

TOURMALINE TRANS- CENDENT

12 Dec 2025—15 Mar 2026 at ACCA, Australian
Centre for Contemporary Art

Curatorial Essay

by Sophie Prince, ACCA Curator



Tourmaline, coming about 2022–25 from Transcendent series 2022–25. Courtesy the artist and Chapter NY, New York

The truth of life is its ongoingness, its essence unchanged and unconstrained by space, time, or physical form.

—Tourmaline

In May 2025, Tourmaline published MARSHA: The Joy and Defiance of Marsha P. Johnson, the first comprehensive biography on the life and legacy of Marsha 'Pay It No Mind' Johnson. Just over six months later, on 12 December 2025, the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art (ACCA) opens Tourmaline: Transcendent, the first solo exhibition in Australia of work by the internationally acclaimed American artist, filmmaker, activist and writer. Transcendent presents three bodies of work created during and shortly following the publication of MARSHA: The Joy and Defiance of Marsha P. Johnson—a book five years in the making—offering a new manifestation of Johnson's love and light beamed from the past into the present through Tourmaline's tender and poetic synthesis. The exhibition brings together the celebrated video work Pollinator (2022)¹, and two new bodies of work across photography and film. Transcendent series (2022–25) is comprised of seven luminous large-scale photographs engaging in the tradition of self-portraiture, and A Flower That Lives Forever an immersive and cinematic single-channel video with sound, specially commissioned by ACCA.

Marsha P. Johnson is today celebrated as one of the most influential and inspiring icons in queer history and LGBTIQA+ advocacy. She is remembered and revered for her presence in the June 1969 Stonewall riots, as co-founder with Sylvia Rivera of the pioneering grassroot activist group STAR (Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries), her life as performance artist touring with the Hot Peaches and the Angels of Light—the off-Broadway theatrical troupes—and her lifelong advocacy work—including for trans rights and AIDS awareness. Equally she is beloved for her enduring commitment to 'showing up and showing out' while looking her best, adorning herself in thrifted dresses and coats, pretty makeup, and wigs often styled with flowers—Baby's breath her known favourite. It is widely recognised that Johnson's well-deserved fame has been championed by more than twenty years of legacy work led by Tourmaline. Since moving to New York in 2002 to study at Columbia University, Tourmaline has been drawing out Johnson's story from relative obscurity, through her archival research, advocacy work, writing and art.

Tourmaline's early life in New York City, like Johnson, was set around Christopher Street. She reflects in the opening pages of MARSHA: 'In the early 2000s, this street was a sanctuary for young queer and trans people of colour like myself, buzzing with electrifying joy. Despite the

¹ Pollinator has been exhibited internationally including at the Whitney Biennial 2024, The Metropolitan Museum of Art—and was also recently accessioned into the Collection in 2025—as well as the Munich Film Festival and Mudam Museum of Modern Art in Luxembourg.

police's efforts to enforce curfews and shut down our gatherings, we thrived'.² While studying Tourmaline worked as a dedicated community organiser and activist, joining the activist group FIERCE, which she says, 'advocated for young queer and trans people of colour and our right to be yourself in any space'³, and worked at The Door, a community drop-in centre. In 2005 she joined the group Critical Resistance and became increasingly involved in the campaign to stop discrimination against trans and gender non-conforming welfare recipients. She also took on another full-time organising job with Queers for Economic Justice, protesting every summer during the annual Trans Day of Action from 2005 until 2009 when the welfare administration finally agreed to meet to end discrimination by training employees appropriately to end transphobia.⁴ In the same year, Tourmaline began getting deeper into Black, queer and trans archives through her work as a research assistant to (and student of) celebrated activist and scholar, Robin D.G. Kelley.⁵ Through her deep and cumulative engagement with community, archive and advocacy, she sensed many affinities with Johnson and became 'disturbed by how few knew about Marsha'.⁶ A turning point in reanimating Johnson's biography came in 2012, when Tourmaline published a web archive on Tumblr called The Spirit Was....⁷ Maintained without pay and accessible for free, the archive became an extremely popular resource for becoming familiar with seminal (yet, then, relatively unknown) figures in Black history.⁸ Reflecting on the importance of this kind of work, Tourmaline writes in MARSHA: 'The historical erasure of Black trans life means so many of us are disconnected from the legacies of trans women before us, denying access to stories about ourselves, in our own voices... I knew that we needed to reclaim and to be nourished by our history'.⁹

