

Bold Crossings of the Gender Line



From left: James Franco, Marc Jacobs and the model Lea T (in feathers, right) legitimized cross-dressing.

By WILLIAM VAN METER
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IT'S certainly a statement on our times that, in the same month, James Franco graces the covers of GQ and Candy. In GQ, he appears in a moody head shot. In Candy, a style magazine dedicated to what it calls the "transversal" — that is, transsexuality, transvestism, cross-dressing, androgyny and any combination thereof — Mr. Franco, shot by Terry Richardson, vamps in trowel-applied makeup, heavy jewelry and a woman's dominatrix-style power suit.

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Stefano Moro
The transsexual model Lea T.

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Candy, it turns out, is but one of the more visible bits of evidence that 2010 will be remembered as the year of the transsexual. Yes, Mr. Franco is just dressing up and doesn't feel he was born the wrong sex. But it is a grand gesture of solidarity with gender nonconformists and certainly hasn't affected attendance at "127 Hours."

Other celebrities have flirted with "the other side," cross-dressing for fashion publications. On the cover of the current Industrie, Marc Jacobs is decked out in one of his signature women's designs (albeit with a beard). Japanese Vogue Hommes revealed its new male model, Jo Calderone, who was, in actuality, Lady Gaga.

Not since the glam era of the 1970s has gender-bending so saturated the news media. The difference now is that mystery has been replaced with empowerment, even pride. Consider a few happenings that have blipped

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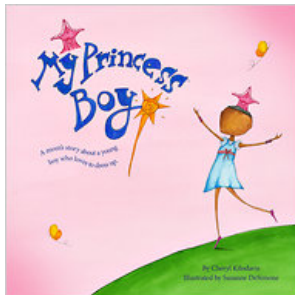
Candy Darling was a pioneer in the 1970s.

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The editor of Candy magazine, Luis Venegas, dressed as Anna Wintour in the current issue.

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"My Princess Boy," by Cheryl Kilodavis, is based on the author's son.

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recently on our radar. The [blog of a young mother](#) whose 5-year-old son had dressed like Daphne on "Scooby-Doo" for [Halloween](#) went viral, initiating a nationwide discussion on the fluidity of gender. (The mother ended up on "Today.") The performance artist Kalup Linzy became a downtown phenomenon in Manhattan for his gender-bending portrayals of soap-opera divas. [Oprah Winfrey](#) welcomed transsexual men to her program.

In November, a transgender student pledged a sorority at Trinity University in Texas. Original Plumbing, a zine for trans-guys, came out with a fashion issue.

This month, Simon & Schuster will publish "[My Princess Boy](#)," a children's book about a boy who wears pink gowns. "It's not acceptable for us to sit back when children are taking their lives because they're not accepted for who they are," said the author, Cheryl Kilodavis, who based the book on her 4-year-old son.

The only thing that would have raised more awareness of trans people would have been a link with the president — even better, a link that rhymed. That's when the "tranny nanny," [Barack Obama's](#) transvestite nanny from his boyhood in Jakarta, Indonesia, was discovered and made headlines. "Trans people are slowly becoming a common part of popular culture," said Paisley Currah, a political science professor at [Brooklyn College](#) who specializes in transgender rights and is the author of "United States of Gender," which will be published next year.

"Sixty years ago, The New York Daily News used its whole front page to talk about Christine Jorgensen's sex change operation — 'Ex-GI Becomes Blonde Beauty,'" Mr. Currah said. "Now you have transgender models and mayors. They elicit interest, but it's not some incredulous response. The public is much more aware of the possibilities of transgender people existing and taking part as leaders in the social and cultural life."

And so they are. "There are always going to be people who don't fit into boxes," said Victoria Kolakowski, who was just elected a superior court judge in Alameda County in California. "What we consider to be normal is evolving

and changing. That frightens many people, but it's the nature of our times." When Ms. Kolakowski takes the bench in January, she will be the nation's first transgender trial judge.

Moonlighting fashionistas dabbling in cross-dressing have surely helped advance the transsexual image, but the real strides in 2010 were made by actual transsexuals and those who define themselves on a spectrum of gender rather than simply male or female. The clearest call to arms was the arrival of the transsexual model Lea T.

For Givenchy's fall advertising campaign, Ms. T. was photographed by Mert and Marcus in a feathery blouson. When the ad was released in May, it set off a press frenzy, with Ms. T.'s modeling agency, Women, receiving more than 400 interview requests.

Ms. T., 28, has been a friend of the Givenchy creative director Riccardo Tisci, since she was 17. (The "T" stands for Tisci; he unofficially adopted her into his family.) She worked for the fashion house in various positions and as a fit model. It was Mr. Tisci's



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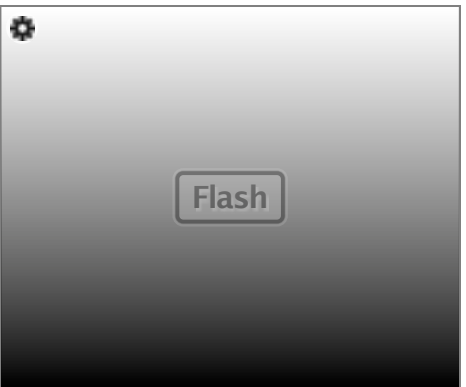
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idea to have her in the campaign.

