

PORTRAIT

23

IDENTITY

FOREWORD

PORTRAIT23: IDENTITY is a major contemporary art exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery reflecting on and seeking to redefine portraiture in 21st-century Australia.

Framed through the lens of the Gallery's innovative and disruptive approach to interrogating long-held ideas about portraiture, this expansive exhibition features work from 23 of Australia's top established and emerging contemporary artists and collectives. Invited to realise a new approach to portraiture without assumptions, constraints or boundaries, these artists have created diverse and exciting works across a range of mediums, from painting, drawing and photography, to street art, textiles, performance, ceramics, bronze and soft sculpture.

The PORTRAIT23: IDENTITY publication sees the artists in conversation during the creative processes of making their new work, alongside honest, thought-provoking reflections on Australian life, experience, culture and identity by nine compelling authors. Both the visual and written artforms explore personal stories, identities, histories and perspectives, expanding and deepening our connections with each other.

An exhibition and publication of this calibre would not have been possible without the truly generous gift from Exhibition Patron Tim Fairfax AC, whose donation has enabled the Gallery to engage with audiences, artists and authors across the nation and globe.

We are grateful for the ongoing support of our Strategic Partner, the ACT Government through VisitCanberra, Principal Sponsor EY, Cultural Partner Midnight Hotel Autograph Collection, Beverage Partner Robert Oatley and Digital Partner Stripy Sock.

Lastly, we congratulate and thank curators Penelope Grist and Rebecca Ray, our PORTRAIT23 artists and authors, for joining the conversation about contemporary Australian art, identity and storytelling in this important exhibition and publication.

PENNY FOWLER

Chair

National Portrait Gallery

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VOICE NOTES

VOICE NOTES

YVES REES

In the first year of my PhD, a senior academic summons me for a tête-à-tête. In the dim hush of her corner office, I sit with legs coiled and arms crossed, bracing for a blow.

‘Your work is good,’ she tells me, ‘But there’s a problem. It’s your voice. It’s too high. You won’t be taken seriously with a voice like that.’

The flush of shame. A sudden urge to disappear.

But also, indignation: how could someone’s voice, their sonic signature, their own personal vibration, be a ‘problem’? Why were some voices ‘better’ than others?

Back then, I sounded exactly like what I was: a twenty-something white Australian millennial, assigned female at birth, living as a woman, and trying desperately to walk the impossible tightrope of winning at ‘femininity’—small, pretty, desirable—while comporting myself as an adult human with several degrees.

High pitch? Hell yes. Breathiness, uptalk? Guilty as charged.

It wasn’t inaccurate to suggest these vocal attributes could work against me. Academic research has confirmed what we already know: in our patriarchal society, deeper voices, the kind we understand as ‘male’, command more authority than higher, ‘female’ voices. A 2012 study found that both men and women are more likely to vote for candidates with a lower vocal pitch. Lower voices are also deemed more trustworthy and more employable.

This bias towards masculine voices has deep roots in western culture. As far back as Homer’s *The Odyssey*, women were being told to hold their tongue, as ‘speech will be the business

of men, all men'. Fast forward to the 20th century, and women's entrance into public life was marred by their 'problematic' speech. In the early days of broadcasting, female voices were regarded as too shrill for radio. At the BBC, women were barred from reading the news, as their high pitch supposedly lacked appropriate gravitas. Even today, similar prejudice persists. In a controversial 2022 Twitter post, ABC journalist Sabra Lane criticised the prevalence of vocal fry and other 'feminine' traits among her junior colleagues. Behind the scenes, radio producers conveyed a similar message. *Watch your pitch, they told me. Limit the uptalk.*

'Vocal authority is gendered,' explains researcher Christine Mottram, and 'women's voices are often not heard as authoritative.'

These days, my voice gets around. I'm a writer and a researcher, but I'm also a professional talker. I co-host a podcast, lecture to students, appear on radio, speak at festivals and public events. Some days, especially since COVID made remote interaction the new norm, I feel more voice than body, a being of frequency and vibration rather than flesh and blood. My vocal trails litter the internet, disembodied ghosts of my sonic self encoded in digital files, ready to be summoned for a haunting.

Those ghosts document a voice that is changing. Over hundreds of days, testosterone has been having its way with my vocal cords. Under the hormone's influence, the cords grow longer and thicker, bulking out like miniature gym bros pumping iron in my throat. Once swollen in size, the vocal cords vibrate at a lower frequency. The voice breaks, it gets deeper, more 'masculine'. It's exactly what happens to teenage boys during puberty. Only in this case, it's happening to me: a non-binary trans adult with a prescription for synthetic testosterone. In my mid-thirties, I'm doing puberty for the second time, reliving the indignities of a fast-changing body just for kicks.

Voice is central to gender presentation, 'one of the most noticeably dimorphic traits in humans', and the pursuit of vocal change is a common trope of trans culture. I had watched countless YouTube transition videos that tracked a lowering pitch.

'This is my voice, before T.'

'This is my voice, one week on T.'

'This is my voice, one year on T.'

It was a cascading descent through frequency, a plunge towards manhood.

