

MUSÉE

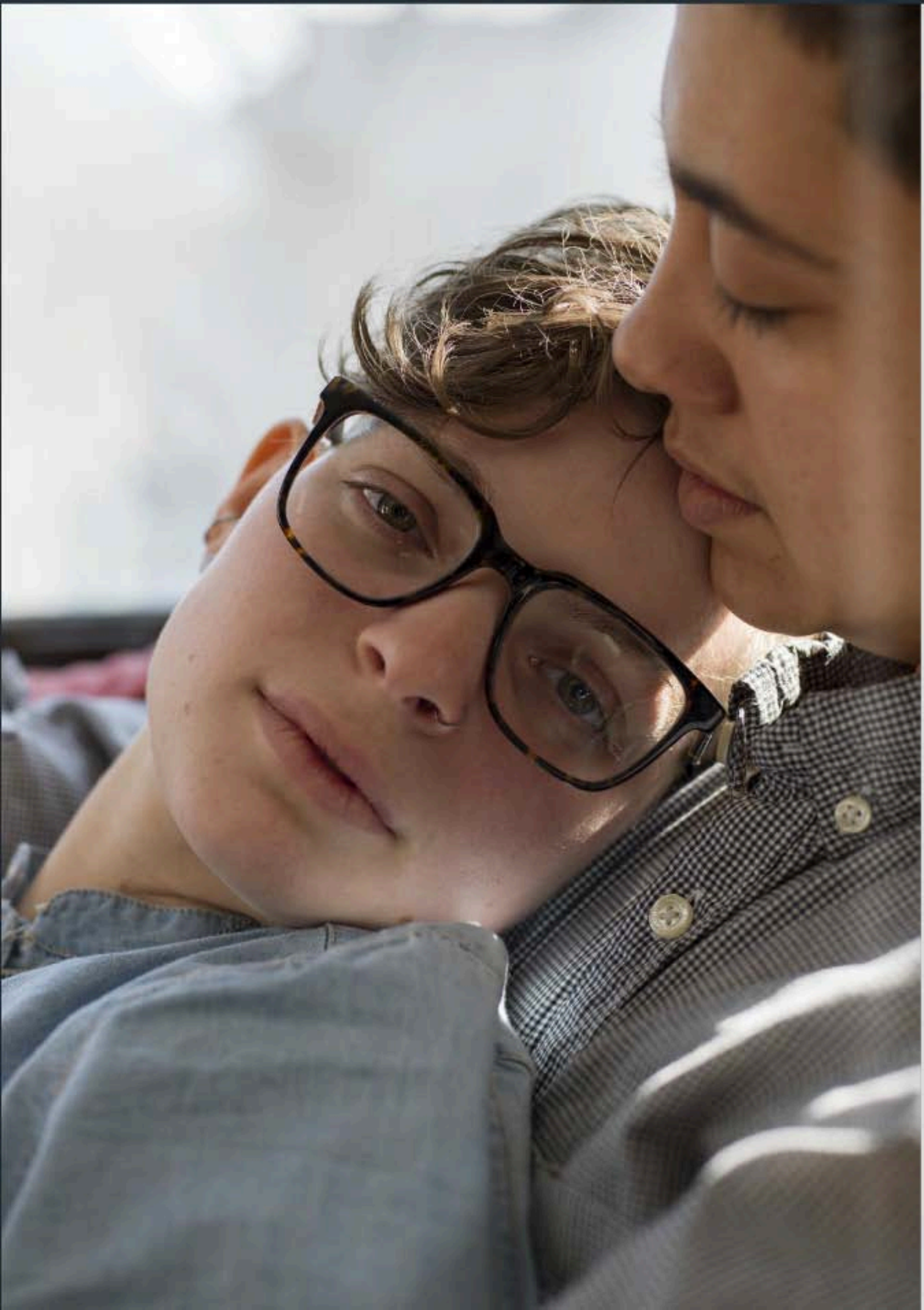
NO. 12 CONTROVERSY

PHOTO



JR
NEIL DACOSTA
BARBARA KRÜGER
CATHERINE J. MORRIS
DINA GOLDSTEIN
EDMUND CLARK
EDWARD LACHMAN
ERIK RAVELO
FRED RITCHIN
GORDON PARKS
ADAM HARVEY
JEN DAVIS
SANDY KIM
JESS DUGAN
ADAM HARVEY
KAY CHERNUSH
RICHARD MOSSE
KEN GONZALES-DAY
HANK WILLIS THOMAS
ANTHONY HERNANDEZ
ROBERT MAPPLETHORPE
JOEL-PETER WITKIN
MARILYN MINTER
SEBASTIAN JUNGER
THOMAS STRÜTH
TOMAS VAN HOUTRYVE

AND A COLLECTION OF EMERGING ARTISTS



JESS T. DUGAN

variations on a theme

ANDREA BLANCH: *Can we talk about what it means to be gender variant?*

JESS DUGAN: Sure. Gender variant is a term by people whose gender identity and expression doesn't fit the expectations of male or female, or our traditional binary gender system. These identities are used by people who don't solely identify with either male or female. Also, gender variant applies in some cases to people who are not a part of the trans community; for example, a young boy who has a more feminine side, or someone born female who is more masculine.

AB: *What role has your mother played in shaping your feelings of identity and self-acceptance?*

JD: I grew up in Little Rock, Arkansas, which affected my childhood in many ways. I was very masculine. I got teased at school. I got chased out of bathrooms. This heavily affected my identity today and the place where my artistic work comes from. My mom was supportive of me from the beginning. When I came home one day from school crying from having been picked on in the bathroom, my mom gave me the choice of either growing my hair out and pleasing the girls at my school, in which case the teasing would stop, or keeping my hair short, keeping my clothes the way I wanted them, and just understanding that if I made that choice, the teasing would continue. I made the second choice and I have always continued to make that choice. Having her treat me with enough dignity to even give me that choice at a young age was really important and validating.

AB: *That was very progressive of your mother.*

JD: My mom has always been a fighter. She's also a lesbian. She came out when I was seven. Growing up in Little Rock, Arkansas, it was brave of her.

