

JoAnn Loulan will tell you that being jammed into a box is not a pleasant experience.

"Some people say things like, 'We always knew she was straight.' They maintain that I'm now in a male-identified community and therefore I'd better get into my new box," says the psychotherapist and lesbian sex author, who recently became the center of much commentary, opinion and criticism for her public pronouncement that she is romantically involved with a man.

"Then others ask me why I don't identify as bisexual," continues Loulan, who has spent the past two decades immersed in women-loving-women's culture. "Calling myself bisexual doesn't feel right to me. That's not what is in my soul."

What is in her soul, she says, is her indelible connection to the "lesbian community," a community which she has helped raise funds for; a community whose visibility she has worked to increase worldwide; a community whose members she has inspired and encouraged to explore their multifaceted sexual and emotional selves.

And yet, after 20 years of being an out and proud femme lesbian, Loulan has found an intimate connection with someone who is not female.

And she's paying the price for that transgression.

Longtime friends and fans—"sisters"—have expressed everything from disappointment to rage over her disclosure.

(As you likely know, in the Feb. 7 issue of *Just Out*, publisher-editor Renée LaChance, a friend of Loulan's, shared her sadness over the news via an editorial entitled "Say it isn't so," which in turn set off a storm of Letters to the Editor, many of which blasted LaChance for being intolerant.)

"I feel very exposed, like everyone is voting," Loulan says, though she fully understands that since she is a public figure, it's only natural people are going to weigh in with their thoughts about her life choices.

It is something they are doing in print as well as in person.

"I recently attended an opening of a new women's club in [San Francisco's] East Bay area," Loulan says.

Many lesbians she has associated with for two decades were also there. "I was getting lots of different reactions, from 'Who cares?' to questions like 'Are you still fucking that guy?'" says Loulan, who despite the sometimes hurtful feedback, swears she would not alter her choices.

"This has been very exhilarating and very painful—and I wouldn't change a thing. I would hope that I would never decide against doing what seemed natural and right because of others' opinions and expectations," she says.

With that proclamation, however, comes this admission: "I have at times been very self-righteous in my life, and I am truly humbled by this experience."

And she still identifies as a femme lesbian. "I think that's what really gets to some lesbians. They're telling me I should give up my identity," she says. "That's the case, I think, because I'm threatening the notion of what it means to be a lesbian."

Loulan is not the first—and certainly will not be the last—person to fall prey to the culture's (queer or otherwise) incessant need to label, categorize and shove people into tidy little gender and sexual-orientation cages, each accompanied with a rigid set of rules and expectations that mustn't be broken—unless, of course, one is willing to pay the price via ostracism, public chastisement, harassment and maybe even physical violence.

Some, however, are beginning to question how these entrenched attitudes are hurting us—all of us, that is.

Enter "Rethinking Gender," a free community discussion set for May 6 at Portland's Metropolitan Community Church. The event is sponsored by the Lesbian Community Project and the Women's Project. Scheduled guests include local

activists and national figures like Kerry Lobel, executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, and author Kate Bornstein.

A promotional flier highlights the kind of compelling chat that participants may be in for by bulleting some intriguing, albeit heady, questions that will be considered:

- What is a lesbian? Women-born women who have sex with women? Women who identify as lesbians but sleep with men? Male-to-female transsexual women who have sex with women? Women who once had sex with men but now have sex with women? Can you be a dyke with a dick?

- Do we have a choice in our sexuality? Do we have a choice in our gender identity?

- A young woman calls herself a "queer boy dyke bisexual." Has language failed us? What is the language of gender liberation?

- What about butch/femme, gender fluidity, gender ambiguity, gender theatrics? What is the promise of freedom for heterosexuality-identified women and men?

Kate Bornstein has been considering gender, well, probably forever.

According to the cover jacket of her 1994 book *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women and the Rest of Us*, Bornstein is

a "former heterosexual male, onetime Scientologist and IBM salesperson, now a lesbian woman writer, actress and performance artist."

Those descriptives, however, don't communicate Bornstein's more fluid take on gender—a definition that clearly veers from modern U.S. society's.

"In this culture, gender means 'This is your lot in life, this is your destiny,'" Bornstein told *Just Out*, speaking by phone from a friend's Manhattan apartment. (With a new show, *Strangers in Paradox*, slated to open next year in the Big Apple, Bornstein was trying to secure her own digs in SoHo.)

As she writes in *Gender Outlaw*, gender assignment starts from the moment you pop into the world: "The first question we usually ask parents is: 'Is it a boy or is it a girl?' There's a good answer to that one going around: 'We don't know, it hasn't told us yet.' Personally, I think no question containing either/or deserves a serious answer, and that includes the question of gender."

When people ask Bornstein whether she's male or female, she answers, "Yes."

"Anyone who has a sense of humor about that is someone I want to keep talking with," she writes.

Not surprisingly, Bornstein has taken plenty

of hits for simply being what she is, which is somewhat indefinable.