² Tourmaline, MARSHA: The Joy and Defiance of Marsha P. Johnson, HarperCollins Publishers, New York, 2025, p. 9.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Tourmaline, MARSHA, 2025, p. 65.

⁵ Tourmaline quoted in interview with Sophie Prince (Tourmaline: Transcendent, Curator), unpublished, 4 October 2025.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ The Spirit Was... active 2012–2016, Tumblr: <https://thespiritwas.tumblr.com/> [Accessed 10 October 2025].

⁸ Posthumously, Johnson has regained and even superseded the cult status of her life. She is widely acknowledged as a source of inspiration, including for many renowned Black trans women such as Antiguan American model Aaron Rose Phillip, actress Laverne Cox, actress and singer Mya Taylor, and writer and producer Janet Mock. Johnson has also been cited by Zohran Mamdani, the recently instated mayor-elect of New York City, Former President of the United States, Joe Biden, and Former Vice President, Kamala Harris, as well as being a reference at the 2021 Met Gala, and the subject of several articles and documentaries.

⁹ Tourmaline, MARSHA, 2025, p. 11.



Tourmaline, Pollinator 2022 (still). Courtesy the artist and Chapter NY, New York.

Transcendent presents three bodies of work created during and shortly following the publication of MARSHA: The Joy and Defiance of Marsha P. Johnson—a book five years in the making—offering a new manifestation of Johnson’s love and light beamed from the past into the present through Tourmaline’s tender and poetic synthesis.

Sharing many affinities with Johnson, some happenstance and others considered, Tourmaline's embodied engagement with Johnson actively shapes both her expanded practice and thinking about her own identity as a trans woman who identifies as queer, and in many ways, she extends the power of this relationship to her audience. She describes the process of writing *Marsha* as, 'an opportunity to delve deep and with detail into Marsha's life',¹⁰ and alternatively, by nature of photography and video being distinct to writing, Tourmaline: Transcendent consciously embraces alternate, less prescriptive ways of learning and knowing. The exhibition harnesses beauty and immersive audiovisual elements for visitors to be moved toward understanding, not only about Johnson's legacy but about the humanity underpinning the advocacy work and very existence of the trans liberation and LGBITQA+ rights communities.¹¹ Pollinator and A Flower That Lives Forever sit within Tourmaline's growing catalogue of film-based work. They are both single-channel videos that layer her archival research with contemporary imagery by the artist to meditate on the legacy of Marsha P. Johnson, but they deviate in the specific moments they reimagine. Tourmaline is aware of the importance of this nuanced approach, often citing Saidiya Hartman's concept of 'critical fabulations' which she summarises as, 'the necessity of reimagining the presence and perspectives of the marginalised in what is a limited and whitewashed archive of history'.¹²

Pollinator can be read as anchored by one of the better-known aspects of Johnson's biography—her death, memorial, and the way in which the circumstances of her death were handled by the police, spurring a remarkable community response to restore her honour. However, the work goes beyond indulging the tendency for collective memory to default to sensationalist recollections by pushing into an embodied realm through its dreamy conflation of imagery and a score that invites speculation on the 'ongoingness' of life.¹³ Pollinator opens with shots of

¹⁰ Tourmaline quoted in interview with Prince, 4 October 2025.

