

THESIS

THE LESBIAN ARTIST AS A CHILD

Submitted by

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ABSTRACT

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My thesis project is an artistic response to my experiences growing up as a feminist lesbian in the United States, England and Belgium in the 1970's and 80's. My monochromatic, childhood self-portraits reference some of the challenges I faced from western, hetero-centric patriarchy and my paper discusses how my identity as "Other" compelled me to discover, then determine, my place in society as well as in art history.

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my father, Harold, whose photos I referenced in this series of paintings. His hard work provided me with countless opportunities, his guidance has been invaluable and his tremendous, unwavering love and support has meant the world to me!

I'd also like to thank my partner, Jamie, for her amazing enthusiasm, encouragement and love. I am a lucky woman.

INTRODUCTION

This thesis paper discusses LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual, and Queer) social and artistic history, especially as it relates to my personal experiences, and explains my compositional and formal choices in communicating my reality through painted self-portraits. Art played a tremendously influential role in my childhood, as my art teacher mother and my businessman/hobby photographer father both consistently wove beauty, creativity and art history into my childhood consciousness, my experiences and environment. Our home was filled with artwork, art books, art materials and all manner of art-making equipment like looms, woodworking tools and a darkroom. Despite its engrained presence in my personality, I didn't embrace art as a lifestyle and career choice until I turned forty years old. Until then, understanding and asserting my core social, political and personal identity as a feminist lesbian had preoccupied my focus. I found intermittent LGBTQ books, music, films and political activism empowering but hadn't really seen (or perhaps recognized) relatable LGBTQ visual art to that point. Happily, my accumulated life-experience has now given me a stronger sense of self and the broader contextual perspective with which to recognize the contributions of LGBTQ artists and graduate school has offered me the agency to better explore visual art as a means of my own identity expression.

CONTEXT

People whom we today describe as existing somewhere in the LGBTQ spectrum have existed throughout the entirety of human history. Cultures around the world and throughout the millennia have treated these individuals in a multitude of ways, from veneration to condemnation, and everything in-between. Queer theorist, David Halperin at the University of Michigan said, “Sex has no history, because it’s grounded in the functioning of the body. Sexuality on the other hand, precisely because it’s a ‘cultural production,’ does have a history.” “...the naming and categorizing of those acts, and those who practice those acts, is a historical phenomenon, and can and should be studied as such.”¹ The homosexual imagery and poetry found in ancient Greek artifacts, or accounts of Leonardo da Vinci’s or Michelangelo’s relationships with men, for example, would not necessarily have borne a prescribed stigma, as their behaviors did not define them. Our modern practice of equating sexuality with identity has its roots in the comparatively recent, nineteenth century.²

The nineteenth-century was an extraordinary turning point in Western culture as its cultural figures sought to understand and conquer the planet and its inhabitants. Mathematicians, physicists, doctors, engineers, philosophers, and historians prolifically quantified and organized the world as they saw fit. In 1889, psychiatrist Richard von Krafft-Ebing, sorted what he considered sexual disorders into his catalog called “Psychopathia Sexualis.”³ Krafft-Ebing, despite the fact that he was presenting his conclusions as science, referenced sexuality in the

¹ Brandon Ambrosino. “The Invention of Heterosexuality”, www.bbc.com, March 16, 2017

² *ibid*

³ Richard von Krafft-Ebing. *Psychopathia Sexualis: with Special Reference to the Contrary Sexual Instinct* (translated by Charles Chaddock) seventh edition, Philadelphia: The F. A. Davis Company, publishers. 1894

context of stoicism - a theology which granted acceptability only to reproductive sex. Later scholars like sexologist Henry Havelock Ellis in 1897⁴, psychologist Sigmund Freud in 1905⁵, and Alfred Kinsey in 1948⁶ would publish more objective studies of sexuality using terms like heterosexual and homosexual but by then, Krafft-Ebing had already imposed the binary of 'normal' vs. 'abnormal' which facilitated prejudice⁷ Greater awareness of homosexuality's existence and even its acceptance in some social circles, did not prevent discrimination... on the contrary, it put homosexuality under a metaphorical microscope which institutions would use to justify criminalization and anti-sodomy laws for more than a century thereafter.⁸ Acknowledging homosexuality 'necessitated' a response and, as is often the case, the majority group declared its orientation as the 'standard' and that of the minority as 'deviant.' Society was exhibiting the profound and cyclical patterns of action and consequential reaction which shape history.

