

Cassils explores transgender identity and the queer struggle in their first UK solo exhibition.

Human Measure at HOME in Manchester is transgender visual and performance artist Cassils' first UK solo exhibition. Curated by Bren O'Callaghan, the exhibition showcases a selection of work by Cassils and includes video, installation, print, and photography. Cassils views the body as a sculptural entity, and places themselves as the main object in their work; their art explores the politics and struggles that queer people live through. A running theme in Cassils' work is physical endurance- in this exhibition we see them punching a 2000lb pile of clay, wrestling the floor, and setting themselves on fire. They use their body to represent the survival and struggle of existing in a world that systematically oppresses LGBT people.

The free exhibition, showing on the ground floor of HOME, is laid out in a circular formation, the first room is also the last room, meaning the first and last piece of work you see is the collection of photographs *Human Measure (Exposure) No. 1-5*. This work shows a group of trans people making the cyanotype that is then used in and added to in Cassils' performance film *Human Measure*. The photos were taken at LA Pride 2021 after the Covid-19 restrictions had been lifted. There is a sense of unity, and power in these photos as you see these sweaty, naked bodies lying next to each other and moving as one. It gives a sense of the joint experience and history that we as trans people have with one another. The shiny, ethereal looking group of bodies are positioned over the large blue cloth being used for the cyanotype, and interestingly the bodies are not sexualised despite the sexual shapes and interactions they are mimicking. They seem to be more so part of a bigger picture. In the background of some of the photographs you can see the car park they're located in. In *No. 4*, bodies lay on the floor being touched by other dancers, but it feels more protective rather than sexual, it might be showing how the trans community care for one another and try to keep each other safe.

Shown behind the series of photographs through a doorway is a finished cyanotype, *Human Measure (Developed) No. 3*, and the large cloth is 20x20 feet and made of linen. It was developed in real time during the performance of *Human Measure* (which is shown in the room next to this one) choreographed by Jasmine Albuquerque. Due to this there is a sense of overlapping bodies and fluidity. It almost looks like floating bodies in deep water. The cloth is held at a caved in angle with bright lights on the other side, amplifying the blank shapes of bodies. It's interesting how the dance translates so differently onto the cloth. While the dance performance looks intimate and united, it translates onto the cyanotype to be more like the laid down bodies are lost in blue water, with the upright figures trying to retrieve them and save them. The intensity of the blue is contrasted with hints of deep orange used to show depth and shape in the figures.



An image of *Human Measure (Developed) No. 3*, taken from the HOME website.¹

103 shots, 2016 is a film that directly addresses the shooting at Pulse nightclub in Orlando, Florida on June 12th 2016. The film is shot in black and white, and opens with the eerie quote from one of the survivors of the shooting:

"You're sitting there having a great time at the club and you hear what sounds like fireworks and balloons popping, and you assume it's part of the show. And then you realize it's not the celebration you thought it was."

¹ <https://homemcr.org/production/cassils-human-measure-live/>

Viewers are provided with headphones to wear and a bench directly in front of the screen. The film is an uncomfortable watch, depicting queer people embracing each other and expressing physical affection, but with a balloon placed between them that pops mimicking the sound of a gun shot. The number 103 is to symbolise 'each life lost or irreparably altered'² to quote Cassils themselves. The shooting sound starts slowly, with silence otherwise, but as the film progresses over the 2 minutes and 35 seconds, the harsh sound becomes more frequent and intense with a low drone sound playing at the same time. It then slows down again towards the end and the drone noise stops, the credits role. I think this editing choice was made to mimic the stress and panic that the survivors likely felt in Pulse that night. The film was shot at Pride in Dolores Park, San Francisco and used over 200 volunteers. The room is dark to accommodate the film, as are a lot of the other rooms, but it made it pretty difficult to read the wall text and annotations. The work isn't self-explanatory by any means, and you really need the annotations to fully realise the work being shown, it would've been a wise choice to perhaps pair the text with small lights.

A lot of pop culture relating to the queer experience in recent years has been centred on events of the previous century, take for instance the popularity of TV shows *It's a Sin* by Russel T. Davies and Ryan Murphy's *Pose*, which both focus on the AIDs crisis in the 1980s. This is of course vital history to know and I don't want to take from that, but something about *Human Measure* that caught my interest is the focus on queer issues that have come about during the rise of the internet. In *The Powers That Be* (2016) snippets from the LA radio dial play over various car stereos. As you stand in a dark room in the middle of 6 screens with differing angles of Cassils writhing, crying and wrestling an invisible force. Around Cassils there are cars shining their headlights, playing sound out of the car speakers. Performed in a parking garage in LA, the audience around them is shown- a lot of the footage taken is from their phone camera footage. The snippets playing speak of news that I can remember happening in my formative years, such as trans-girl Leelah Alcorn's tragic suicide in 2014. Other snippets play news speaking of police brutality and highlight the danger of being a trans woman of colour. I think a criticism that some may have of *Human Measure* is that due to Cassils being a white, masculine presenting and passing performance artist, there is a lack of

² <https://www.cassils.net/cassils-artwork-103-shots>

diversity in their work- that it only conveys a privileged queer experience. I think this issue is tackled in *The Powers That Be* particularly; Cassils seems to acknowledge this and consequently uses their body not just to portray those like them, but to bring to light the troubles others deal with. The video installations narrative shows Cassils being repeatedly knocked down- there are moments when they seem utterly defeated, lying on the floor breathing heavily, but Cassils portrays the strength and stamina that the LGBT population has built over time, and gets back up ready to continue with their martial art. The piece is a collaboration with artist and fight choreographer Mark Steger, and is supposed to mimick a brutal fight between 2 people.

