



Jade Kuriki-Olivo, a.k.a. Puppies Puppies, photographed in the Brooklyn Navy Yard on Jan. 12, 2021. Melody Melamed

ARTS AND LETTERS

The Reappearing Act of Puppies Puppies

The artist, who also goes by Jade Kuriki-Olivo, began her career as a solitary and mysterious figure. Now, with the support of her community, she's become entirely herself.

By Jameson Fitzpatrick

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UNTIL JADE KURIKI-OLIVO appeared in the stairwell of her Crown Heights, Brooklyn, apartment building, more than half an hour after the agreed-upon time, I wasn't convinced I'd ever meet the artist. [Kuriki-Olivo](#), who has made work under the pseudonym Puppies Puppies since 2010, had been hard to schedule an interview with and, as I waited on her front stoop, I wondered if her evasion was part of an extended performance. Studying the street for potential clues — there was someone in full-body spandex doing an elaborate jump-rope routine nearby, and two UPS deliverymen — I half expected to see her coming down the block in costume or on horseback, as she has done in past performances.

Like many conceptual artists before her, the 32-year-old gained her reputation as something of a trickster, making a name as Puppies Puppies (Puppies for short) while obscuring the identity behind the persona — what seemed both a canny marketing move and a kiss-off to the contemporary art world's fixation on who's who. ([“Who, or What, Is Puppies Puppies?”](#) asked a 2016 headline in *Artspace*.) Without biographical information, viewers were forced to contend with only the artist's output, grounded in creative ventriloquisms. Puppies' installations, with their evocative, sometimes humorous recontextualizations of readymade sculptures — [automatic Purell dispensers](#) among them, years before Covid-19 forced a broader reassessment of hand sanitizer's value — won her comparisons to Marcel Duchamp and [Félix González-Torres](#), artists who likewise made art that felt both wry and surprisingly personal. (The Purell dispensers emerged as a recurring motif due, in part, to Kuriki-Olivo's time in hospitals: In 2009, she was diagnosed with a malignant brain tumor, which was removed the following year.)



The artist's "Body Fluid (Blood)" (2019) at Remai Modern, Saskatoon. In the foreground, "Blood Drop Stress Balls (for Lutz Bacher)" (2019). In the background, "Portrait (My Blood)" (2019), which incorporates the artist's blood, a blood donation bag, an IV stand and a fridge. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Barbara Weiss, Berlin. Photograph by Blaine Campbell

Puppies' performances, meanwhile, fueled curiosity about the person (or rotating cast of paid actors) inside the mass-produced costumes that became her signature. The artist's exhibitions regularly featured a lone performer, often portraying a figure from children's entertainment — [SpongeBob SquarePants](#) at Mexico City's 2015 [Material Art Fair](#); one of the [yellow Minions](#) from "Despicable Me" surveying everyday objects from the artist's home at Detroit's [What Pipeline](#) gallery later that year — or a monstrous, if misunderstood, villain. For her first New York solo exhibition, in 2015 at the gallery [Queer Thoughts](#), a loin-clothed [Gollum](#) crouched atop a stone plinth; the next year, Freddy Krueger wandered a Los Angeles art fair carrying a photograph of the Hollywood sign digitally altered to read "The End Is Near." During the 2017 Whitney Biennial, a Lady Liberty in the style of

one of New York City's "living statue" street performers held her torch on the museum's eighth-floor terrace. "Liberty (Liberté)" is now the only work categorized as performance art in the [Whitney's permanent collection](#).

The mystique surrounding Puppies' anonymity was rigorously cultivated, sometimes with the help of Kuriki-Olivo's then partner, identified only as Forrest, who came to serve as an interlocutor between artist and public. Those seeking an audience with Puppies at the couple's Los Angeles home would instead be greeted by Forrest, who was deputized to answer any questions while Kuriki-Olivo remained nearby but unavailable — in the shower, for instance.

