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Photo illustration by Thomas Levinson/The Daily Beast/Frances Coombe on Instagram

A successful fashion model claims his agency deep-sixed his career after he came out as transgender last year, deeming him “insufficiently masculine” to work as a man, and dropping him from their roster.

In a lawsuit filed Tuesday in Manhattan federal court, Frances Coombe, who has appeared in *Vogue*, *i-D*, and *Women’s Wear Daily*, accuses Muse Model Management NYC and its founder and president, Conor Kennedy, of civil rights violations over his gender identity, and wants them to pay for inflicting emotional distress and damaging his reputation, career, and income.

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time, as have many of my former agency's models, both male and female," Coombe said in a statement provided to The Daily Beast by his attorney, Jillian Weiss. "... I am filing this lawsuit so no other models of any gender need ever face such job discrimination in the modeling industry in the future."

In an email, Kennedy's attorney, Carlos Carvajal, said on Wednesday, "Muse represented Frances Coombe for over 10 years as a model. It's surprising and disappointing that Frances has filed this lawsuit, after a decade of working together, that lacks merit and is legally flawed. We look forward to clearing Muse of any alleged wrongdoing."





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The 30-year-old Coombe was first discovered in his native Toronto at the age of 16, and signed with Muse in 2011, according to the lawsuit. At the time, Coombe’s “modeling was directed to the female market, with a gender expression that was feminine,” and he appeared in magazine spreads and on runways for, among others, Marc Jacobs, Miu Miu, Gucci, and Yves Saint Laurent, the lawsuit states.

As time went by, Coombe’s gender expression became increasingly androgynous, the suit continues. In mid-October 2021, Coombe notified the higher-ups at Muse, including Kennedy, “of a change in his gender identity, expressed at that time as a non-binary identity,” the suit goes on.

This apparently didn’t sit well with Kennedy, who allegedly told Coombe, “In the modeling world, non-binary does not exist, we will still pitch you to clients as a woman.”

“In modeling life, you will be ‘she’ and ‘her’ until you arrive on set; non-binary models are not sought after in the casting process,” Kennedy said, according to the lawsuit. “When you show up for a job, you can tell them your pronouns then.”

