

# HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

## Painting and Recording Queer Lives in Kansas City

by [Blair Schulman](#) on August 17, 2016

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Ryan Wilks, “Andy,” part of ‘Gender Treason’ (2015–16), oil on canvas, 48” x 56” (all images courtesy the artist)

KANSAS CITY, Mo. — Artist [Ryan Wilks](#) and I are two men of different generations who have had similar experiences of being queer. Over the course of the decades between us, American society has come to a better understanding of LGBTQ existence, but there remain longstanding issues and those

same old recurring prejudices. Wilks recently completed a yearlong project titled *Gender Treason* that's currently on view at the [Leedy-Voukos Art Center](#) in Kansas City. It consists of interviews with and paintings of members of Kansas City's gay, lesbian, queer, trans, and gender-nonconforming community. This subject matter can be sensationalized or made hyperpolitical, but from my first interaction with Wilks, I felt he had the ability to convey empathy and sensitivity in equal measure. The more we talked, the more I felt like he was the right artist at the right time.

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**Blair Schulman:** *What does Gender Treason consist of?*

**Ryan Wilks:** A project in which I interviewed and painted people in Kansas City who fall on the queer spectrum of different gender and sexual identities, to give an honest and desensationalized insight into queer lives.

**BS:** *Why did you want to do this project?*

**RW:** After gay marriage was legalized, while Kansas City was celebrating, I saw a lot of backlash concerning the Supreme Court's decision and wanted to do a project that combatted that negativity.

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Ryan Wilks, "Anonymous," part of 'Gender Treason' (2015–16), oil on canvas, 40" x 60" (click to enlarge)

**BS:** *What do you want your audience to experience?*

**RW:** I want them to feel and be educated. The cool thing about *Gender Treason* is that it allows viewers



and readers to look into queer lives in a way that is not commonly discussed and not portrayed in the media.

**BS:** *Back in pre-internet days, it was a big deal for anything queer to be seen in the movies or on television. An Early Frost, Roseanne, Will & Grace, Empire, Orange Is the New Black, and other programs have since proven that media can be important to the national dialogue. But do you think these reflect a genuine concern for LGBTQ issues? Or are there feelings of resentment that LGBTQ issues are just being “used as bait for public applause,” in the words of South Africa’s Trans Collective?*

**RW:** An example of this for me is corporations that started slowly embracing LGBTQ issues in their commercials. I think it’s interesting that gay pride events are usually sponsored by liquor companies.

**BS:** *Why do you think that is?*

**RW:** Because of gay caricatures, that when we gather we drink heavily. I don’t necessarily think Smirnoff gives a shit about empowering queer people. I think it’s damaging to have LGBTQ people portrayed as extremes; gay men are always abusing something, mean, catty, bitter, often very promiscuous. To have them portrayed consistently [like this] is shitty. As for trans people, they’re often portrayed as downtrodden, afflicted. Almost never does one see a healthy, happy trans person [in media].

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**BS:** *How does Gender Treason respond to this?*

**RW:** *Gender Treason* allows queer people to share their stories and speak for themselves to a lack of transparency in mainstream media.







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Ryan Wilks, "Terri," part of 'Gender Treason' (2015–16), oil on canvas, 48" x 56"

**BS:** *Do you feel there's animosity within the LGBTQ community with regard to their personhood and portrayal?*

**RW:** Absolutely. There's a hierarchy: white men, lesbians, people of color, gender-nonconforming people, then trans people at the bottom. There is striving to be unilaterally heard. The gay rights movement has gained momentum and strength, and now other people who fall on the queer spectrum want to be heard. Gender-nonconforming and trans people are not protected under many laws in the United States.

*Gender Treason* is giving [those in Kansas City] an opportunity to be heard on the same platform. Not one subject in this project has a louder voice than another, and that was intentional.

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**BS:** *Now that you're on the other side of this project, how do you feel about what you've created?*

**RW:** I feel extremely proud, and that pride was validated by the community, who came to the show, were moved by it, and thanked me for creating it. So many people embraced me and cried with me.

