MICK ROSE

Fluid Selves, *Fluid* Stories

Itai Jeffries and Morgan Thomas spoke with Mick Rose, who was featured in the 2019 documentary "There's Heart Here." Our conversation focused on the inherent fluidity of both gender and story, and the importance of considering and staying true to this fluidity within our communities, story-sharing practices, and healthcare centers.

Morgan: Mick. this conversation grew out of talking with you about your experience of seeing yourself on posters for "There's Heart Here." I wonder if you would talk a little bit about what that experience—seeing a piece of your story from 2019 continue to be shared today—has been like for you.

Mick: It's an interesting feeling. because I feel really proud of being a part of that project. And I know that every day it makes a difference. I received a DM recently from one of our canoe family kiddos who saw a poster of me in their school last week. and they were like. My auntie's Two Spirit! They were so sweet and so loving and excited about it. And I didn't reshare it on my Instagram. It just felt weird to do that.

When we filmed the documentary I was fiercely advocating for my partner in their journey through transformation of self and body. And being in that space so much with another person. I lost sight of myself and how I was feeling in my body. It was a big lesson in continuing to always ground and notice your own feelings as you're advocating for other people. As people that work in public health or social work. serving community and humanity. staying grounded in ourselves is the only way we can do it. We have to carry our wholeness forward into the work.

Since 2019. I've gone through this big journey of softening. I've come to understand that my advocacy has always been really fierce. because I've always been in this struggle of opposition within systems. having to push forward through them. I'm asking myself. What does it mean as I transition out of that phase of my life? Because it served me. and it served the people around me. and it served my community. A lot of things shifted and changed because of my ability to hold strength and fierceness. but it's time to move differently now. Over the past couple years. I've really tried to call in soft boundaries. Not soft as in inflexible. Soft as in how I communicate them. How I sit with them for myself. understanding what I need to say and how to say it with intention and kindness. Because in all of the fierceness in my past. I took on so much energy. and then I didn't have a way to move that energy through my body. Now. I'm trying to move and released that energy using different Indigenous somatic techniques.

I was in such a big transition during the documentary. I was even growing my hair, which is huge—we have so many stories around our hair and what it means. Growing out my hair came to me in ceremony, and I knew it needed to happen. I was transitioning how I felt about myself and about my gender and about my body and how I was being perceived in the world and how I was presenting myself in the world. I was trying to come back to myself, and I was so uncomfortable in my own skin that looking at myself in the video and in the pictures I just feel a disconnect. I can't—I physically can't look at it.

Itai: I'm realizing that part of the reason I'm here is that I needed to hear Mick. There's so much that you shared that resonated, things I haven't been able to articulate yet. Around softening—it's like when you're always a hammer, your elbow gives out. Two Spirit people tend to be very empathic, tend to be folks who can share story and help people move through things. That's been a role we've had since time immemorial. And we're really good at it. And it requires showing up with rawness and adapting to what story needs to be told, and I can do that. Whatever the space is, I can do it. Often, it involves telling vulnerable pieces of my own story that I can share in that moment because I'm making a connection to the people I'm talking to.

But later I don't think of myself in the same way that I was at that moment, so by the time I see a video that's been on YouTube for a year, I'm so far apart from that person. It's similar to the dysphoria I feel when I look at childhood photos. I have a really hard time with those. My mom has learned not to pull them out. And I have a very similar reaction to some of the stuff that gets put up online and just stays there forever, as if that story is stuck in time. I feel really limited by it.

Even the Sassy Sassafras story we share in our children's book—I had a young person come up to me a few months ago at an event and say, This book changed my life. They were really emotional, and I felt pain. Because

there's so much I want to share with them beyond that story. And I'm happy the story resonated for them. but I don't know how to celebrate that. because on that day I was barely surviving myself.

It makes me think about how traditional storytelling is really dynamic. I've heard traditional storytellers tell the exact same story. but I've never heard it the same way twice. because they're always hitting on different parts. bringing out what needs to be shared in that moment.

Mick: I want to see stories that continue to unfold. We do that in our relationships—we're constantly changing and touching in with people. And we share things online in that way. Like. I stopped posting to my main page of Instagram. I just post everything in stories. because everything I experience is temporary. My anger and frustration is temporary. my love. it's all in flow and flux and informed by everything around me.

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I want to hear stories that change and flow like life does.

Morgan: We haven't spoken super directly about gender fluidity and gender identity. In healthcare settings and community settings, settler cultural narratives of gender often limit those stories to either transitioning from one thing to another thing, in which case you have an endpoint, or finding the "right" gender identity and knowing that you're going to have that identity forever. I'm curious if you would want to speak to the ways those narratives might feel limiting to you and how you think about your own gender fluidity and identity. I know mine changes all the time.