Coombe would be sent to women’s wear jobs whether he liked it or not, the



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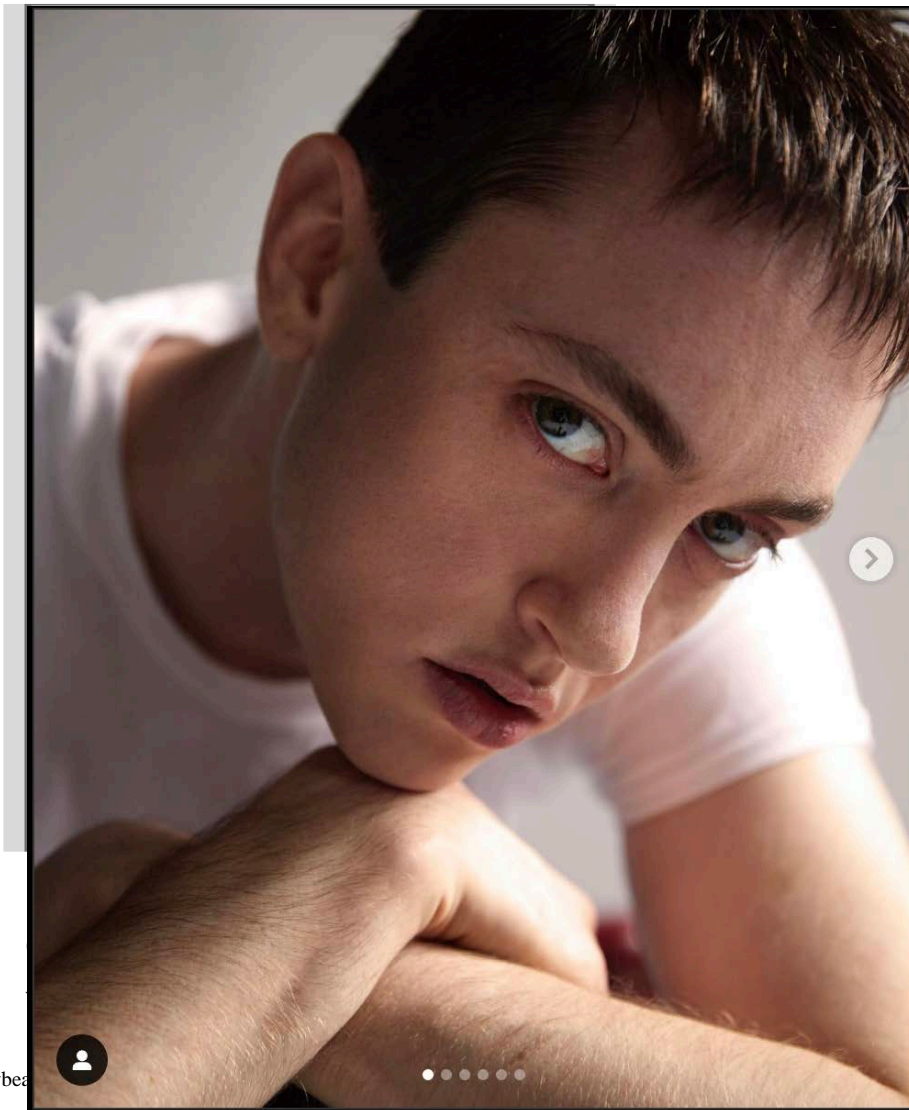


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A week later, Kennedy agreed to have a Muse photographer take new photos of Coombe for a “non-binary” rebrand, the lawsuit says. However, it alleges, the photog “insisted that [Coombe] wear women’s clothing, i.e., a bikini, and refused to permit him to wear men’s boxer briefs or men's shoes.” In January 2022, Coombe hired his own photographer for a reshoot, followed by another one the next month, and provided the pictures to Kennedy, according to the lawsuit.



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suit. Kennedy chastised Coombe for continuing to raise the issue, and took no action even after Coombe—who says Kennedy made him cry on at least one occasion—submitted multiple complaints to both him and the company, the suit says.



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opportunities and income,” the lawsuit states. On March 30, 2023, Coombe told Kennedy he had had enough.



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[Kennedy] accepted [Coombe’s] resignation,” the lawsuit says.

The next day, Coombe posted on Instagram: “Don’t tell me I’m brave for being visibly trans. The choice I make not to hide from the world, should not be looked at as an act of courage. Yes I am vulnerable but I will not let my existence be measured by a reaction to fear or hate.”

Coombe has since signed with We Speak Model Management, a decade-old agency that bills itself as one that “develops and nurtures careers for models and creatives across all identities.” His bio on the agency’s website lists Coombes’ pronouns as He/Him/His.

“Frances gained the attention of top photographers Miles Aldridge, Ellen Von Unwerth, Hedi Slimane, along many others, displaying an ability to effortlessly transform in front of the camera,” it reads. “A muse to New York icon, Norma Kamali for over a decade, she describes him as ‘the chameleon.’ ... In 2022 Frances came out as a gay trans man, and continues to captivate audiences not only through his modeling, but acting[,] as well.”

In her own statement, Weiss, Coombe’s attorney, said the lawsuit is intended to send “a strong message.”

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such as modeling,” Weiss said. “... A model may also be respected on the quality of their work, regardless of gender identity. All Americans deserve an equal chance to work hard and earn a living for themselves and their families, without fear of being targeted for being themselves.”

Coombes is asking for yet-to-be-determined compensatory damages and punitive damages significant enough “to deter Defendants from engaging in similar discriminatory conduct.”



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