In 1687, physicist Sir Isaac Newton introduced his third law of motion which states, "For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction."⁹ His formula for understanding physical forces also explains human nature and is relevant in understanding the intended and unintended consequences of social change. While nineteenth century Cartesian impulses had narrowed the known world into discrete categories and sciences, it had simultaneously broadened access to information with the advanced technologies and new class structures that came of the industrial revolution. Larger populations had access to the money, leisure time, steam-engine travel, literacy and telegraphic communication necessary to learn more and more about the world at

⁴ Clare Barlow and Tate Britain, Host Institution. *Queer British Art, 1861-1967*. YBP Print DDA. 2017. 54

⁵ Paul Robinson. "Freud and Homosexuality," *Constellations*, March 1999, Volume 6. 81

⁶ Alfred C. Kinsey. *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*, W.B. Saunders Company. 1948

⁷ Brandon Ambrosino. *The Invention of Heterosexuality*. www.bbc.org, March 16, 2017

⁸ House of Lords, United Kingdom. "Sexual Offences (Amendment) Bill 2000.

<https://www.theyworkforyou.com/lords/?id=2000-11-13a.18.6>

⁹ Jim Lucas. "Equal and Opposite Reactions: Newton's Third Law of Motion, *Live Science*, September 25, 2017

large. The masses, including those in the LGBTQ community, slowly started rejecting the social norms and expectations that had kept them in their places. Formerly disadvantaged populations started realizing that knowledge and new experiences gave them a new sense of personal empowerment and greater freedom and they sought more of the same.¹⁰

The art world, too, was being loosed from the long-held expectations and the restrictions that traditional aristocratic and religious art patronage had imposed. Changes in wealth distribution and the rise of a middle class meant that by the 20th century there were new art consumers and new art producers. LGBTQ artists and authors, many of whom came from wealthy industrial families, started creating art that reflected their own views and experiences. Male painters like Frederick Leighton (fig. 1), Simeon Solomon (fig. 2), Henry Scott Tuke (fig.3), and writers like Oscar Wilde and Lord Byron, portrayed men as sensual and beautiful. Female painters like Romaine Brooks (fig. 4), and Gluck (fig. 5) and writers like Radclyffe Hall created images of women as independent and strong. Despite the fact that these artists lived under threat of “anti-buggery” laws,¹¹ they risked their lives and fortunes to defiantly offer new versions of sensuality and identity to the public. Because their stories became part of cultural consciousness and started slowly changing attitudes, later LGBTQ artists continued their example of artistic risk-taking buoyed by the conviction that while power comes from knowledge, it can also come from being known.

This basic desire for recognition, respect and self-determination would gather momentum over the next century to eventually become the sexual revolution, civil rights and feminist movements of my lifetime. Newton’s Third Law could, once again, be used to describe the

¹⁰ Robin George Collingwood, Dussen, and Dussen, W. J. Van Der. *The Idea of History*. Rev. Ed., with Lectures 1926-1928.. ed. Oxford [England] : New York: Clarendon Press ; Oxford University Press, 1993.

¹¹ Felix Dennis. “A Timeline of Gay Rights in The U.K.” <http://www.theweek.co.uk/87213/a-timeline-of-gay-rights-in-the-uk>, *The Week*, July 2017

white, heterocentric patriarchy's resistance to change. Every advancement towards equality would elicit a backlash, as if there was only so much power to go around. Attempts at self-actualization in the LGBTQ community, at large, would meet with consequences in all aspects of society, including healthcare, education, legislation and in cultural realms like art.