¹¹ While on tour for her book, MARSHA, in 2025, Tourmaline has been reading Walt Disney's biography. Tourmaline is interested in Disney's sharing of messages through depictions of dreams and fantasy, and also the power for immersive experiences to operate as a frontier for inserting speculative futures into a present reality. For more background on this area of interest for Tourmaline, listen to "'Turn Up The Volume'", Las Culturalistas with Matt Rogers and Bowen Yang, podcast, 14 May, 2025.

¹² Tourmaline, MARSHA, 2025, p. 60; Saidiya Hartman, 'Venus in Two Acts', Small Axe, 12, no. 2, Duke University Press, 2008, pp. 1–14.

¹³ Tourmaline quoted in 'Tourmaline: Pollinator, 2024 Whitney Biennial, Artist Interview', The Whitney Museum, 28 May 2024. <https://whitney.org/media/58743> [Accessed 12 November 2025].

Tourmaline walking in a reflective state through the Brooklyn Botanic Garden and the Edwardian period rooms at the Brooklyn Museum, New York. The work then seamlessly introduces archival footage from July 1992 of Johnson's memorial and community celebration, interspersed with contemporary footage of Tourmaline in a zero-gravity chamber and excerpts from home videos by Tourmaline of her late father, George Gossett, as he sings The Cisco Kid (1972) by War. An original score by Danni Venne overlays the work, implicating the audience through the experience of sound. Venne incorporates tuning forks, originally made for NASA, tuned to the Hertz frequency of one Venus rotation around the sun, and their reverberations invite audiences to become calibrated—like a pollinator—as both a generator and receiver within the networking of time and space. Reflecting on the metaphor of the pollinator, Tourmaline describes transforming her own encounters with loss, past, present, and future; 'as though those who came before us and are now gone are as yet more alive now than they have ever been'.¹⁴ The metaphor of the pollinator is carried by Tourmaline's presence throughout the work, such as the way the artist adorns herself akin to Johnson's way of styling her hair with flowers, and in her way of gently brushing through her environment, embodying concepts of transference, interconnection and transcendence. Working in tandem with these more subliminal devices, the raw energy of the archival footage from Johnson's widely attended memorial powerfully seeds curiosity and reflection on the impact of her life and legacy.

Moving from Elizabeth, NJ to New York in 1963, Marsha P. Johnson was coming up as a Black trans woman and self-proclaimed 'street queen'¹⁵ at a time when you would be arrested and put in jail for living authentically as a gender-nonconforming person—systemic discrimination that produced a myriad of obstacles but also strong grassroot communities who showed up for each other.¹⁶ Under the guide of Section 240.35, Section 4 that enforced the 'three articles' policing (a

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ See Tourmaline, MARSHA, 2025, pp. 75, 79. Tourmaline addresses the contextual norms and changes in the language for identities in MARSHA. She writes, 'After Stonewall, words like "Transvestite" and "queen" continued to evolve, with some people identifying more with terms like "transsexual", which Marsha publicly identifies with in 1971. And later, terms like "transgender", "non-binary", and "gender nonconforming" became more popular.'

¹⁶ One of seven children, Marsha P. Johnson was born in Elisabeth, NJ, in 1945, raised by her single mother, Alberta Claiborne. She began wearing women's clothing for the first time at five years of age, which was not openly encouraged, particularly in her youth, due to prevailing value systems of the era. Elisabeth was a city marked by segregation (despite also being an early hub for civil rights activism), and Johnson's family attended the Mount Teman African Methodist Episcopal Church, the oldest Black church in Elizabeth. Despite the Church not

law that stayed on the books until May 28, 2020), the NYPD would harass queer bargoers and sex workers on the streets.¹⁷ Johnson endured harassment, nights in jail, and disproportionate discrimination. She was even shot by a taxi driver in 1980, and for the rest of her life she lived with a bullet in her back, causing her chronic pain and associated issues, including navigating medical and mental health systems for treatment. Having collated these insights on Johnson's life, Tourmaline summarises in MARSHA:

