

ARTFORUM

INTERVIEWS

JAYNE COUNTY

February 19, 2018 • Jayne County talks about her retrospective at Participant Inc. in New York



Jayne County, *untitled*, 2017, acrylic and marker on canvas, 18 x 24".

Considered the first openly transgender rock performer, Jayne County is revered for the in-your-face punk acts she performed at CBGB and Max's Kansas City in the 1970s and at SqueezeBox! in the '90s. Archival photographs from her historic five-decade-long career are being displayed at Participant Inc. in New York as part of "Paranoia Paradise," the first retrospective of her visual art. This revelatory display of over seventy of County's ravishing paintings from the '80s to the present expands her artistry well beyond the performance histories for which she is widely known as a living legend. Here, County discusses the exhibition, which is curated by Michael Fox and is on view through March 11, 2018.

I'VE ALWAYS BEEN FASCINATED with creatures that don't fit into society, or are mysterious, nonhuman, half-human. If the creature is unexplainable, it makes it more interesting for people.

When I perform live—and I've been doing it a long time, since the late '60s—Jayne County is basically an extension of me. I lose myself in another world when I go onstage, in this creature that I created: a very irritable punk-rock bitch with all this strong energy. People with more of a conservative stance would say I just look vile. With my music, you only know this one person up there. But with my art, you get to know more of me. And many people, many personalities, come out in my art.

I've made some paintings that are dark, but there's humor in the work too. I love images of shrouds where you can only see eyes peeping out, to which I add humungous feet or toes. I think that's an amazing visual that makes you wonder about the person inside.

If I'm pissed off at somebody, I either write a nasty song about them or make a nasty piece of art, as you can see with my paintings of Lady Bunny. Now, Bunny and I are actually the best of friends, but a couple of years ago we had a bad falling out, and I did these awful pieces about her that were absolutely insulting. Yet, to this day, she says she's more flattered than offended. Some of the paintings have a political sense to them, but they're humorous as well. I believe in taking politics and laughing at it, like I did when I was going through a period of redoing covers of magazines and I took Rush Limbaugh and put coke around his nose. It's all about something that I think will make people smile a bit.



Michael Fox, *Jayne County at Squeezebox!*, 1999.

I admit I am colorist. Some artists don't like to be accused of that, but, to me, it's a compliment. I have this thing for loud bursts of color. It's probably from all those times in the '60s when I dropped acid. When mixing colors, I don't have to think about what color goes where, it just comes out of nowhere. I didn't get one painting entirely the way I wanted it until I mixed a little bit of my lipstick with the paint and created a whole new color. I'll get the color from anywhere I can.

My art comes so naturally, many times I don't plan what I'm going to do. I sit down with a blank page and get the paint, the brushes, the Crayola metallic glitter pens around me, and then my hand starts moving, drawing, making images. Sometimes I do it without even thinking about it, then maybe I might get the idea of what I want the painting to be right in the middle of it, or a direction comes toward the end of the artwork, when I'm almost through with it. A lot of my art happens that way.

I've also always felt very strongly about adding a bit of my own personality as a transgender person to my work. A lot of the figures in my paintings are androgynous—you really can't tell if they're male or female. They could be both, and I love that. To me this is very old; it goes back thousands and thousands of years, to ancient Egyptian art, life, and mythology. The ancients held shape-shifters—from gender to gender or sex to sex—in high regard.

I really want the younger generation to learn and know about my history—it goes back so far. I was gender-fluid before anyone was doing it. I love that somebody young and androgynous could discover Wayne Jayne County and think, "Oh my god, look at this person, this was so long ago and look at what they were doing." I do think of myself as a pioneer, as somebody who drove a covered wagon with a mule and paved a trail. I was just being myself and doing what I wanted to do, including my own personality and my own opinion. I will probably live to be into my nineties. Can you imagine? "Hey Grandma, what was it like doing the twist back there in the '60s?"