In 1989 right wing conservatives, like Jesse Helms, Pat Buchanan and Newt Gingrich attacked the National Endowment for the Arts for providing funding to LGBTQ artists.¹² While they claimed that they were concerned about 'obscene,' explicit sexual imagery which they considered pornography, they specifically targeted homoerotic imagery, lesbian and gay artists and artists of color regardless of the content of their work. Andres Serrano's work, "Piss Christ" (fig. 6) which showed a crucifix submerged in a jar of Serrano's urine contained no sexual content whatsoever.¹³ The Corcoran Gallery of Art cancelled Robert Mapplethorpe's retrospective show, "Robert Mapplethorpe: A Perfect Moment" shortly after his death because his work, like his "Self Portrait, 1975" (fig 7) and his admittedly graphic sadomasochistic photos offended various members of Congress and caused too much negative publicity.¹⁴ Gay artist and activist, David Wojnarowicz wrote, "It is a standard practice to make invisible any kind of sexual imaging other than white, straight male erotic fantasies..."¹⁵ The aforementioned artists were male, but censorship and the male gaze perhaps played an even greater role in affecting the visibility of lesbian artists.

¹² Tom Wicker. "Art and Indecency," New York Times, July 1989

¹³ National Coalition Against Censorship, National Endowment for the Arts: Controversies in Free Speech. <http://ncac.org/resource/national-endowment-for-the-arts-controversies-in-free-speech>

¹⁴ Barbara Gamarekian. "Corcoran, To Foil Disputes, Drops Mapplethorpe Show," New York Times, June 14, 1989

¹⁵ Harmony Hammond. Lesbian art in America: A contemporary history. New York: London: Rizzoli; Troika, 2000. 95

Since 1985 the feminist activists, The Guerrilla Girls, have been famous for calling out art museums for the exclusion of female artists from their shows and collections (fig. 8), but lesbians, as a minority within that category, have had even less visibility.¹⁶ Artist and author, Harmony Hammond said, “Art by lesbians has been erased from the historical canons, or minimized, marginalized, and straightened in what Arlene Raven has called an ‘academic douche’, a kind of heterosexual cleaning. This lack of accessible history is a form of oppression, for those were denied a history of culture did not exist.”¹⁷

In 1998, artist Deborah Kass declared that there was representational disparity even within the LGBTQ community of artists. Kass boldly said, “The art world isn’t homophobic, it’s lesbophobic. It’s riddled with fags. They support each other and show one another. It’s traditionally where fags go to make a living. It’s very culturally historically sanctioned from da Vinci, Michelangelo Caravaggio and on. This is where we expect faggots to be... no one expects lesbians. We’re expected to be in literature or libraries not visual art. There’s no culturally sanctioned place that has any fame, money or glory attached to it where lesbians are supposed to go, unless it’s the tennis circuit and even that’s controversial”¹⁸. This quote makes me laugh but it does address how even marginalized groups can harbor inequitable hierarchical divisions. To give Kass credit, even thirty years after she said this, I can assume most people on the street could name at least one or two gay male artists but would be hard pressed to come up with one lesbian.