Mick: I was just talking to someone who said, I wish I was a shapeshifter and that my body changed according to my gender—for the day or the moment or how I was feeling. And I just thought that would be so incredible.

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Part of me wishes I could unlock more teachings and stories of my trans ancestors, so that I could be at home in my body. So I could not allow people's perceptions and the way I'm treated by people I don't know, or people I do know, to influence how I feel about myself. Sometimes I wonder if that influence is part of how I feel about my gender and part of my desire for gender-affirming surgery. But then there's also such joy when I think about gender-affirming surgery.

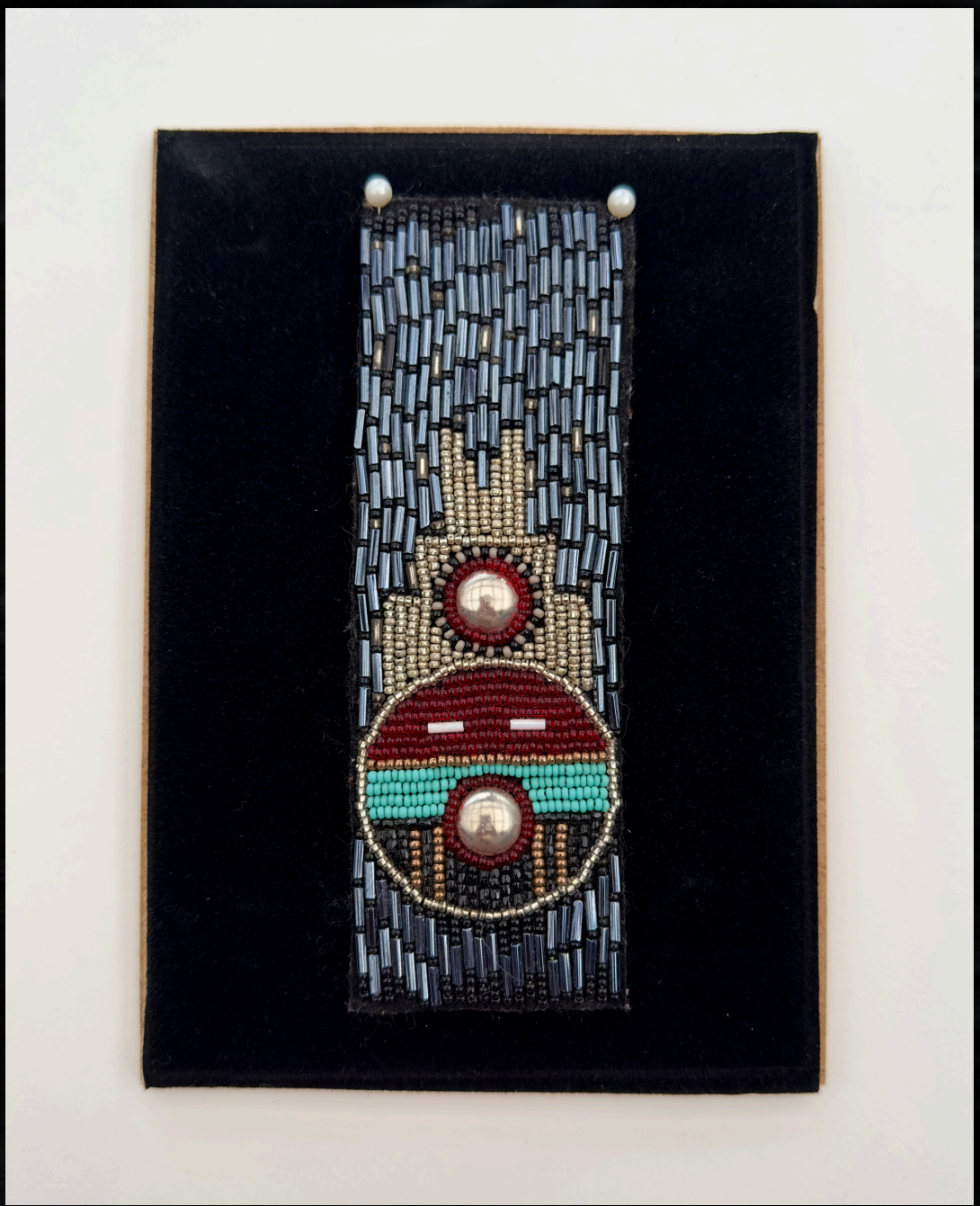
I've noticed as I've gotten older that I embody a lot of my emotional and spiritual processing. It first comes through my body. When I'm really stressed, I have big health things that come up. Last year, I had some terrible bleeding in my uterus. The first gynecologist said right away, before we even got to know each other, My recommendation is a hysterectomy, and that just shattered me. I was completely thrown. I was like, How can you talk to me in this insensitive way, as an Indigenous person who has experienced all of this harm and trauma, whose family has experienced the trauma of sterilization? They didn't listen to the fact that I was very stressed and that I know my body well. So I went to many different gynecologists until I found one that was non binary and understood me. We explored together, asking: Is it inevitable for me to have a hysterectomy? Are there other interventions that don't include hormones? Because I also didn't want to take hormones. In that exploration, I started to really think about my gender, and I realized that I've always been disconnected from my womb space. Because of the pain that I experience. And I've always been disconnected from my chest. So I asked, what's going on there? And I prayed. I knew I didn't want to remove my uterus if I didn't have to. That's a huge surgery. And in all of that, thinking about the disconnection to all of the pieces that make people that don't know me identify me as female, or as a woman, or as sexy, or whatever, I decided that I wanted to get top surgery.