At the same time, there were multiple systems at play that challenged Marsha's survival. She faced a society filled with anti-Black, ableist, and transphobic prejudice, and these abuses led to her poverty, homelessness, police harassment, and time in the prison system. The government neglect in funding healthcare for people with AIDS, for poor people, and for people with mental health issues further imperiled Marsha's life.¹⁸

Lived experiences of injustice no doubt spurred Johnson's lifelong commitment to 'showing up and showing out' at protests for LGBTIQA+ rights, Pride marches, and AIDS activism demonstrations—participating in awareness walks, dance-a-thons and the advocacy group ACT UP.¹⁹ Her consistent presence was noticed by friends and passersby alike, and she became known as the 'Saint of Christopher Street' and 'Saint Marsha'.²⁰ Her words and actions equally articulated care, such as her comments on the importance of AIDS awareness campaigns; 'You can't get back the people who died of AIDS; you can only help the ones that are here. If we

recognising queer identities and expression, Johnson embraced religion and spirituality from her youth and carries with her throughout her life. Moving to New York City in 1963 with little money, Johnson quickly accumulated skills to not only survive but thrive, in her own right. She earned money through her work at Child's Restaurant and as a sex worker, predominantly around Christopher Street and Times Square, where she soon met Sylvia Rivera. Acquaintances met through the gay and youth friendly scenes of NYC (particularly around Christopher Street), and during her activism and performance art work, soon became beloved friends—her circle coming to include the likes of gay liberation activists Randy Wicker and David Combes who were partners, and Bob Kholer, performance artist Agosto Machado, Hot Peaches and the Angels of Light founder Jimmy Camicia (along with all of the Hot Peaches troupe), and Thomas Gerald Davis who was known Candy (who Johnson informally married), among many others. She hustled to hone her sense of self—eventually undergoing gender affirming hormone therapy—but above all, she was forever generous towards others.

¹⁷ Tourmaline, MARSHA, 2025, p. 71.

¹⁸ Tourmaline, MARSHA, 2025, p. 141.

¹⁹ Tourmaline, MARSHA, 2025 p. 121.

²⁰ Marsha P. Johnson's care can be sensed undeniably by her clear perspective captured on archival home videos, recorded interviews with journalists and in poetry that are increasingly accessible online. Simple searches on University and Library archives and YouTube channels can lead you to free resources including, 'Marsha P. Johnson & Sylvia Rivera Collection' on the Digital Transgender Archive and The UCLA Film & Television Archive; documentaries such as Pay It No Mind (2012), and podcasts including Making Gay History and Afterlives hosted by Raquel Willis.

didn't do the walkathon, darling, people would be saying, "Oh those people don't care." Things like that are very important'.²¹ She even extended her compassion to causes that did not directly affect her body, Tourmaline finding; 'she was fighting for and accessing gender affirming care in the 1970s, but at the same time was fighting for free childcare for cis women', and accents that, 'she was caring for a group who wouldn't have necessarily been an ally on the other side, but was nonetheless wanting to create a coalition for a world where all of us would be free and experience that'.²² Tourmaline perceives Johnson as, 'a critical figure confronting the interlocking oppressions of racism, transphobia and economic injustice. Her efforts extended beyond addressing a single crisis, touching on broader social justice issues and urging contemporary movements to adopt similar intersectional strategies to realise their transformative potential'.²³