— *As told to Alex Fialho*

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REVIEWS May 1, 2018

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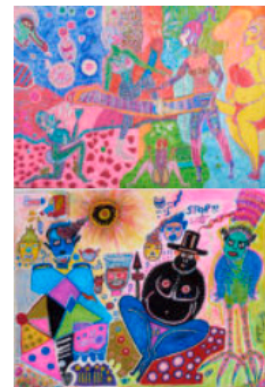
NEW YORK
at Participant Inc.

by [David Ebony](#)

Transgender punk icon Jayne County, aka Wayne County, gained considerable notoriety in the 1970s and early '80s for her raucous performances at New York nightclubs including Max's Kansas City and CBGB. She wore bouffant blonde wigs to channel Dolly Parton and Dusty Springfield, though she eschewed those mainstream stars' vocal techniques by belting out underground anthems like "Man Enough to Be a Woman" with tongue-in-cheek panache. County's brash style was a cross between those of the Dave Clark Five and the Ramones, and her lyrics expressed unabashed rancor toward the "straight world," American Puritanism, and all those who would make day-to-day living miserable for the LGBTQ community. A major influence on contemporary gender-fluid performers such as Justin Vivian Bond and Lady Bunny, County, now seventy-one and living in her home state of Georgia, is gaining recognition as a fearless trailblazer, with her vintage performance videos on YouTube attracting new audiences.

As her music career began to wane in the 1980s, County relocated to London and then to Berlin. While abroad, she deepened her long-standing interest in visual art, creating paintings, drawings, and collages, most of them small-scale. Participant Inc.'s "Paranoia Paradise" was the first survey of this work. Organized by Michael Fox, the exhibition, titled after one of County's songs, featured over seventy pieces dating from 1982 to 2017, as well as photographs and memorabilia from County's music career.

Jayne County: *Untitled*,
2017, acrylic and
marker on canvas, 18
by 24 inches; at
Participant Inc.



Having been fortunate enough to attend several Jayne County performances during her heyday, I can attest that her art bears a similar kind of strident energy, acerbic wit, and political edginess. The show at Participant included a section of politically oriented pieces: anger-filled collages, most comprising newsmagazine covers she altered with texts slamming right-wingers. In one untitled 2010 example, County altered a cover of *Newsweek* featuring a portrait of Rush Limbaugh, changing the magazine's title to *Naziweek* and adding swastikas to the talk-show host's cheeks. In another 2010 work, graffiti scrawled on a photo of Mitt Romney labels him an "anti-gay Mormon bigot." Yet these explicit attacks on public figures were the exceptions, and County's overall body of work is dominated by intensely colorful compositions packed with obsessively wrought patterns of abstract shapes—usually circular forms—populated by funky figures.

Some of County's works initially appear to have been made by an outsider artist. That label, though, could hardly apply to County, who was entrenched in New York's avant-garde art world of the 1960s and starred in Andy Warhol's bawdy stage play *Pork* (1971). Though her stylized figures and eccentric compositions certainly share some kinship with paintings by outsiders like Lee Godie, Justin McCarthy, and Eugene Von Bruenchenhein, many of her pieces also fall into clear art historical lineages. A group of works on paper from the first decade of the 2000s, including *The Passion of the Penis #1* (2005) and *Penis Tree Frenzy* (2007), depicts tree trunks with extended phallus shapes for branches—the anthropomorphic imagery recalling certain Surrealist landscapes, especially those of Max Ernst. A 2017 series of lyrical abstractions on canvas features compositions of narrow, wavelike bands of acrylic and glitter that evoke Color Field painting, though County has abandoned the heroic scale of modernist abstractions while adding pizzazz. One of the best pieces in the show, *Mer Creatures* (2017), depicts two stylized mermaids adorned with tiny circles and dots set against a background of similar patterns, calling to mind Yayoi Kusama's formal vocabulary.

Many of County's figures are hooded or veiled, a puzzling feature for an artist who might be regarded as the ultimate extrovert. In *Peepin Dots* (2017), a cast of individuals gathering in a hallucinatory dot-filled world are draped in colorful sheaths. The figures in *Changilings* and *Active in Wise Ladies* (both 2017) wear what look like black burkas, while emerging from an ethereal pool of blue, pink, and yellow. Although perhaps alluding to Muslim women, these figures are ultimately ambiguous, inhabitants of a gender-fluid realm: a place where Jayne County might feel at home.