AB: *In the series with your mother, you are exhibiting your scars from chest reconstruction surgery. What was that experience like, and what made you decide to share it with the world?*

JD: I came out as gay at 13. I was pretty young. I had moved to Cambridge, Massachusetts by that time with my mom and, needless to say, that was a better experience than coming out in Little Rock, Arkansas. By the time I was 14 or 15, I was questioning my gender. At the time, I knew people who had transitioned from female to male, but that never really felt like who I was. I went my own way for a while, thinking, "Well, maybe that's not really my path." Then I went to a trans conference and I saw a video someone had made as an art piece about their experience accessing chest surgery. I was 16 when I saw that video and, silly as it sounds, I had this total "aha" moment. It had never occurred to me before that you could just pick and choose parts of transition-related procedures. I had only known people who were transitioning all the way, and that was just never really my truth. When I was 17, I decided I definitely wanted chest surgery, and I had my surgery when I was 18. My mom came with me. I think in a way it was hard for her, just watching your child go through surgery is challenging. We flew from Boston to Texas for this surgery. When we got home, I was in this moment where I had this new body and trying to make sense of what was going on. For me, photography has always been the way I make sense of things in my life and figure out how I relate to the world around me. As soon as I got home from Texas, I picked up my camera and made a picture. I originally was going to make a picture of me, then my mom was there, and I asked her to be in the picture with me and we decided to do one topless next to each other. On an intuitive level, I recognized that that moment was really



important between us. When I look back on it, I see it a little bit differently. You know, I look very much like my mom. I recognize a lot of myself in her. I was interested in this moment where we started from a similar path but we have made such different decisions about our bodies. Looking back a decade later, I view that photograph as the beginning point of so many things that would continue in my work.