But in late 2017, Puppies' work began to engage biography as subject more explicitly. The first reference to Kuriki-Olivo's gender transition appeared in "[Green \(Ghosts\)](#)," an installation for which she and Forrest relocated their apartment's contents to Los Angeles's [Overduin & Co.](#) gallery, where they and their dog would sleep each night, thus altering the space from day to day. One morning, before leaving, Kuriki-Olivo was moved to affix her daily dose of estrogen — two elliptical pale blue pills — to the wall. In 2018, she created an installation that functioned as a funeral for her deadname, complete with a grass lawn and an engraved headstone. The press release for that show was a poem addressed to her pretransition self and signed, simply, "Jade." The artist now uses her full name, usually set off in parentheses alongside "Puppies Puppies."



The artist's "Plague," at Halle für Kunst, Lüneburg, 2019. Courtesy of the artist and Halle für Kunst, Lüneburg. Photograph by Fred Dott



Another view of "Plague," at Halle für Kunst, Lüneburg, 2019. Courtesy of the artist and Halle für Kunst, Lüneburg. Photograph by Fred Dott



"Courier on Horse (Donnelly)" (2019), which was part of "Plague" at Halle für Kunst, Lüneburg, 2019. Courtesy of the artist and Halle für Kunst, Lüneburg. Photograph by Fred Dott

Now, with only a street address — no apartment number — I waited for a reply to my text announcing my arrival. When a dark-haired woman in a black leather trench coat approached, I squinted to determine if the masked figure resembled photographs of Kuriki-Olivo. It turned out to be her roommate, an artist and designer named Ren Light Pan, who invited me into the lobby to wait. A few more minutes passed. I prepared myself for the possibility of an interview by proxy.

When Kuriki-Olivo did emerge, it was as a blur of apologies and acid green hair that floated around her face; she'd lost track of time while getting ready. But she had a vision for the *mise-en-scène* of our conversation: We'd talk while she finished her makeup so I could watch her in the mirror.

In person, Kuriki-Olivo is both surprisingly forthcoming and prone to the same associative, idiosyncratic logic that has long been at the center of her work. In an age when many people document their lives in painstaking detail for public consumption online, and self-exposure has become commonplace, Kuriki-Olivo's art offers an alternative take on vulnerability. She's never sought to play tricks on her audience, she told me, correcting a common misconception about her work; Kuriki-Olivo approaches everything she devises from a place of sincerity. When she first performed in costume — as her high school mascot, a lion, to both fulfill and sidestep an athletic requirement — she was drawn to the freedom she felt dancing in the suit: Here was not just a way of hiding in plain sight but a way of being seen, made endurable through the filter of a costume. (As we spoke that afternoon, I kept thinking of Emily Dickinson's edict to "[Tell all the truth but tell it slant.](#)")

Through her estrangements of readymade objects, pre-existing characters and quotidian actions, Kuriki-Olivo has created a vocabulary for self-expression refracted through the detritus of contemporary life, one that troubles the distinction between the universal (Purell dispensers; household items) and the specific (the reason for the Purell dispensers; *her* household items, including family heirlooms). In this way, she is indeed working within the tradition of artists like González-Torres, who excavated

something deeply human out of seemingly banal objects. But she is also blurring this tradition, rejecting any singular focus in favor of trying to reflect the messy multiplicity of what Kuriki-Olivo might consider the ultimate readymade: life itself.



Puppies Puppies (Kuriki-Olivo), “Coffin (Sculpture & Performance)” (2019), at the Galerie Francesca Pia, Zürich. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Francesca Pia, Zürich

WHEN WE MET, Kuriki-Olivo was still on a high from the day before, when she’d attended an artist showcase at the Crown Heights community space the [Salon on Kingston](#), which had featured her friends [Iman Le Caire](#), a dancer and actress, and [Thesan Pollyanna](#), a singer and multi-instrumentalist. Their performances — which, after their sets, had continued sporadically throughout the night — exemplified Kuriki-Olivo’s own approach to art. “I’ve always been in love with the idea that art just blends in with life,” Kuriki-Olivo said. “Everything seamlessly intertwines,

and you start to not be able to differentiate the edges between the two. That blurriness is where I thrive.”