“He saw that my transitioning process was hard, how prejudiced people are and how I was suffering,” Ms. T. said. “He wanted to make me happy to have a nice picture of me.”

Ms. T. wasn't outed by the news media. In fact, it was a condition of her agreeing to do the ad that Mr. Tisci mention in interviews that she was transgender.

“When you are a transsexual, you look for your future, and you can't see it,” Ms. T. said. “I thought this would be a nice message for another tranny: ‘Look, we can be the same as other girls and boys.’ It's small, but it makes you feel like you have a little chance. Maybe a transsexual will open a magazine and think: ‘That's cool. We can be whatever we want.’ That's why I did the Givenchy campaign.”

Since the Givenchy ad, Ms. T. has become a popular editorial model, appearing twice in *Vogue Paris*. In 2011, she will be a guest on Oprah Winfrey's show in its final season.

Born in Brazil to a soccer player father and a religious Catholic mother, Ms. T. was raised in Milan, to which she has returned to await her sexual reassignment surgery. She knows it won't be a magic cure-all. “This is something you are going to keep for your life,” she said. “I will always feel uncomfortable, but it will make my life a little easier, and I will look in the mirror and see something I like more.”

TRANSEXUAL models have a long lineage. After a youth spent feeling trapped in the wrong body and going through a difficult transition, modeling could be viewed as the ultimate physical validation. But for many, happiness was fleeting. There has been a transsexual moment in fashion in virtually every decade, dating to the early 1960s when April Ashley modeled for British *Vogue* and was photographed by David Bailey and Lord Snowden. In 1961, Ms. Ashley's transsexual status was revealed in the British tabloids, jettisoning her career and prompting the removal of her name from a film she had completed.

The [Andy Warhol](#) actress and muse Candy Darling (who inspired the naming of Candy magazine, not to mention the [Velvet Underground](#) song “Candy Says” and [Lou Reed's](#) “Walk on the Wild Side”) was a 1970s sensation. “Beautiful Darling,” a touching documentary about Ms. Darling, will open next month. It traces her life from rejection to stardom and, ultimately, to her death from leukemia in 1974. She is now recognized as a pioneer in an era when it was illegal in New York City for a man to wear women's clothes, an act that was known as “impersonating a female.”

“The fashion industry is embracing transsexuals as they did in the '60s and '70s,” said Katie Grand, the influential stylist and editor of *Love*, the British alternative fashion magazine. “The difference at the moment is that high fashion has embraced these characters for advertising, as well as *Vogue* and Oprah Winfrey.” In its last issue, *Love* highlighted transsexuals, and for the next issue, Ms. Grand just finished a feature in *New York* with transgender models, photographed by Patrick Demarchelier.

In the '80s, Stephen Sprouse's transgender model/muse was Teri Tove. “Her style was effortless and very downtown,” said Connie Fleming, who in the early '90s was briefly fashion's transsexual “It” girl (then going by the name Connie Girl). “All black, the bangs — it was very rock 'n' roll. I idolized her.”

Back then, Ms. Fleming was a fixture on Thierry Mugler's runway. In 1992, she starred alongside Linda Evangelista and Nadja Auermann in [George Michael's](#) “Too Funky” video. Ms. Fleming is now a fashion illustrator, designs a clothing line and, on occasion, works as a notoriously glacial club doorman.

“There were girls who came before me,” she said, “like Tula and Tracy Africa. Before them, there was Candy Darling and Holly Woodlawn, who worked in fashion and were visible. It's always come in and out. It's like a flavor of the month, and let's get into it, and then there's always a backlash.”

FOR the utopian Technicolor version of the trans lifestyle, there is now Candy. Introduced in 2009, the magazine was an immediate smash in the fashion world. An annual issue, which costs \$55, is limited to 1,000 copies. The second issue, with Mr. Franco, sold out in two days and is going for hundreds on eBay.

“Gay magazines talk about the rights of gay people and the achievements of the gay movement,” said Luis Venegas, the founder and editor. “I didn’t want Candy to be like that. I wanted it to be like Vogue. There are few groups of people for whom fashion, makeup and hair is more relevant.” (In the Franco issue, Mr. Venegas has a cameo, dolled up as [Anna Wintour](#).)

Just don’t call it a niche publication.

“With people like Bruce Weber, Terry Richardson and David Armstrong, it’s not underground or niche,” Mr. Venegas said. “It’s something that everybody, especially in the fashion and art world, could be interested to look at.”

For all of this newfound gender liberation, there are people who worry that it is just a passing fancy.

“There’s room to be proud of transgender and gender-nonconforming people positively profiled in the media,” said Ady Ben-Israel, the program coordinator at the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender Community Center in Manhattan. “At the same time, it’s important to advocate for sustained media attention, not just celebrating people who attain a particular beauty standard that reinforces gender norms, which are a source of a lot of the difficulty for trans people in the first place.”

Ms. T. imagines the heightened visibility of transsexuals as the precursor of a new enlightenment.

“I hope we have a big revolution,” she said, “and people change their minds about us — that it is just the beginning.”

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