Through her writing and art, Tourmaline presents character-led legacy work that decenters the Eurocentric canon and master narrative complexes, destabilising what academic Saidiya Hartman qualifies as the systemic 'policing and gatekeeping of official memory'.²⁴ This approach reframes climactic and renowned moments in Johnson's story, including her powerful presence at the outbreak of the Stonewall riots on 28 June 1969. Unfolding over six days—originating at the Stonewall Inn, a known haven for LGBTIQA+ communities, and flowing into the surrounding streets in Greenwich Village—the course of the gay and trans rights movements irrevocably shifted when Stonewall patrons finally resisted arrest after years of enduring bar shutdowns and countless arrests enforced under the by 'three article law'. Stonewall has been recalled through many inconsistent and at times conflicting retellings, likely due to the slippery nature of memory in the wake of extreme conditions and trauma.²⁵ Cutting through inconsistencies are numerous recollections of Johnson's presence, for example, Holly Woodlawn, a trans Latina and an Andy Warhol muse recalled; 'These were the Stonewall riots, and Miss Marsha was the debutante! It was a hot night, people were hopped up, Judy [Garland] was [just recently] dead, and the cops were out busting heads'.²⁶ Pop-cultural references often

²¹ Marsha P. Johnson quoted in Tourmaline, MARSHA, 2025, p. 190.

²² Tourmaline quoted in interview with Prince, 4 October 2025.

²³ Tourmaline, MARSHA, 2025, pp. 121-13.

²⁴ Tourmaline, MARSHA, 2025, p. 97; Saidiya Hartman, Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America, Oxford University Press, 1997.

²⁵ Tourmaline, MARSHA, 2025, pp. 58-9.

²⁶ Holly Woodlawn quoted in Tourmaline, MARSHA, 2025, p. 87.



Tourmaline, Pollinator 2022 (still). Courtesy the artist and Chapter NY, New York.

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cite Johnson ‘throwing the first brick’ or ‘the shot glass heard around the world’ or a vivid scene of her looking into a piece of broken mirror and stating, ‘thank God the revolution has begun, honey’. Although the precise sources of these compelling stories are unknown, the context that led to this watershed event only adds to their gravitas. Photographed by Andy Warhol and the subject of his screenprint *Ladies and Gentlemen (FS II.133)* 1975, as well as capturing the attentions of Alvin Baltrop, Diana Davies, Peter Hujar, Stevie Wonder, The Beatles and many others, even just a little time spent reflecting on Johnson’s lifeforce brings understanding to her allure as a muse and a contemporary icon.

Pollinator features primary material from Johnson’s memorial following her death on 6 July 1992. By her memorial her death had already been filed as a suicide by the NYPD after her body was pulled from the Hudson River. The lack of investigation into her death was protested by her community who swarmed to celebrate her incredible life across three memorials and a march through Christopher St. Pier. Before the congregation took to the streets, Reverend Karen Ziegler offered a closing prayer;

Marsha taught us not to be ashamed, and Marsha taught us to turn up the volume. Our hope is that as we go from this place. We will not be ashamed of who we are, we will turn up the volume and we will be more fully ourselves. We pray that you open up your hearts and minds more and more because of who she was and who she will always be.²⁷

Johnson navigated a lot of hardship and as deeply spiritual person she often referenced her afterlife as ‘crossing the River Jordan’,²⁸ however, her life was abundant, and, considering the many systemic issues and violence she navigated, she deserves more than to be reduced to an assumption made by a system that did not protect her. By December 1992 her death was reclassified to ‘causes unknown’ thanks to campaigning led by Marsha’s family and the Justice for Marsha campaign.²⁹ There is speculation Johnson was pushed, accidentally fell or endured harassment, and the significance of these considerations was pressed upon more recently by transgender activist Mariah Lopez, leading to her case being officially reopened in 2012. While it

²⁷ Reverend Karen Ziegler quoted in Tourmaline, *MARSHA*, 2025, p. 248.

²⁸ Tourmaline, *MARSHA*, 2025, p. 129. Tourmaline summarises that Marsha P. Johnson ‘understood from the Bible that the waters of Jordan represented freedom and relief and the path to the promised land. This was a metaphor also used among African Americans for finding freedom from being enslaved’.

²⁹ Tourmaline, *MARSHA*, 2025, p. 142.