Cassils' affinity for physical endurance shines the most in *Inextinguishable Fire (2007-2015)*, where they film themselves being set alight in a burn suit for 14 seconds. The film is shot at 1000 frames per second on a phantom camera, so in total the piece is 14 minutes long. Using techniques that would be used in Hollywood stunts, Cassils treads the line between real danger and the simulation of it- when it all comes down to it they chose to do this. Behind Cassils is an artificial orange sunset background, which adds to this idea of falsity and mime. In front of the physical film is *Encapsulated Breaths (2017)*, 14 hand blown glass cylindrical pieces being hung from the ceiling. Each sculpture captures a 14 second exhaled breath (Cassils had to breath out every time they were set alight to not damage their esophagus), and they resemble speech bubbles. The piece signifies the fragility of political expression- glass is an easily broken material. The choice to display these together is interesting because fire is not only used in the process of glass blowing, but it could so easily explode the sculptures- that is if they were to physically interact.



A still of *Encapsulated Breaths* in front of *Inextinguishable Fire*³ taken from Cassils' Website.

I realised after visiting the exhibition that I might have walked round it the wrong way- I finished viewing it in the room showing their earliest work. Since it's a circular exhibition it is left to the viewer to decide which way to walk. The choice to display the work this way makes the show feel less like a chronological timeline, and I think this is deliberate due to Cassil's work constantly changing. So much of their work is developed over years and continues to develop- there isn't really a definitive beginning or end. The last two rooms I viewed showed *Becoming An Image* (2012- Present) and *Cuts: A Traditional Sculpture* (2011-2013). These are both performance projects where Cassils pushed their body to the extreme. In *Becoming An Image* they attack a 2000lb block of clay in pitch black darkness, only illuminated by the flashes of photography around them, burning images into the viewers retina. In *Cuts: A Traditional Sculpture* Cassils reimagines *Carving: A traditional Sculpture* (1972) by Eleanor Antin. While Antin diets for 45 days and documents the changes through photography, Cassils looks to gain 23lbs over 23 weeks and documents the physical changes in the same way. In both rooms I enjoyed how the pictures of these projects were accompanied by film footage. The earlier room shows *Monument Push* (2017), a short documentary about a group of Queer

³ <https://www.cassils.net/cassils-artwork-inextinguishable-fire>

people in Omaha, Nebraska pushing a bronze casted version of one of Cassils' Clay piles (*Resilience of the 20%*) 6 miles through Omaha. This documentary was a change of pace compared to the performance films, with there being a narrative to it- It also brought through voices other than Cassils', voices of people who have a different lived experience. This room's wallpaper is a large image of the audience to a *Becoming An Image* performance. It is clear from this room how important the audience is to Cassils' work- it wouldn't be half of what it is without the people watching. The photography from *Cuts* is accompanied by 2 montage films titled '*Fast Twitch // Slow Twitch*'; showing in one Cassils eating raw meat, working out, and pouring steroids into their mouth; and a video showing the full body photographs of Cassils' body through the transformation in the other. This early work certainly set down a foundation for Cassils' more recent performance art- most of their work shown in *Human Measure* is video based. A video immortalises a performance.

This exhibition is Cassils' first impression on the UK, and I imagine it must've been an interesting process deciding which of their work to include in this. Overall I thought the show was a brilliant exploration of Cassils' career over the last 10 years, and it shows the versatility of their artistic skill. While it could've fallen flat if it was all video, the intertwining of sculpture, photography, and print avoid this. The exhibition being shown for free by the entrance of HOME means that people who aren't aware of transgender and queer issues can wander in and walk out with perhaps more knowledge than what they had previously. In a country that some may consider to be 'TERF Island', where we have government funded news outlets publishing unquestionably transphobic articles⁴, we need now more than ever transgender existence and issues to be made accessible, loud, and clear.

Bibliography:

1. <https://homemcr.org/production/cassils-human-measure-live/>
2. <https://www.cassils.net/cassils-artwork-103-shots>
3. <https://www.cassils.net/cassils-artwork-inextinguishable-fire>
4. <https://www.gaytimes.co.uk/life/bbc-condemned-for-propaganda-piece-perpetuating-transphobic-agenda/>

⁴ <https://www.gaytimes.co.uk/life/bbc-condemned-for-propaganda-piece-perpetuating-transphobic-agenda/>