Here, minutes into our conversation, Kuriki-Olivo’s voice began to break as she tried, unsuccessfully, not to cry: “Because I always thought I was some sort of freak. And now that I’m finding community — people like Thesan and Ren, trans people who are my community — I realize I’m just a person. As a child, you look at the world as this new, complicated thing that you don’t understand. ... And then at some point, you have to ask, ‘Who am I in all of this?’ I kept thinking there was no real answer to that question. I felt like nothing, like I wasn’t even there. Now I feel present — and that sounds so cheesy and cliché, but it’s a gift to feel that you’re present and you can be yourself.” By this point, Kuriki-Olivo had long since turned away from the mirror (nearly ceiling-height, framed with LED lights) to face me. “Well, it was good to get the crying out before the makeup,” she said.

Kuriki-Olivo was born in 1989 to a Japanese mother, a public health doctor, and a Puerto Rican father, who met one another in Dallas while in college. She grew up outside the city, in a racist and homophobic environment inhospitable to “a mixed-race, closeted trans woman.” For her, the place remains synonymous with trauma. “If people in Texas heard my voice, they would turn around,” she said, which taught her, from an early age, to be as quiet as possible.

Her father was especially influential. Around her neck, she wore a fur pouch that he’d made from a rabbit pelt (he was a certified Texas Master Naturalist). Kuriki-Olivo also seems to have inherited his love of Day-Glo colors — one in particular. Her long, wavy hair matched the semi-sheer curtains, the sheets and blanket covering a makeshift bed, a love seat constructed out of multiple circular cushions and a pair of sneakers. (The lingering fragrance of pot contributed to the overall impression of green.) When she disappeared to make coffee, I became suddenly attentive to the spectrum. There was Day-Glo, yes, but also chartreuse, fern, mint ... jade? After she returned, lime green mug in hand, I asked about the color’s significance. Green is “a ubiquitous color — it’s one of

the most common in the world,” she explained. “And it’s made up of blue and yellow. It’s ambiguous. I am very much a mixed person, and so I think about this mixing that happens all the time, in all that I do.”



An installation shot of the artist's 2018 exhibition "Andrew D. Olivo 6.7.1989–6.7.2018" at Detroit's What Pipeline gallery. Courtesy of the artist and What Pipeline, Detroit



A detail of "Andrew D. Olivo, 6.7.1989–6.7.2018" at What Pipeline, Detroit, 2018. Courtesy of the artist and What Pipeline, Detroit



A detail of "Andrew D. Olivo, 6.7.1989–6.7.2018" at What Pipeline, Detroit, 2018. Courtesy of the artist and What Pipeline, Detroit

Kuriki-Olivo's father identified as Taíno, the name for the Indigenous peoples living on the island now known as Puerto Rico, and elsewhere in the Caribbean, at the time of European arrival in the 15th century. Though colonization decimated the Taíno population, for the past several decades activists both in the Caribbean and throughout its diasporas have pushed for recognition of the identity — a claim [supported by recent research](#) affirming significant Taíno ancestry in Puerto Ricans today, as well as by, more meaningfully, many generations of tradition. "I think in a lot of ways I'm trying to, through different artifacts from my family, make sure that the past isn't erased," Kuriki-Olivo said. "Taíno culture was obliterated by genocide, but it actually wasn't. Against the odds, it survived." This heritage has taken on particular meaning since her transition, given the traditional acceptance of gender fluidity among many Indigenous peoples. "I'm like, 'Oh, my ancestors accepted it' — and deep down in my heart and soul, a part of them exists in me. ... You can ground yourself in knowing that your transcestors were doing their own thing, too."