AB: *What has the general reaction to your work been?*

JD: The reaction varies depending on the audience and the geographic location. Of course, within LGBT communities, I've generally gotten very positive reactions. Some people find the work moving, and find it an important representation of LGBT communities. I've also exhibited it in places that are less friendly. I had a show in Birmingham, Alabama. I've shown the work in North Carolina. I've shown the work online and had it end up on sites in Russia and other countries. I've had some people unwilling to publish or exhibit certain images because of the content. Overall, I hope that all people can connect with it on some level.

AB: *Did you not label any of your subjects' sexes on purpose?*

JD: Correct. I've always struggled with how much information to give about someone's specific identity versus how much ambiguity to leave. My work is about something larger than just the trans identity. It's definitely about something larger than just the body. I've always been interested in talking about someone's internal and psychological identity. I never wanted to reduce my portraits to figuring out who is this and who is that. With the trans work, I've always only listed the work by people's first names. I often leave enough clues or signifiers to understand some things about their gender or their body, but I've always heavily resisted pinning too specific an identity on any portrait. It's too complicated and kind of impossible. Many people I photograph, their identities are shifting or are at an earlier point in their transition. How they think about their identity changes. It's a slippery slope, to try to start labeling everyone. Also, more conceptually, I want viewers first and foremost to engage with them as a human, and for all of the layers about gender and identity to come as a second wave of thought. I've had people ask me why I didn't photograph more surgeries. For a long time in my work, I really pushed back against this more mainstream idea that a trans identity is all about the body and the physicality. I wanted to make a portrait that went beyond the surface and the specific gender, but also included that element.

AB: *When you were younger you had problems with the bathrooms. Can you talk more about this?*

JD: Bathrooms are loaded places for some trans people, especially public restrooms. For some trans people, these spaces can be sites of harassment and violence. I am pretty much guaranteed to have a problem using a public restroom. I use women's restrooms mostly now. For a period of time, I did try to use men's rooms because it was easier. Until I say something, I can pass as male. If I walk into a women's room, there's a 90 percent chance that I'm going to get looked at or someone's going to chase after me and tell me I'm in the wrong bathroom. But, while the chance of something happening is higher, the severity of what will happen is lower. Chances are I'm not going to get attacked and I'm not going to get arrested for using the "wrong" bathroom. If I'm in a men's room, there's a 90 percent chance that nothing will happen. Men don't look at each other in bathrooms; my theory is because of homophobia. But if something does happen, the severity is worse. There's a higher chance for violence. Over the years, I've become really proud of being female-bodied and masculine presenting. I feel there's no reason I shouldn't be allowed to use a women's restroom without a problem.

Going back more globally, restrooms are set up on this binary gender system. In the case of women's restroom, that's supposed to be a space that's free from "men." Part of that fear comes from violence against women. There are these added layers of why people are afraid of difference in the restrooms. For many trans people it's a place of anxiety and harassment and fear and sometimes violence, especially for trans women who can't blend as easily. Trans women definitely face more violence. I have many friends who will never use a public restroom. They'll drive home to use the bathroom just to prevent having an uncomfortable experience. I'm pretty excited when I see a single stall bathroom or a gender neutral bathroom.