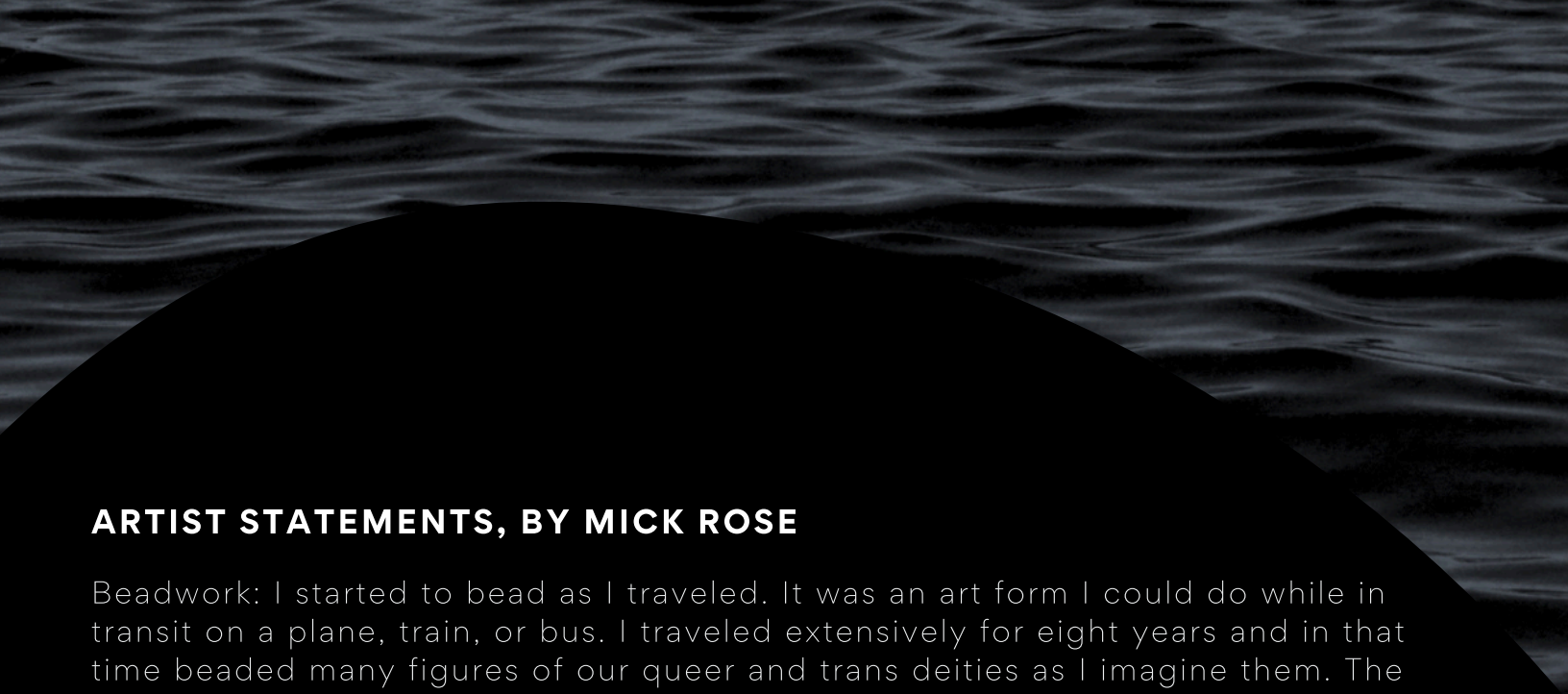
And it felt really good. And I was like, Why didn't I think of it before? I think in the past, I'd thought of plastic surgery as vain, as prescribing to whiteness, wanting a body that is like a white body or a European body. And that's not anything that I was interested in. But I always wanted to change something, and I did that with exercise and clothing. But none of those things really fit until I realized I wanted top surgery. That realization about gender was wrapped up in a big health scare.