"At first it was hard. In fact, it could be horrible," she says, when describing others' reactions to her and her life choices.

But then she began to understand that some folks needed to belittle her—or anyone else for that matter—in order to feel superior and safe. That, she says, is unfortunate.

"You know, it's rather ironic that we are a society obsessed with gender, yet we do not scratch the surface to examine it," she says.

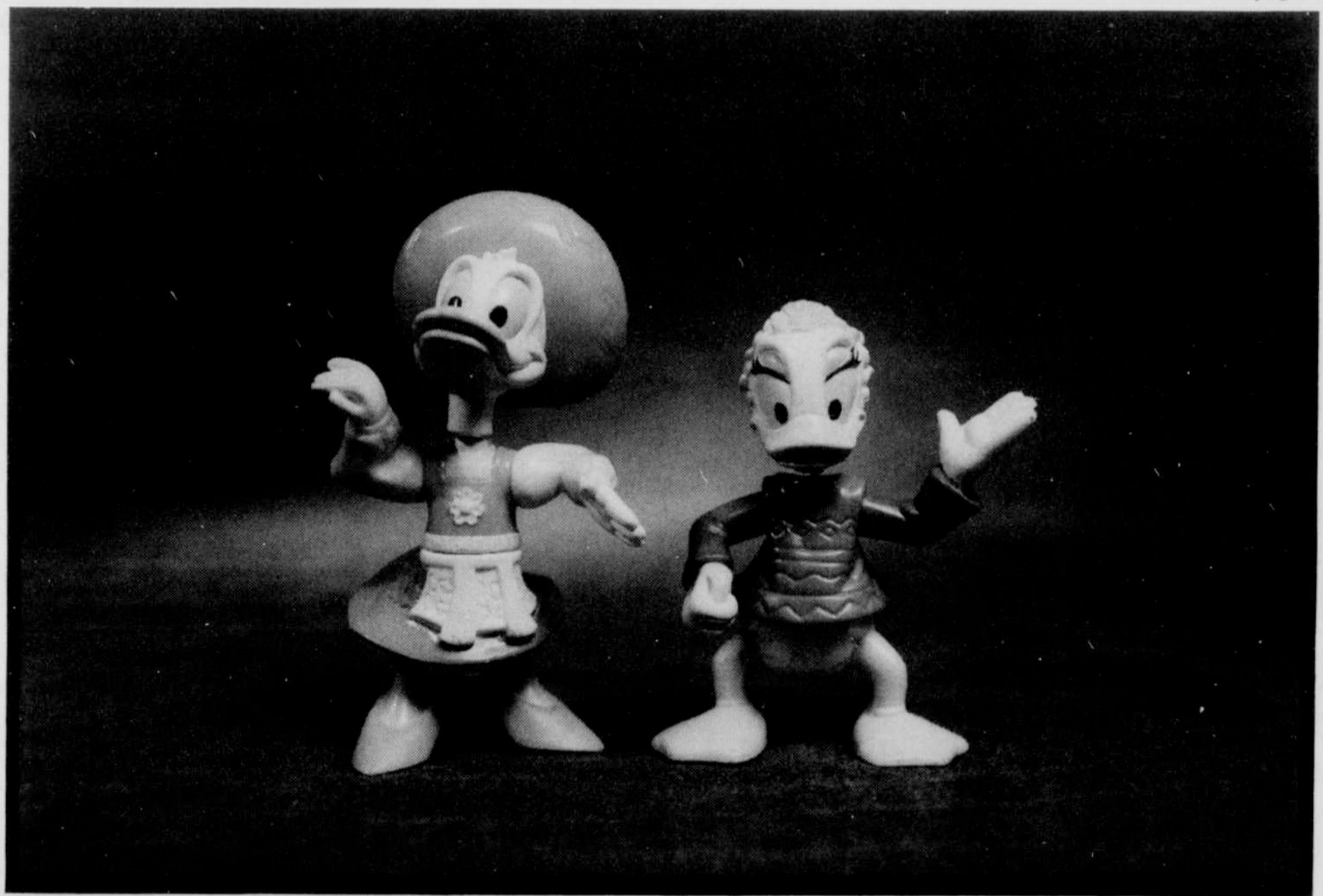
Bornstein has thought long and hard about it, writing and speaking and performing extensively about the meanings of gender.

"I don't think of it as an identity but rather as a value," she says.

And what does that value look like? "It looks like a young, heterosexual-identified woman who finally stands up and says 'No' to the male boss who has been harassing her," she answers. "It looks like the frontier woman in the 1800s who said, 'I will not be barefoot and pregnant in your kitchen.' It's those people who say, 'What's wrong with sado-masochism between consenting adults?'"

It is that young woman who calls herself a "queer boy dyke bisexual."

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Mixing It UP

It's the era of the gender blender, a slow cultural frappé that could move us from rigid roles toward individual freedom

by Inga Sorensen ▼ photos by Linda Kliewer with E. Ann Hinds