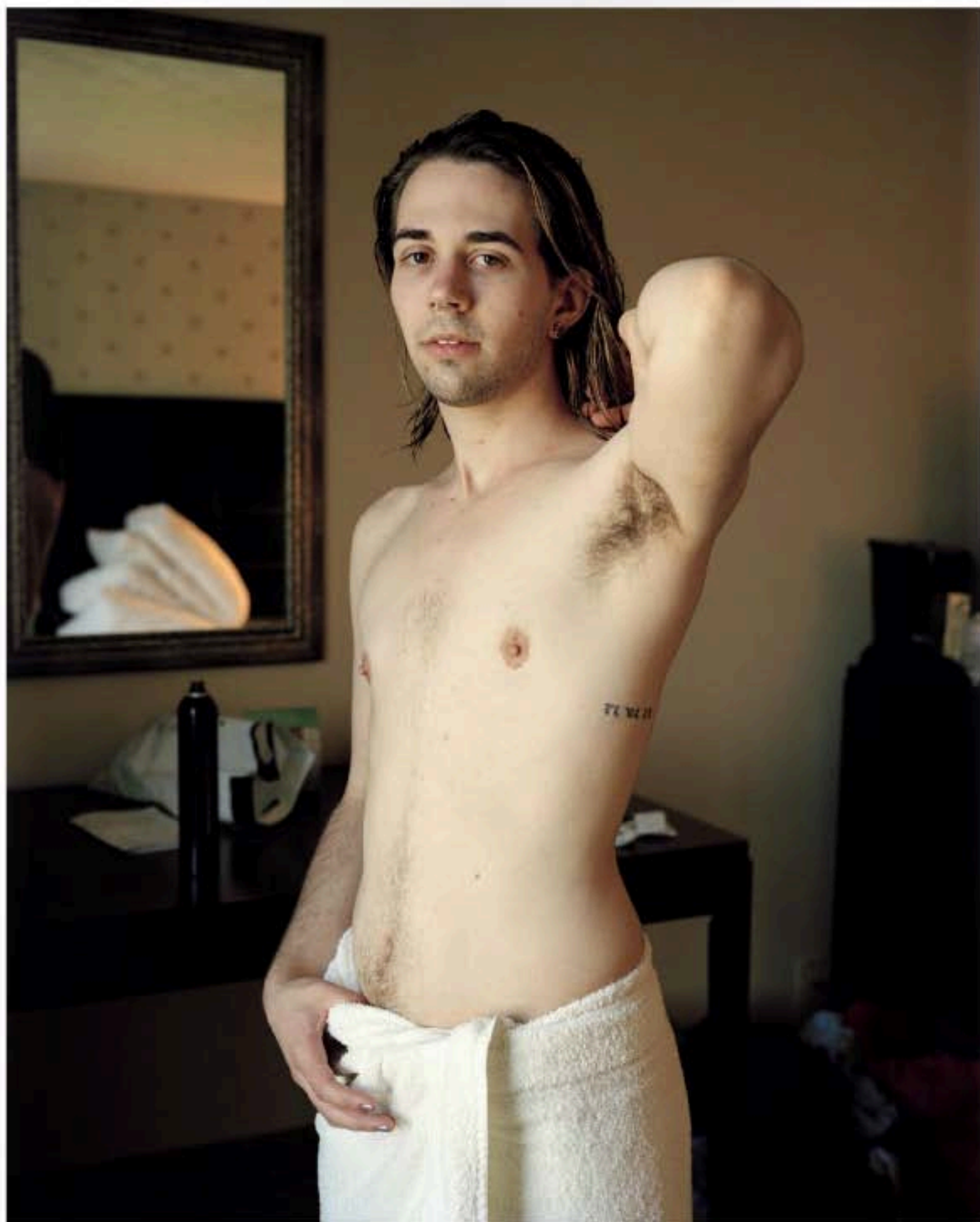
AB: *What do you think the biggest issues challenging the LGBT community are today?*

JD: In some ways, we've made a of progress in terms of acceptance, but we've got a long way to go. In many states, people can't legally get married or legally have children, don't have access to healthcare, etc. Also,



Jess Dugan, *Tom*, 2012.





Jess Dugan, *Aiden*, 2012.

there are significant burdens for trans people and non-trans people in the LGBT community relating to race and class. I see a pretty significant divide between white upper-class gay men and lower-class trans women of color. I think they're fighting for two different things. Especially for trans women, there are huge burdens in access to housing, access to healthcare, and access to employment. Even within the community, there are multiple layers of work that needs to be done. More broadly, we're making progress because people are coming out, people are telling their stories, and we're one-by-one changing the way people think about LGBT and queer folks. One of my friends is an educator who does trainings and she asks everyone to raise their hand if they know a gay person personally. Everyone in the room raises their hand. Then she asks them all if they know a trans person personally, and almost nobody in the room raises their hand. In part, that familiarity is what has led to our current climate around acceptance and progress for gay and lesbian folks in the United States. It's a lot harder to discriminate against a group of people when someone you know and care about is gay or lesbian. That's true for trans folks as well. That's part of why I make the work that I make. If people feel like they've seen a trans person, they know a trans person's story, and they've had this moment of engagement with someone who has a trans identity, people's minds and hearts will start changing.