When lesbians and gay men did show in galleries together there were distinct style differences that largely had to do with the male gaze. While gay men, especially in the 1970s

¹⁶ <https://www.guerrillagirls.com/projects/>

¹⁷ Harmony Hammond. *Lesbian art in America: A contemporary history*. New York: London: Rizzoli; Troika, 2000. 10

¹⁸ *ibid*, 124

before the AIDS crisis, tended to portray idealized and often erotic images of the male body, lesbians generally wanted to avoid imagery reminiscent of heterosexual male pornography. As artist Harmony Hammond explained, “Most erotic art has been rooted in figuration. To get around the problems of voyeurism and consumption imposed by figuration, lesbian artists have employed a range of devices and strategies that have been successful to varying degrees: blurring, overlaying, solarizing, fragmenting, reframing, repeating, abstracting, or symbolizing.”¹⁹

Works by lesbians, Tee A. Corinne (fig 9) and Joan Snyder (fig. 10) tended towards this more abstract approach of portraying women, while images like those of Judie Bamber (fig 11), Zoe Leonard (fig. 12) and Catherine Opie’s “Self Portrait/Pervert” (fig 13) tend to focus on isolated body parts or more grotesque representations of the female body as a way to challenge traditional male-gaze ideals. While I understand the intent to re-contextualize the feminine and to reclaim power by over-emphasizing objectification, I take issue with how these artists continued to portray women, in absence of or as Body. In my opinion, reducing lesbians or feminists to abstractions or genitalia perpetuates the idea of women as sexual commodities. Leaving the rest of the person out of the portrait becomes another sort of censorship or exclusion. Happily, feminists and lesbians today have started to reintroduce representations of themselves as whole, complex and empowered artistic subjects. My self-portraits are an attempt to be acknowledged as an equal member of society while building a dialogue between the heterosexual and LGBTQ worlds. Even though more LGBTQ people can be seen in media and entertainment and are more likely to be ‘out of the closet’ in liberal parts of the country these days, there is still a sizable amount of outreach to be done in diversity work.

¹⁹ *ibid.* 88

I joke that I probably seem to talk to everyone about my homosexuality too often but my reasons for going on about it in conversations and in my artwork are not at all funny. Representation, visibility and activism are still a pressing concern. Internationally, there are many countries where it is actually illegal to be LGBTQ. People are ostracized, assaulted, and killed every year all around the world for being (or even suspected of being) gay or transgendered. Civil rights are forever tenuous and subject to social tides. Openly gay English parliament minister, Ben Bradshaw said in 2011, “We must always be on guard against the assumption that progress is irreversible. Although I think we’re still moving in the right direction we must be wary of a revival of old prejudices and bigotry, and there is a tendency throughout human history to target and scapegoat minorities.”²⁰ In the United States, the prejudice that kept LGBTQ people legally marginalized and oppressed for centuries still exists and has been emboldened by the latest divisive and regressive administration. Bigoted legislators around the country have attempted to rollback and restrict the rights and freedoms of all marginalized groups including LGBTQ people, women and all people of color as a backlash to the small advances made during the Obama administration.

In February 2018, in the Colorado capitol, House Bill 1206, ironically called the “Live and Let Live Act,” was introduced to legally sanction discrimination against the LGBTQ community on religious grounds.²¹ On February 14, 2018, House Bill 1245, which sought to ban “Conversion Therapy” was re-introduced despite being consistently defeated for many years.²² This bill, which seeks to deny the right of licensed therapists to subject underage members (or

²⁰ Holly Williams interview, *The Independent* online, 17 December, 2011

²¹ Colorado.gov. Live and Let Live Act, http://leg.colorado.gov/sitewidesearch?search_api_views_fulltext=18-1206

²² Joey Bunch. “Colorado Senate Kills Anti-Gay Conversion Therapy Bill for Third Straight Year.” *ColoradoPolitics.com*, <https://m.gazette.com/colorado-senate-kills-anti-gay-conversion-therapy-bill-for-third-straight-year/article/1599544>, March 23, 2017

even suspected underage members) of the LGBTQ community to so-called “reparative treatments” like genital-shock aversion techniques and hypnosis in an attempt to make them “normal” has repeatedly failed to pass because enough legislators believe that children should be “fixed” by any means possible.²³ This despite all evidence that neither homosexuality/bisexuality, nor transgenderism are disorders (it was removed from the Diagnostic Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders in 1987)²⁴ or that psychological abuse and violence can change someone’s orientation.²⁵ The final indicator of a regressive legislative backlash came in February when Colorado’s Joint Budget Committee proposed to defund, and in essence, eliminate Colorado’s Civil Rights Commission.²⁶