A Flower that Lives Forever
is a Flower Inside of Me



Tourmaline, A Flower That Lives Forever 2025 (stills). Courtesy the artist and Chapter NY, New York.

Presented as a cinematic experience, A Flower That Lives Forever invites audiences to slow down to encourage what Tourmaline calls 'receptive mode'.

remains unsolved, its status speaks more honestly to what was known and unknown about Johnson's life and death, and the importance of remaining open to the revelatory connection between past and present.

Presented in a distinct space with carpet, beanbags and lowlighting, the global premier of A Flower That Lives Forever invites a leisurely slowing down to complement the dreamy, uplifting and receptive quality of the video work. A Flower That Lives Forever joins Pollinator, and two other filmic works co-directed by Tourmaline and Sasha Wortzel—Happy Birthday, Marsha! (2018) and Tourmaline: Lost in the Music (2017)—as 'critical fabulations' that canonise Johnson. A Flower That Lives Forever reimagines a story told directly to the artist by Agosto Machado, a dear friend of Johnson (and now Tourmaline). Meeting around the hubbub of the 1963 World's Fair, across the late-1960s into the 1970s Machado and Johnson would hustle together in Times Square and the West Village, sharing in full spectrum experiences of exhaustion and violence, exuberance and joy, performance art and thriftiness—life filled with many different contradictions. A glimmer of Johnson's strength through joy and care is encapsulated by Machado's recollection of Johnson rallying the posse on a day when they were all particularly exhausted. Tourmaline retells the story;

Marsha was like, "Come on, girls, we're going on a cruise", to which Augusto said, "a cruise?" People were very skeptical, but Marsha doubled down, "yes, a cruise!" Without faltering, she brought them down to the free commuter ferry to Staten Island, where they all boarded, and took the Marsha P. Johnson cruise. Leaving Manhattan, they waved goodbye to the skyline and waved hello to the Statue of Liberty. They disembarked on Staten Island where they truly were the first flowers of their iteration to pollinate the otherwise conservative, white, and strait-laced island off Manhattan. On Staten Island, people had an abundance of different reactions—as they do—to seeing such beauty for the first time. They eventually turned around and went back. But they returned with a feeling of replenishment from the mental shift of being in a receptive mode. They

transmuted something that was mundane and ordinary into this larger-than-life experience.³⁰

The entity of the river was a life-long source of spirituality and renewal for Johnson, and she was generous in sharing the energy she was able to cultivate from it as both an idea and spectacle. Transmutation and generosity is at the heart of A Flower That Lives Forever. Layering footage of Machado on the Staten Island Ferry—including an expansive cruising scene—with contrasting scenes of Tourmaline in Johnson’s hometown of Elizabeth, the work tows the line between ‘real life’ and nostalgia. This theme is guided by the score and film quality that is evocative of the 1960s, in contrast with contemporary imagery of Tourmaline.

Today, Tourmaline exudes her own air of serenity and attunement to the profound, but admittedly she was not always like this. As a young community organiser and activist in her twenties, Tourmaline remembers considering ‘feelings were for the weekends’,³¹ and has laughingly recalled, ‘back then, I wasn’t really asking spiritual questions. I was a kind of annoying organiser person... and not that that was wrong or bad, but there was so much beauty I maybe wasn’t ready to receive’.³² Becoming receptive to beauty has been a cumulative process for Tourmaline, much of which has been guided and practiced through reconciling the worlds of art and activism.

Tourmaline’s relationship to photography began at nine years of age, receiving her first Pentax camera for Christmas. Her first experiences with photography and also film began through documenting the world as she saw it, rather than embracing the speculative quality that we see in her work today. Through her activism she made many important connections and embraced opportunities, such as meeting and working with filmmaker Kagendo Murungi who proposed making a documentary about themselves, Taking Freedom Home (2010).³³ The documentary

³⁰ Tourmaline quoted in interview with Prince, 4 October 2025.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Tourmaline quoted in ‘Bonus: Tourmaline, Marsha’s biographer’, Afterlives: Marsha P. Johnson, podcast hosted by Racquel Willis, 5 August 2025.