AB: *What would you tell other photographers who want to photograph LGBT culture and issues?*

JD: That would really depend on who the photographer is and what their motivations are. Traditionally, there's been a lack of representation of LGBT people. It's important to be thoughtful of how and why you're making those images, and how you're engaging the community. Is it something that will benefit them, or is it something that's more of an exploitative undertaking? I don't, by any stretch, think that you have to be a part of the community that you're making work about, but it gets complicated if you're not. There's more potential for exploitation. We need more positive representations, and I don't mean sugar-coating because that's problematic as well, but more respectful presentations.

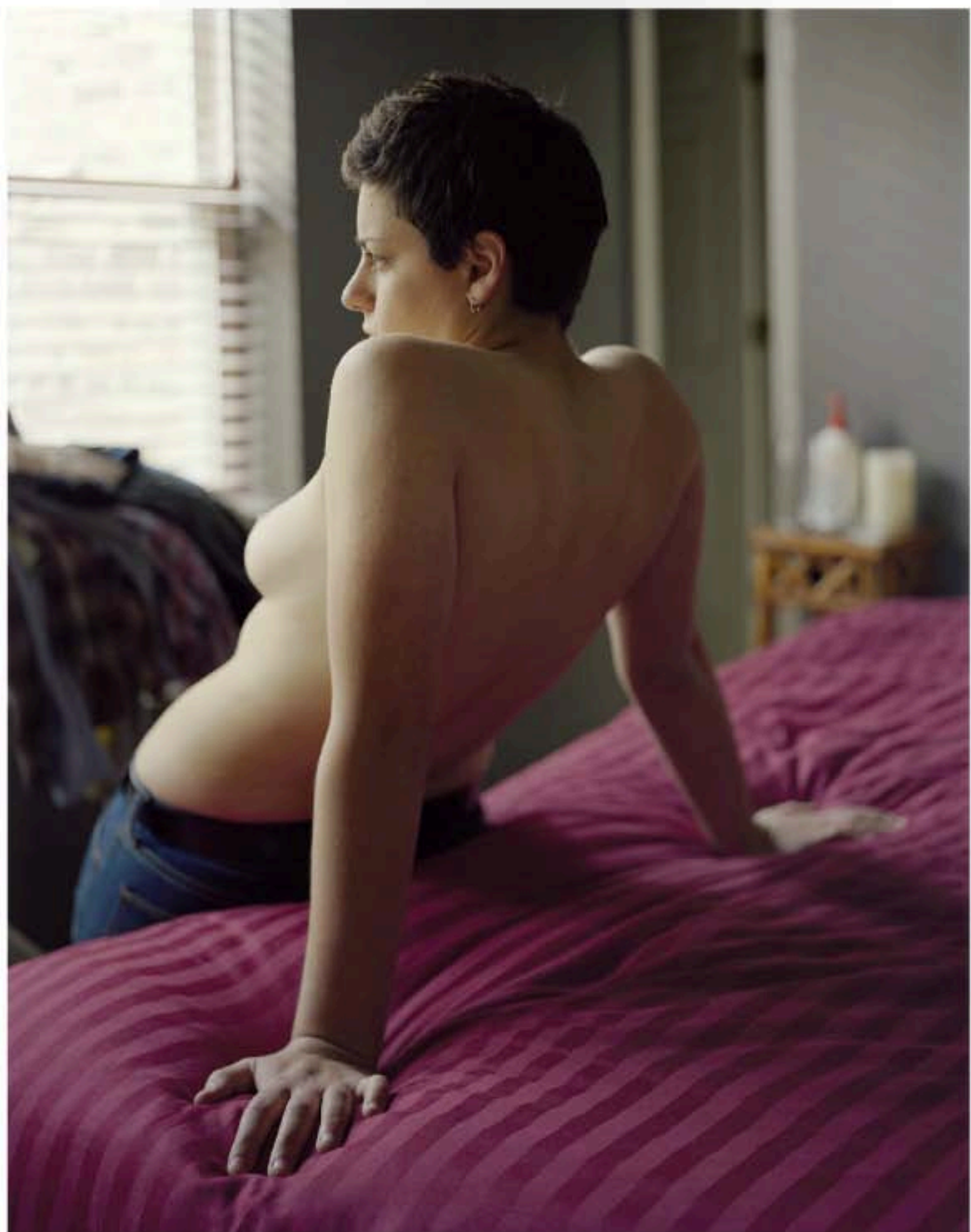
AB: *What other photographic or artistic work regarding LGBT experiences have influenced you?*