Itai: You said it all and enough. My body responds very similarly. My cancer comes back every time I get too stressed. so I have to be vigilant and mindful or my body just turns against me. In that sense. my body is a teacher. My gender is a teacher. Somedays. she makes me feel excited about things. and some days she wipes me out. and other days she smacks me down. I'm always trying to keep up with her. Sometimes I struggle with the framing of dysphoria. because the way I think about it. I have social and cultural dysphoria. Because of those things. I have body dysphoria. I have childhood dysphoria. I am seeking a tracheal shave. a medical operation that I don't know how to access yet. and I don't know if I would want that if I lived in a precolonial society. and I'll never know. That question doesn't even feel productive for me. because we are in white culture. colonial culture. and we have to find ways to live inside of our bodies here. Rafael/a Luna Pizano talks about our bodies as land and territory. How do we create sovereignty around that if we feel like we're alien visitors to that territory.

The only place I've found where I can create enough space to feel comfortable embracing the fluctuations in my gender. and just the sadness or the joy or whatever she gives me any given day. is through relationships with other mostly Indigenous queer folks. a few queer BIPOC folks. but mostly Indigenous queer folks who have seen me show up in all kinds of ways. They've seen me tear everything out of my kitchen and rebuild and do all the plumbing—Itai showed up like a butch handyperson today. And the next day. they're dancing with me in four-inch pink heels at an Indigiqueer dance party. It feels really natural with those folks. In those moments I stop thinking about the way I show up. I'm not stressing out about whether I should wear this to that place. I can just move.

Mick: I love what you said about social and cultural dysphoria creating body dysphoria. That's exactly how I feel. And if we're talking about gender expression. Indigenous people are fly. We have long hair. we have long earrings. we wear lots of bright colors. That is just how we are. It doesn't matter what gender. All genders are expressive in how we show up and present ourselves and adorn ourselves. A friend the other day put out this art collage of herself that was so beautiful. The title was "Being Extra as a Spiritual Practice." And I was like. Yes. That's how I feel in my gender. Because in that adorning of myself. putting on a fun outfit. I'm loving myself just as I am.





ARTIST STATEMENTS, BY MICK ROSE

Beadwork: I started to bead as I traveled. It was an art form I could do while in transit on a plane, train, or bus. I traveled extensively for eight years and in that time beaded many figures of our queer and trans deities as I imagine them. The beaded pieces always had the night sky represented by the black shiny bugle beads. The figure here has a crown of earth/mountains and a colorful face. I've imagined what it would be like to exist with markings and colors as the animals do. How would we look as humans? How would we look as Two Spirit/Indigiqueer people? How would we be distinguished in our form as ones who hold so many intersections and divinity?

Watercolor: For years I have been praying and creating art where I call in my Trans Ancestors, asking for their guidance, for their names, for their stories. I started using watercolor when I was in university from 1998-2002. I used to paint the bricks and hills of my homelands, which I found meditative. I would go home and take photos, then paint the various scenes. I used to play in the old buildings and structures of my ancestors, where most people come to play tourist and learn a very western narrative, complete with dioramas and fake pre-recorded ceremonies. My brother and I would take a picnic and play in those buildings, sometimes sitting up there all day, pretending we lived there. I have been searching for a connection to queer and trans ancestors since a child. One late night at the studio painting the "ruins" I started imagining my ancestors in those places. I thought they would have the night sky for hair, crowns made of stardust, and be adorned with turquoise. This watercolor has been with me since. This figure watches over me, or I them, looking for guidance.

We'wha: During the pandemic, I was searching for places to go for rest. Simple places where I could meditate and pray for my trans ancestors to share their knowledge with me. To ensure I was following a good path that was worthy of sacrifice and love in this time of human or more than human form. There are very few pictures of Queer/Trans Indigenous ancestors. The life of We'wha, Zuni Llamana, is powerful, beautiful, inspiring, and devastating. We'wha held so many gifts for her people, and as I learned more about her life, I felt a connection to her story. Though I am not Zuni, I feel a deep love for We'wha and was called to create a collage during my retreat. In this way, she is honored for the incredible person she was and looked at as an ancestor, guiding our path from the stars.