IN 2019, THE FIRST year Kuriki-Olivo appended her full name to Puppies Puppies, as well as her first based in New York, she mounted five exhibitions in five countries. Though her work with Forrest ended along with their relationship in 2018, her practice remains rooted in collaborations of all kinds: At Zurich's [Galerie Francesca Pia](#), she and the painter [Eliza Douglas](#) created an eerily prescient show dramatizing doomsday preppers' fear of (zombie)

contagion. Surrounded by paintings depicting costumed Puppies Puppies performances past, Douglas, dressed as a zombie, binge-watched scenes from the TV series “The Walking Dead” on a large monitor. Nearby, Kuriki-Olivo — made up to resemble a corpse — lay in an open coffin lined in peach satin. Against one wall, a series of metal shelving units housed bulk quantities of toilet paper, water and food under the title “Survival Preparations,” which Kuriki-Olivo dedicated to the memory of her father, who’d recently died. For the opening of her (also eerily prescient) exhibition “Plague,” at [Halle für Kunst](#) in Lüneburg, Germany, she recreated a 2002 performance by the conceptual artist [Trisha Donnelly](#): Costumed as a Napoleonic courier, she rode in on a horse and delivered news of the emperor’s surrender. Her show “Una Mujer Fantástica (A Fantastic Woman)” in 2018 included two portraits of a friend, the artist [Cielo Oscuro](#), on her first day of hormone replacement therapy, along with a link to the GoFundMe supporting her transition (proceeds from the sale of the photographs also went to the fund).



Another view of “Andrew D. Olivo, 6.7.1989–6.7.2018” at What Pipeline, Detroit, 2018. Courtesy of the artist and What Pipeline, Detroit

Lately, Kuriki-Olivo tries to make the opportunities afforded to her useful to others, an echo of how, in that early interview with Artspace, she differentiated herself from Duchamp: “In Puppies’ work, the objects must function or else they’re props.” This condition was clearly illustrated last year in “Body Fluid (Blood),” her first solo institutional exhibition in North America, at [Remai Modern](#) in Saskatoon, Canada. The show was inspired by her parents, who shared a rare blood type and frequently donated blood during her childhood, as well as by the queerphobic policies, dating back to the emergence of the AIDS crisis in the 1980s, that still place [restrictions on blood donations](#) based on gender and sexual orientation in a number of countries, including Canada and the U.S. Inside a private room in the museum’s ground-floor gallery, free rapid H.I.V. testing was offered on select dates, with peer mentors available for pre- and post-testing guidance. Outside the consultation room, a glass-doored refrigerator displayed an IV bag of Kuriki-Olivo’s blood, ineligible for donation, the floor around it scattered with stress balls — often given to donors to make their veins easier to locate — shaped like cartoon crimson droplets. On Saturdays, visitors could take a shuttle bus from the museum to a donation outpost administered by Canadian Blood Services.

The exhibition was both personal and site-specific: Saskatchewan has the highest rate of new H.I.V. infections in Canada (more than twice the national average), with Indigenous people [disproportionately affected](#) by the virus. “Rather than just landing there, putting my artwork up and then going away, I wanted to try to do something that really dealt with the place,” Kuriki-Olivo said. Drawing on her time working at [TransLatin@ Coalition](#), a Los Angeles-based nonprofit that provides support and services to the trans community, she asked, “How can I incorporate what I was doing in social work with what I want to do with my art practice?”

At its most political, Kuriki-Olivo’s work is also at its most literal, and tends not to equivocate. In her most recent show at New York’s Queer Thoughts, “Executive Order 9066 (Soul Consoling Tower),” about the World War II internment of nearly 120,000 Japanese

Americans and Japanese immigrants, for instance, the artist showcased an urn filled with the ashes of burned American flags.

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The impulse to use the platforms made available to her “to try to create some equality when it doesn’t exist” defines not just her art but the artist, as well, a sense of responsibility that seems to have become especially urgent as she builds a community with other trans New Yorkers of color. “There’s a whole network of us: amazing, beautiful, brilliant, incredible trans artists and creatives,” she said. “And we’re not getting the attention we deserve.” Kuriki-Olivo wants to leverage her success to make space for others, and to take advantage of future invitations to show her own work as a chance to exhibit other artists so that they might “skip some of the unnecessary steps. ... You really have to uplift your trans family, because the world is not going to do it.”