JD: When I was coming out, I didn't see myself represented anywhere in the media. Some of the first representations I saw of LGBT people were in fine art photography books. The first photographers that heavily influenced me were Catherine Opie, Robert Mapplethorpe, and Del LaGrace Volcano. I found other works by feminist artists like Carrie Mae Weems and Lorna Simpson. It was the first time I saw photographs of my community, and photographs that reflected my own identity back to me. I saw photographs that were about something political, about something powerful, and about representing people who were underrepresented. I think representation could literally be the difference between a young LGBT person living or dying. Luckily, now we have some more representations in the mainstream media. As I got a little bit older and started studying photography, my interest shifted a little bit from artists who were directly representing LGBT identity to work that had more psychological ambiguity around identity and around sexuality.

In some ways everything seems fluid. My gender is such that it doesn't fit in the binary, and my partner is queer-identified and her gender fluctuates. In some ways it seems like everything I do is transgressive, but in other ways I'm just kind of, I don't want to say I'm boring, but I'm just doing my thing. I don't have any anguish or secrets to hide. Coming into my identity has freed me up to not worry about it anymore. One thing I feel strongly about is the way that gender roles and gender expectations are restrictive. All of these expectations we have around gender and sexuality, how a man is supposed to behave, how a woman is supposed to behave, they fail everyone. Everyone goes through this process of figuring out, "Who am I? Who am I attracted to? How do I want to live?" That process is incredibly human. Everyone is complicated and you can be what you want to be. You don't have to fit into any prescribed notions of what a person should be.

AB: *When I asked if you wanted to be included in our "Controversy" issue, at first you were hesitant because you didn't feel the topic was controversial. Why don't you feel that it's controversial?*

JD: I try to make pictures that show the humanity of my subjects, work that's specific to their experience without pigeon-holing them, or being too abrasive. Making the work that I make, there is a component that feels natural and beautiful. I have such a respect for the people I photograph. I am aware that the work that I make is politically engaged. I view it as my way of being an activist. There is something really important about making representations of LGBT people that they feel empowered and validated by. I wish it wasn't controversial, but I am aware that it is. I want to show my work in places where it's mean-



Jess Dugan, *Berry on the bed*, 2013.