³³ Taking Freedom Home (2010) is a documentary released by the Welfare Warriors Research Collaborative, a project of Queers for Economic Justice. In Spring 2009, the Welfare Warriors surveyed low income LGBTQNC people about their struggles with racism, homophobia, and transphobia and their strategies in fighting for economic justice and queer liberation. They shared their research in this documentary featuring interviews with and comments by Sandie Green, Natalia Pabon, Chris Parker, Jonas Siregar, Trishala Deb, B.B., Kayla Stevens, Joseph A.J. Briggs, Jay Toole, Rachel Pugh, Kagendo Murungi, Dwayne Bibb, Michelle Billies, Miss Major Griffin-Gracy, Tourmaline, and Angela Davis. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WyRYGLmh_U [Accessed 10 October 2025].

marks Tourmaline's first formal filmic project, which charts a momentous time for Critical Resistance campaign including the positive outcome in 2009 in the campaign against building a new jail in New York in the South Bronx and stopping discrimination against trans and gender non-conforming welfare recipients. Within the context Tourmaline was also considering, through committee work, ideas of 'change, dismantle, grow' with the likes of trailblazing activist, Angela Davis. Tourmaline reflects, 'I was on this committee with Angela and maybe seven other people part of the program, and we were thinking about, "what do we want?"'³⁴ This question marked a paradigm shift for Tourmaline; 'We would talk about the five "I's" of oppression; ideological, institutional, interpersonal, internalised isolation. And part of what I didn't understand the importance of was your interior condition; how I feel about any given subject, especially about myself. Today this valuing is reflected in all my actions, conversations, and words. It's a rippling out effect'.³⁵ This shift in many ways was complimented by her work with Robin D.G. Kelley. Tourmaline remembers, 'he wrote a book about how to "Freedom Dream", which became a really important text in my life'.³⁶ It is a concept that involves imagining and envisioning a future that is more just and equitable, moving beyond what is currently possible. It is both a political and personal practice. The synergy of this concept can be seen across Tourmaline's expanded practice, including the radical joy of her most recent video work A Flower That Lives Forever and work as early as Happy Birthday, Marsha!

Transcendent series truly centres the valuing of presence and attunement with the self, thematically in dialogue with A Flower That Lives Forever. The series of seven dye sublimation photographs all feature the artist, depicted in luxe, custom looks styled by longstanding collaborator, Claire Sullivan, who over the course of years collaborating with Tourmaline, has gone on to work with renowned artists including Lady Gaga, Charli XCX and Rosalia. In Far and Away (2022–25)—one of two black and white works—Tourmaline is shown enjoying a cruise on the canals of Venice. She depicts herself in a state of bliss as indicated by her relaxed posture, eyes gently closed, and face turned up to bask in the sun, evoking the serenity of Johnson's Staten Island cruise. Alternatively, in the full colour image a flower that lives forever is a flower

³⁴ Tourmaline quoted in interview with Prince, 4 October 2025.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.



Tourmaline, Far and Away 2022–25 from Transcendent series 2022–25. Courtesy the artist and Chapter NY, New York

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inside of me (2022–25), the artist has depicted herself in a garden—poised, and looking directly, yet softly, at the viewer while dressed in a unique, sleek silver look—owning her moment. This work in particular recalls photographs from Tourmaline’s Pleasure Garden series (2020–21) that specifically recentre the history of the Black-owned pleasure gardens. In the 1820s these gardens of leisure and joy existed in the historical Seneca Village—a free Black land-owning community that existed in New York City—until it was destroyed for the development of Central Park that began in 1857.³⁷ Pleasure Garden series dually speculates and claims Black pleasure, leisure and peace. The artist explores her capacity to reclaim Black history through conceptual practice, in this series this is through the art historical tradition of Afrofuturism, as seen in her futuristic attire of an astronaut’s spacesuit, signaling to worlds beyond what we know. By engaging with relatively obscured Black histories while looking to the future, Tourmaline presents the concept and practice of Freedom Dreaming. Transcendent series continues the artist’s interest in this powerful practice and message. She engages with the fraught history of Black leisure through reimagining the specific experience of Johnson’s defiance in choosing rest and joy.

