

# Isa Wang

Founder, Gamut Pins

[gamutpins.com](http://gamutpins.com)

"Assumptions are awkward." That's the motto that guides Gamut Pins—and it is something founder and artist Isa Wang understands well.

Growing up in a Chinese American family of textile artists in a predominantly white, affluent area of Connecticut, Wang never felt like they fit in. That sense of not belonging only increased as Wang came to understand—and share—his queer, trans-masculine identity. "I look quite androgynous most of the time. That's how I feel most comfortable, but early in my transition I made a concerted effort to appear as masculine as possible to avoid being misgendered," says Wang. "I always spoke at the lowest pitch I could reach in hopes of 'passing' as male. When people addressed me by 'she,' 'her,' 'ma'am,' or 'miss,' I would feel a flood of negative emotions. Specifically, all my insecurities about my body and my voice would rush in and completely wipe my thoughts."

"Awkward," then, puts it mildly. To help other folks avoid these kinds of hurtful experiences, and to encourage more and more people to wear their pronouns on their sleeve (or lapel), Wang launched Gamut Pins: simple, sleek identifiers that have been embraced by individuals as well as workplaces that want to make thoughtfulness around pronouns a part of the company culture. For his part, meanwhile, Wang also donates 10 percent of proceeds to LGBTQ organizations.

Not to make assumptions, but we foresee great things ahead for Wang, who is also cofounder of another innovative business: the Bower Studio, maker of eco-friendly, plantable seed-embedded stationery.

## How does Gamut fit into the larger story of your work as an artist?

I've never committed myself to one medium or genre because my parents instilled in me this idea that creative expression is an approach to life, not an isolated activity. The most rewarding projects that I've worked on have been in service of addressing a problem or need. The more freeform art that I make revolves around ambiguity, intersecting identities,

and transformation. I guess it's my way of making space for myself in a society that is constantly pushing for me to silo myself into categories that are arbitrarily defined. With both my art and Gamut, I'm saying no, I'm not going to be pushed to choose either Asian or American, feminine or masculine, gay or straight. There's so much room in between. C'mon in, the water's fine.

## What's one major challenge you faced in starting your business?

Artists aren't exactly known for their business acumen. I would say that I'm better than average but that's a low bar. When I was an undergraduate at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, I took a class on entrepreneurship at our sister school, Tufts. The professor made no effort to hide his feelings about how incompetent he thought the art students from SMFA were. That sort of set the stage for my entry into being a business owner. So many people were quick to underestimate my ability to run a business. In the first few years of operating mainly through the craft show circuit, I got pushback from family and acquaintances who were waiting for the idea to fizzle out. There just wasn't a playbook for what I was trying to build. There's still a very narrow view of what is generally thought of as entrepreneurship. I think we limit ourselves to the "Shark Tank" view of entrepreneurship—I can't count how many times that show has been brought up in conversations—and leave out all the other myriad of ways a person can create economic value.

## How do you view the importance of your work in the current climate of anti-trans rhetoric and legislation?

The contention around pronouns has definitely increased in the last few years. When I started Gamut, I felt like I was speaking to my own community of trans and gender variant folks. While I'm encouraged to see the conversation open up to include cisgender voices, it comes with misinformation and demonization, as marginalized identities are used as political fodder.

My mission with Gamut is to foster the respect that trans and gender variant people deserve and uplift this community that is being targeted by violent and



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discriminatory individuals and systems. In a way, Gamut is about combating social erasure, as it is being perpetrated by anti-trans rhetoric and legislation. We exist here, in America, in the local communities, in the economic ecosystem, in the schools, in the public offices, and in the families and fabric of this country.

## How do you see pronouns and language around gender evolving right now?

The visibility around pronouns is evolving so quickly that it's sometimes hard to believe where Gamut started. When I launched I thought this was a product specifically for folks who maybe weren't "passing" as their gender in public and social situations. Now the whole idea of passing is sort of pointless. If we can state clearly what our pronouns are, we don't need to rely on cultural cues of gender like hair length, voice pitch, etc. That's really liberating and radical to me. At the same time, I recognize that most humans are averse to change. I try to sympathize with that aversion because I know it's born of a seed of fear of the unknown.