these images become the ones I don't have, overcoming the differences and fingering a universal emotion.

Perhaps all of it is sentimental, but maybe so am I.

Though a common trope in music, love feels more rarely a subject for contemporary art. The vulnerability that good art requires perhaps feels too vulnerable for public exhibition of love, but those transitioning wear their changing bodies in public, the deeply intimate nature of one's femininity, masculinity, or queerness and the changes are science and fashion on parade. The intimacy of Drucker and Ernst's images are not belied at all by their sometime performative nature, the relationship between intimacy and performance already so blurred.

But as this couple transcends the gender binary, the work itself transcends the limitations of being read simply in those terms. The love and its heartbreak are real for them and for us watching it unfold.

And when in love, how thoughtlessly in the moment we are. And when it ends, how reduced it all feels, how much we grieve the despair our desires have wrought. But desire we must.

As Drucker says in a video, "Our poetry evaporated leaving us just a few pounds of salt."