At a time when the rights and self-determination of trans and gender nonconforming peoples are increasingly under threat by numerous political and social groups globally, the visibility of Tourmaline’s practice is particularly urgent.³⁸ Activist Raquell Willis has observed that in recent times, ‘trans people are being discussed as if we are a topic up for debate’.³⁹ As one of the smallest demographics in the world, this public discrimination is scary for all. Professor of Law

³⁷ ‘Press Release’, Tourmaline: Pleasure Garden, 14 December 2020–31 January 2021. <https://chapter-ny.com/exhibitions/pleasure-garden/press-release/> [Accessed 10 October 2025].

³⁸ In the United States the recent and ongoing actions of President Donald Trump have explicitly prohibited the rights and self-determination of trans and gender nonconforming peoples. For example, on 21 January 2025, the day of his inauguration, President Trump signed an Executive Order taking the ‘X’ gender marker off of passports, and soon after signed another Executive Order to keep men out of women’s sports, and then another that defines gender in federal matters as only male or female. Similar regressive reforms can be seen across the globe. In April 2025 Hungary passed a constitutional amendment, led by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, to ban LGBTQ+ public events, such as Pride, and also stated that the constitution recognises two sexes, male and female, an expansion of an earlier amendment that prohibits same-sex adoption by stating that a mother is a woman and a father is a man. Furthermore, in March 2024 Russia added ‘LGBT movement’ as groups to list as extremist and terrorist organisations to be maintained by an agency called Rosfinmonitoring that has powers to freeze the bank accounts, joining the figures that range from Al Qaeda to associates of late Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny. Closer to home, recently on 29 October 2025, in Queensland, Australia, the Queensland Health Minister Tim Nicholls issued a new directive to ban public doctors from prescribing puberty blockers to adolescents with gender dysphoria.

³⁹ Racquel Willis quoted in ‘Bonus: Tourmaline, Marsha’s biographer’, Afterlives: Marsha P. Johnson, podcast hosted by Racquel Willis, 5 August 2025.

at Monash University, Paula Gerber, articulates; 'Everyone benefits from environments where diversity is respected and protected, reducing social tensions and fostering mutual understanding',⁴⁰ the alternative is an interlocking system of judgement and oppression. Self-portraiture, which exists across Tourmaline: Transcendent offers a powerful lens to reify lived experiences through an autoethnographic framework, whereby unique experiences become networked within both community and canon. Through the human spirit, the exhibition navigates histories of trans-liberation and LGBTIQA+ rights movements, racial and class issues, political and judicial systems, manifestations of counter-cultural art, the AIDS crisis and spirituality. By locating meaning within the body, across subject and mediums, *Tourmaline: Transcendent* moves us towards a recording of history and futures that honours agency and nuance.

⁴⁰ Paula Gerber, The power of allies in safeguarding the rights of trans people in Australia, Monash University, Melbourne, 17 October 2025. <https://lens.monash.edu/@politics-society/2025/10/17/1387926/the-power-of-allies-in-safeguarding-the-rights-of-trans-people-in-australia> [Accessed 27 October 2025].



Tourmaline, a flower that lives forever is a flower inside of me 2022–25 from Transcendent series 2022–25. Courtesy the artist and Chapter NY, New York

Tourmaline's engagement with the life and legacy of Johnson has come to inform the language of her art... Tourmaline: Transcendent extends the power of this relationship to audiences, so that progress made, and insights learned by those who have come before can continue to bloom, forevermore.
—Sophie Prince