

Gender blending

Hannah Barrett's paintings and drawings in "Family Jewels" at Howard Yezerski Gallery are comical and deadly serious. Barrett has for years made portraits of fictional characters of blended genders. The first I saw

were mash-ups of her parents. For the newest ones, she tosses together Adolf Hitler and Queen Elizabeth II — two very different icons of power in the 20th century.

This show is all about connotations of power. Each piece begins as a collage, and evolves into a drawing, then a painting. The subjects share the same DNA, but they all look quite different, as Barrett shuffles facial features and elements of physique and costume. For the backgrounds, she borrows from Tintoretto and John Constable, not to mention Hitler's own watercolors. In almost all the

works, Barrett unveils the hermaphroditic subjects' genitalia amid the jodhpurs, uniforms, and gowns.

"Joyous Entry" depicts a figure executing a demure royal wave, with petite hands in creamy gloves. The figure, on horseback (and with an open fly), wears Hitler's uniform shirt and sports his mustache, but also has donned glittering rubies. The brown hair is cropped short, but bracketed by gray curls.

The funniest bit, in every work, is the face. These characters look awkward, distorted, and prim, yet they are always somehow trying.

"Fidei Defensor" shows a largely masculine character, with Hitler's nose and mustache over a broad neck, draped in fur. The chest is bare and muscular, yet there are breasts, and the genitals pop out of a white skirt. In the background, Barrett has painted a glacier from a Hitler painting. One of Queen Elizabeth's Fabergé eggs perches on the desk in the foreground.

It's charged imagery. Simply to expose a royal's genitals has an emperor's-new-clothes vibe. It nakedly acknowledges the historic emphasis on a monarch's fertility, too. In making these figures androgynous, Barrett also elevates to high rank people born that way, who hide, pass, or surgically alter what nature gave them. Her subjects are floridly both male and female, affirming of all possibilities.

HANNAH BARRETT: Family Jewels

At: Howard Yezerski Gallery,
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through Dec. 23. 617-262-0550,
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