WHEN I ASKED her about the origin of Puppies Puppies, Kuriki-Olivo spoke of her past desire to disappear. Inspired by a former acquaintance who vanished after deleting everything from their Facebook page and then repopulating it with photos of cats, Kuriki-Olivo changed both the first and last name on her account to Puppies and replaced its content with pictures of small dogs.

“I romanticized disappearing,” she said, invoking [Bas Jan Ader](#), the Dutch conceptual artist who was lost at sea while trying to cross the Atlantic in a small sailboat in 1975. But her alter ego also offered an escape hatch from a name and a way of being that had left her feeling alienated from herself: “I didn’t relate to who I was, so I erased my identity. But I put expressions out into the world as much as I could because I had a brain tumor, and I thought the world was going to end. That name came out of pain, but also out of wanting people to see there’s beauty that comes from this brain of mine.” During her transition, though, Kuriki-Olivo realized that she needed to reassess her decision to make work anonymously. “It

meant something very different to hide as a trans woman,” she said, “because society forces us to hide.”



A still from the performance “Liberty (Liberté),” presented at the 2017 Whitney Biennial, on the museum’s eighth-floor terrace. The piece is now part of the institution’s permanent collection. Paula Court

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given her commitment to creating a platform for others, Kuriki-Olivo did not seem especially interested in talking about her own current or upcoming works. Instead, she spoke most animatedly about participating in the weekly Stonewall Protests, which usually begin outside the Stonewall Inn in Greenwich Village, that have been held every Thursday evening since June of 2020. Led by the organizers [Joela Rivera](#) and [Qween Jean](#), both Black trans women, the Stonewall Protests refer as much to a collective as to the standing series of demonstrations. The first post on the group's Instagram account ([@thestonewallprotests](#)) declares: "We are a community of Black queer and Black trans activists fighting for visibility in the Black community and abolition in this nation. We are here to serve the Black community and end the systemic racism that plagues this country in every aspect, including: health care, education, housing and policing, to name a few." The group, which draws a diverse crowd of regulars to its protests, also coordinates frequent food and clothing drives.

The Stonewall Protests are currently where Kuriki-Olivo is spending most of the energy she once devoted to live performance. One of the protests' important functions is to provide a respite from the violence, structural and personal, faced by community members, to make room for joy, self-expression and, reliably, dancing. "These spaces are about healing, is how Qween puts it," Kuriki-Olivo said, "especially for Black trans queer people. Each protest is also a ball, which stems from the ballroom culture created by Black and brown trans and queer people. We'll block off a whole street and have a dance floor."

Last fall, she also began making videos as [@mosstransgirl](#) on her [OnlyFans page](#). (She can get by "only so far" on her art, she said, and also does in-person sex work.) Having grown into her sexuality online, she sees OnlyFans as an opportunity to lean into — and change her relationship to — that complicated history. And these videos also help her process the shame around sex that "growing up in Texas and being brainwashed as a Christian" instilled.

She did tell me about one public performance she embarked upon in the last year. Wearing a suit of armor she purchased with money made through sex work, she went on a series of walks throughout New York. It's a response to the city's much-derided "[Walking While Trans](#)" ban, the 1976 anti-loitering statute that was [repealed in February](#) after years of pressure from critics, who claimed it was used to disproportionately target and arrest trans women of color. "Honestly, it feels like that some days," she said, "like putting on a suit of metal armor to go out into the world." Kuriki-Olivo was excited to do the performance outside a designated art context, to reclaim "the power in doing something because you love it and you want it to happen." The piece was dedicated to her trans siblings, trans women in particular. "Why I wanted to be an artist was to have a voice," she said, tearing up again. "It's crucial to feel heard, even if you're scared to talk. It's crucial to a human being to feel heard, to feel cared about, to feel love. And I want that for other people. So I think that's what it's all about. Or at least that's where it's going."

Portrait: Melody Melamed. Set design: Todd Knopke. Makeup: Kaori Chloe Soda using MAC Cosmetics. Photo assistants: Xiang-yun Chen, James Reddington. Location: Ten Ton Studio

<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/18/t-magazine/jade-kuriki-olivo-puppies-puppies.html>