

# SIGHT LINES

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## In a Joyful, Monumental Scale, Xavier Schipani Chases Trans Desires

By [Jeanne Claire van Ryzin](#) - August 2, 2018



*Installation view "Xavier Schipani: Chasing Desire" at Lora Reynolds Gallery, 2018. Photo by Colin Doyle*



*Xavier Schipani, "We're Still Here (6)," 2018, colored pencil and acrylic on canvas. Lora Reynolds Gallery. Photo by Colin Doyle*

Xavier Schipani is clear about "Chasing Desire," his solo exhibition on view at Lora Reynolds Gallery through Sept. 1

"I want my work to celebrate my community which is queer/transgender and give others the courage to celebrate," he says during a gallery visit, a week after the show's July opening.

"I want to represent the trans body as an object of desire."

Schipani's presentation at Lora Reynolds — in step with current art trends for all things immersive and experiential — is deliberately monumental in scale.

"Masculinity is historically monumentalized, and that puts pressure on us all to maintain the importance of both," Schipani says.

Murals cover the gallery's front room. Stylized nude men — white, brown and dark brown — recall figures from Grecian friezes. A giant marble bust floats behind of a scene wrestling men. In another arrangement, bodies in a hedonistic swarm adorn a blue urn, a reference to the Anthora, the iconic paper coffee cup synonymous with New York's diners. Wrapping around a corner, another mural shows two groups of men in a tug-of-war.

In the back room, a bathroom installation — three grey toilet stalls, two urinals, sinks, a mirror — mimics the arrangement of a real public restroom, the politically-charged spaces as so-called bathroom bills in some states seek to exclude transgender individuals from the restrooms which conform to their gender identity.

# lora reynolds gallery

Open the door to a stall in Schipani's restroom, however, and you find a mass of entangled bodies in a hedonistic swirl.

For Schipani, who documents his life and his transition to more than 16,000 Instagram followers, going big with his art work also means not hiding.

"A trans body is fetishized; it's hidden. It's treated as a curiosity, not with respect," he says. "Strangers feel like they can ask me the most intimate questions."

Schipani, 33, has lived the last 10 years as a man after being at odds with the female body he was born with. A graduate of the Maryland Institute of Art, Schipani has lived and worked in Austin for several years, arriving in the Texas capital city like so many after a chain of circumstances that somehow involves visiting SXSW.

The scale of Schipani's current show dovetails with his busy commercial career. He's the illustrator behind multiple murals around Austin including chic eateries Irene's and la Barbecue. Two years ago, he was voted Best Muralist by the Austin Chronicle's Readers Poll. Earlier this year, at MASS Gallery, Schipani painted an enormous mural, a celebratory pyramid of male bodies.

Last year during New York's fall Fashion Week, Schipani was invited to help "Transparent" producer/creator Jill Soloway with a restroom-like installation that was part of "29Rooms," an arty funhouse-esque pop-up hosted by Refinery29. The pseudo restroom, called "Gender Neutral," was designed as a trans safe place and in his signature graphic style Schipani drew faces including several self-portraits. A ticketed attraction, "29Rooms" has since traveled to Los Angeles, San Francisco and Chicago.

"What Makes a Man," is the name of Schipani's solo-authored restroom installation at Lora Reynolds.

Schipani's flat style of painting is born as much from Pop Art influences and the artist's mural work as it is from the lack of vision in his left eye, a condition he's had for 10 years. His depth perception is extremely comprised.

"I'm just painting how I see," Schipani says.

And he's painting what he desires to see.

"What makes a successful male body? Who defines it and who decides how it's represented?" he says.

In the gallery's project room, the 13 portraits that hang in the gallery's project room reveal a quieter tale. Indigo-toned like faded Polaroids, the portraits are more detailed and expressive. Twelve of them are of queer people Schipani has known.



Xavier Schipani, "What Makes a Man," bathroom partitions, toilets, sinks, urinals, mirror, enamel paint, and oil-paint pen, 2018. Lora Reynolds Gallery. Photo by Colin Doyle



Detail of Xavier Schipani, "What Makes a Man," at Lora Reynolds Gallery. Photo by Colin Doyle

"These are people I call my 'trans-cestors,'" Schipani says. "People who in one way or another had an influence on me as I was transitioning."

In the middle of the trans-cestor portraits is Schipani's self-portrait — not in blue but in muted full color, as if looking to his trans-cestors for encouragement.

"I'm using my voice and my work to speak to people," he says.