**BS:** *One viewer told me that what really stood out were the eyes of your subjects, which she noticed before the rest of their bodies. What was the most important element you wanted to capture in your subjects?*

**RW:** People hold emotion in different parts of their bodies, and by using texture and color, I wanted to highlight their strengths.







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Ryan Wilks, "Eugene," part of 'Gender Treason' (2015–16), oil on canvas, 48" x 56"

Most of the subjects have a solidly painted background, but Eugene, for example, is encased in this pink wrap with green behind it — it was meant to depict him as a minority within a minority. He is African-American and gay. His race affected his experience more than the others. When he moved to Kansas City, he joined a "house" of other black gay men, and they ultimately kicked him out because he was dating white men. His queer experience was trying to figure out, as he put it, how to be "black and gay."

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Brian's story was centralized around body image and the role that played in his queer experience. I used very heavy, textured paint to illuminate his body image issues and ideas of body dysmorphia.



Anna's breasts are where she carries her femininity, because nothing else about her is feminine.



Ryan Wilks, "Ana," part of 'Gender Treason' (2015–16), oil on canvas, 48" x 56" (click to enlarge)

**BS:** Another visitor told me, "there were a lot of gays in that one small space." This implies that it isn't



*too often you get so many queer people together nowadays for a convergence. How do you think this work responds to our society's migration from IRL interaction to online communication?*

**RW:** *Gender Treason* forces people to get away from the screen, get out of their house, and submerge themselves in an environment.

**BS:** *Does your work take an intentionally activist stance?*

**RW:** It does. I've tried being an activist by organizing protests, soliciting petitions, and creating Facebook posts, but it wasn't satiating my desire to be an activist with art. It wasn't as impactful. *Gender Treason* allows viewers to come to their own conclusions. It does not ask the viewer to feel any certain way. The project, in and of itself, is a passive form of activism. My personal intentions are aggressive.

**BS:** *When your subjects sat for you, what was the most important dynamic you hoped to bring forward?*

**RW:** Trust. Before each interview I really took the time and energy to create an environment that was safe and welcomed vulnerability. I was careful not to ask any questions that might offend, and because I did that, they trusted me with sincere and deep truths about who they were.

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**BS:** *Can you give some examples of what your subjects shared with you?*

**RW:** In those interviews, they shared trauma, sexual assault, often deeply rooted in their parents' rejection, which in most cases I chose to leave out. If you focus only on those dynamics, it doesn't offer an opportunity for the audience to learn anything new about these people.

**BS:** *How are you looking at the project now? What would you do differently?*

**RW:** I would have given myself more time for the actual, physical painting. There were techniques I wanted to explore, but because of time constraints I set for myself, I opted out. Ultimately, I don't think the show was affected by it, but I wanted these paintings to stand alone more — to be as impactful by themselves, stripped from the narrative. The scale of the painting was really ambitious, but also incredibly challenging to do well, and the stress and anxiety of that scale might have blocked some of my creative expression.





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Installation view, 'Ryan Wilks: Gender Treason' at the Leedy-Voukos Art Center (click to enlarge)

**BS:** *In your studio there's one set of emotions with the work, being so close to it. Seeing the paintings hung in a public space, how does it feel?*

**RW:** Seeing it all together was a really profound experience. At my studio the paintings were pressed against each other on a wall, waiting. I felt like, when all the pieces came together in the gallery, they held their heads high, and there was a pride in the paintings themselves. The shame that each person went through at some point was dissolved. I released something into the world that is now out of my hands. The way it impacts people is out of my control.

[Ryan Wilks: Gender Treason](#) continues at the Leedy-Voukos Art Center (2012 Baltimore Avenue, Kansas City, MO) through August 27.

[Kansas City](#)[Leedy-Voukos Art Center](#)[LGBTQ](#)[queer culture](#)[Ryan Wilks](#)