

**Exactly Foundation – Residency #11 – *Writing on the Wall* by Grace Baey  
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**Artist's Statement  
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I have thought a long while about how to work on a project about transgender identity that would be meaningful and collaborative – something more than just pretty or “visual” pictures which often just feed into negative stereotypes about the community. Portrayals of trans men and women in the media are usually sensationalized and hypersexualized, which paint a very limited view.

I started this project with a basic goal: to start conversations and build understanding. And I thought that I would start the ball rolling by incorporating conversation into the pictures, where story subjects tell their own stories as part of the pictures we make together.

The process involved us having conversations about specific aspects of people's stories that they wished to focus on for the project, making the pictures together, printing out the pictures, and having them write their responses and thoughts on the pictures.

The series is entitled *Writing on the Wall*, alluding to personal thought and expression amidst societal boundaries and divisions. The metaphor of the wall often comes up in my conversations and interactions with both the LGBTQ+ community and folks from the conservative right. The wall can signify power, but it is also people's coping and defence mechanisms when threatened.

Despite Singapore's history of being a regional hub for gender reassignment surgery, alongside old Bugis Street in the 1970s and 80s, it feels as if we have taken several steps *backwards* in terms of social acceptance. Whilst gender reassignment is formally recognized by the state, many trans men and women still choose not to be as open about their identity in view of stigma and discrimination.

I emphasize identity because transgender and gay identity are not “lifestyle choices” as some would assume. For many transgender persons I know, transitioning is not so much a choice as it is an inevitability. I have seen the tremendous costs that people pay – be it physical, emotional, social, and/or financial – to be who they are. Nobody would undertake these costs just for the sake of.

When asked what it felt like to go through gender reassignment surgery, Sham, a trans man featured in the project, shared that his first sentiment was one of relief. “After going through so much to transition fully, *now I can die peacefully in the right body*,” he said. “This is how much it matters to me.”

These stories are born out of courage and struggle – many, only after years of coming to terms with gender dysphoria and life circumstances – and I am very grateful for the willingness of the people whom I have photographed to share these intimate stories in public.

Jose said to me: “If you asked me a few years ago, I probably wouldn't have agreed to let you photograph me because my dysphoria was so strong. But I'm tired of seeing all these perfect bodies on the internet, and it doesn't help your self-image. People need to know the reality of what transitioning looks like.”

We hope that the pictures would invite people to look deeper and within, instead of the common once-over on the street. We also hope that the work would speak to individuals in the LGBTQ+ community who are currently transitioning or thinking about it.