In a 2021 study of testosterone therapy, the trans participants identified voice as one of the traits that caused most dissatisfaction prior to transition. Voice masculinisation was also rated as the most important desired change of testosterone. The study concluded that 'transmen viewed voice change as critical to transition success compared to other masculine traits'.

I am no trans man, however. I pursued testosterone to lose the costume of 'woman', but I didn't wish to be perceived as a man either. A stereotypically 'male' baritone was no more desirable than my original 'too high' pitch. But that begged the unanswerable question: what is a non-binary voice? In a world that recognises only two genders, how do you speak in a way that signals something else altogether?

In truth, I wouldn't have much say in the matter. Voice is shaped by culture but it's also a product of anatomy. For better or worse, testosterone would change my vocal cords, but to what degree and with what result, no one could say. HRT was a stumble in the dark, a blunt instrument of bodily renovation with no guarantees. 'Like unlocking the DNA of a male twin,' the doctors explained.

My new voice crept up on me. For the longest time, the same old sound. Then, a full year after commencing HRT, I caught up with a friend interstate.

'Your voice, it's changed a lot,' he noted over lunch.

The next day, I asked another friend if she'd noticed the shift. We were at a writers' festival, and I'd been speaking on stages all week.

'Of course,' she said. 'Your voice is very different.'

'Different, how?'

'It's lower. A much better public speaking voice.'

Again, deep = male = better. The same old arithmetic, only now I was landing on the 'right' side of the equation. I felt the

twinge of something that resembled guilt. Was I now the unwitting beneficiary of our cultural preference for masculine speech? Already, I noticed a new attentiveness in my audiences, but had no way to judge whether this was due to a deeper voice or simply being older, happier, more experienced, more confident.

My trans friend Ben recalls the moment when his professional life transformed. There came a time when his voice dropped and suddenly, like flicking a switch, his colleagues listened in meetings. When he spoke, people paid attention like never before. Expressed at a lower frequency, his words suddenly carried weight.

I download an app that promises to analyse my speech. As instructed, I speak a short script into the phone's mic. My average pitch is 115.7Hz, close to the male average of 123. The app calculates my voice as 82 per cent male, eight per cent female.

I wonder about the missing ten per cent. Perhaps that is the non-binary part. And which eight per cent was the remnant 'female' element? Was it when I said 'feminine' words like *beautiful* and *rainbow*, or when my pitch still shot up at the end of a sentence?

Such authoritative numbers, figures that stood up straight and proud with enviable certainty. Yet how could a human voice be so neatly broken into sexed components? It was like reducing a delicious home-cooked meal to its macronutrient profile; the numbers claimed to reveal all but missed the unquantifiable essence of things.

Case in point: despite what the app said, my voice had not become 'male'. Deeper pitch notwithstanding, strangers still heard a woman when I spoke. Out in public, men had begun to call me 'mate' in that distinctive tone reserved for fellow blokes, only to recoil in confusion when I opened my mouth, and they heard a 'female' voice.

The body told one story, the voice another.

Yet this new voice refuses to be any one thing. It has a mind of its own, as fickle as the weather. One day it's hoarse, a veteran smoker's drawl; the next, my voice cracks without warning, skidding across the sound scale like a bucking horse, giving lie to my efforts to perform the competent professional.

It's a voice that lunges in multiple directions: deeper, descending towards the masculine, yet also running back in time, away from sober adulthood towards the absurdities of adolescence. Whatever masculinity my speech possesses is the masculinity of the teen, awkward and gangly, neither child nor man. Even as I age by the calendar, my voice remains juvenile: no longer 'girlish', it's now the 'breaking voice' of the proverbial pimpled youth. I am 34; I am 14. In the queer temporalities of transness, I inhabit multiple ages at once.

I take my unruly voice to a new trans choir. We gather in a community hall, a cavernous space lit by harsh fluorescent light, and perch on chairs arranged in a circle. The air vibrates with expectation. It's like an AA meeting for gender rebels, a flock of strangers brought together by a shared insurrection.

In most choirs, the gender binary organises the room. Sopranos and contraltos are women; baritones and tenors are men. This all-trans choir is a space to break those rules. There are no expectations that certain genders will map onto certain voices; instead, everyone sings the part that fits best each week. We refer to high parts and low, neutral descriptors without gendered connotations. Our choirmaster, a trans musician, strums a guitar and ushers sound from our throats, gentle as a midwife.

We sing Bowie, 'Rebel Rebel'.

You've got your mother in a whirl / She's not sure if you're a boy or a girl.

Same here, David, same here. But this is one space where gender labels don't really matter. In here, I'm just a person, just a voice, belting out the lyrics of one of the original gender benders.

'You look a bit like Bowie,' a fellow chorister tells me.

Afterwards, I float home through the winter night, heart soaring despite the drizzle, every cell vibrating with the echo of our song.

DR YVES REES is an historian at La Trobe University, co-host of *Archive Fever* podcast, author of *All About Yves: Notes from a Transition* (2021) and co-editor of *Nothing to Hide: Voices of Trans and Gender Diverse Australia* (2022). They won the 2020 Calibre Essay Prize for 'Reading the Mess Backwards', and write about transgender history, identity and politics.

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