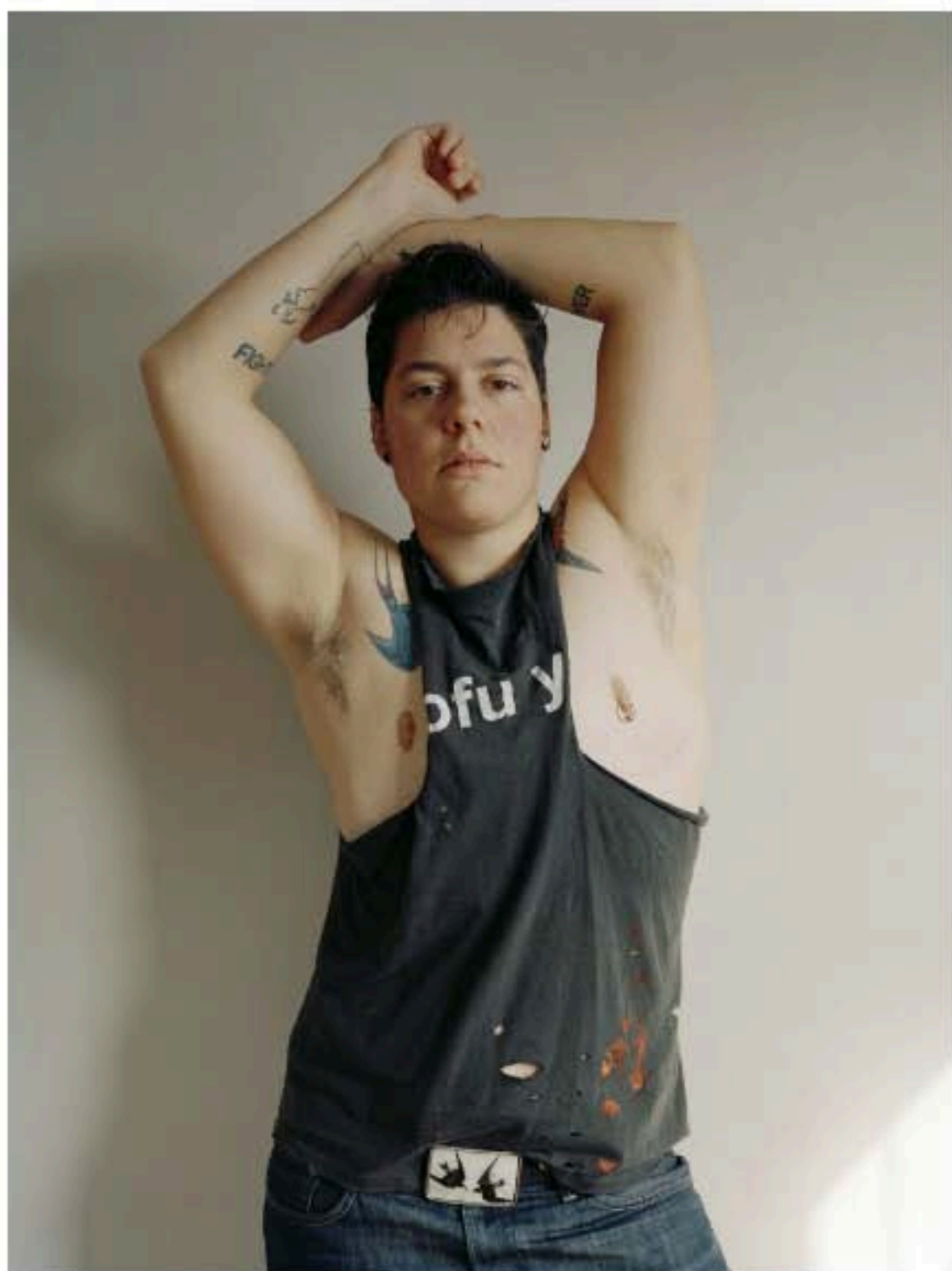


Jess Dugan, *Devotion*, 2012.

ingful, and those places are the same places where it's controversial. In general, the more controversial it is, the more necessary it is, and the more it means something for people to see it. I'm protective of my subjects. I try my best to be thoughtful about when the work might get negative feedback, and I do my best to take that upon myself and not upon the people in the work.

AB: *Do you plan on documenting any other personal relationships in your life?*

JD: I've always been interested in relationships. Right now, I'm continuing the photographs of my mom. I've been re-staging the original black-and-white photograph of us every year. We have about five in that series. I've been working a new series for a little over two years, photographing my relationship with my partner Vanessa. I'm excited and curious to see how it develops, because even within a couple years, the images have gotten more complicated and the emotions have changed. In so much of my work, I have this highly formal environment that I love. But making the work with Vanessa, it's more exciting technically because I'm making different kinds of pictures with different kinds of poses and different kinds of moments. I'm excited to see how that evolves.





Jess Dugan. Opposite: *Self-portrait (muscle shirt)*, 2013. Above: *Enuwet*, 2013.



Jess Dugan, *Jillian*, 2014



Jess Dugan, *Kiss*, 2014.