Even though I have more rights than my lesbian predecessors and despite the fact that today’s general public, especially its teenagers, have become more open-minded, it is clear that there are forces actively trying to curtail my civil liberties and keep me from being a respected and empowered citizen. I need to keep insisting on recognition and validation. I believe that art is an important aspect of my voice, in part, because it can be accessible to people who are different from me.

²³ Laura Reinsch. “LGBTQ Legislative Priorities Discussion”, at Out Boulder County, Longmont office, February 12, 2018

²⁴ Neel Burton, M.D.. “When Homosexuality Stopped Being a Mental Disorder,” *Psychology Today*, September 18, 2015

²⁵ Kate Kendall. NCLR Executive Director, “#BornPerfect: The Facts About Conversion Therapy,” www.nclrights.org, June 30, 2017

²⁶ Marianne Goodland. “Joint Budget Committee Votes to Defund Colorado Civil Rights Commission” *Colorado Politics*, February 8, 2018

MY WORK

When Frederick Leighton (fig. 1), Simeon Solomon (fig. 2) and Henry Scott Tuke (fig.3) exhibited paintings that portrayed men as sensual and beautiful and Romaine Brooks (fig. 4) and Gluck (fig. 5) painted dapper and defiant portraits of themselves, friends and lovers, they were asserting their own visibility as gestures of affirmation. This tradition continued through the work of more modern LGBTQ artists like Diane Arbus (fig. 14), Lucien Freud (fig. 15), David Hockney (fig. 16), Annie Leibovitz (fig. 17), Sadie Lee (fig. 18), Roxana Halls (fig. 19) and Sarah Jane Moon (fig. 20), all of whom have used portraiture to present their subjects, as well as themselves, as LGBTQ people in a world dominated by heterosexuals. Whether they have suggested explicit political or emotional messages or not, they have used their artwork to declare themselves worthy of attention and recognition. Art, over time, has become a self-declared validation akin to the chant used in LGBTQ pride marches in the 90's - "We're here, we're queer, get used to it!" (fig. 21)

I want my artwork to make this declaration. Like others before me, I use portraiture to capture a sense of self. In this particular series I do this by representing my accumulated memories as a feminist and lesbian. While I hope that each painting leaves room for multiple interpretations, I see this thesis as an opportunity to share my story and show how my development was especially affected by these two key aspects of my identity. All of the paintings in the series are simplified but realistic images of me taken from childhood snapshots.

Like all LGBTQ people, I started out as a child. This is, of course, patently obvious but it is a good reminder that we each made our way through a cultural landscape of arbitrary rules and roles - many of which didn't feel right for us. I was vaguely aware of my non-

heterosexuality as early as 4-5 years old. Homosexuality wasn't generally discussed, so from a very young age I was only able to define myself as unlike most people. I did not play with Barbies, wear 'girly' clothes, or have crushes on boys at school. Instead, I preferred building things and obsessing over female characters on television. I felt no desire to be considered cute, I wanted to be considered capable. I didn't mind being called a tomboy but I did not care for being mistaken for a boy, which happened at least once a week. I didn't quite fit in with either the girls or the boys on the playground. I was highly aware of inequities between girls and boys, mostly because, as a girl, I felt I was nearly always at a disadvantage. Childhood, for everyone, is a time of navigating, trying out, accepting or rejecting socially imposed or at the very least, expected, gender roles. Because I was inherently different, and because adults and other children filled my childhood with concerned or critical feedback about my difference, my youth became a symbolic testing ground for an identity I would need to talk about for the rest of my life.

I would also like to think that, since everyone seeing my paintings will have experienced a childhood, that they might have an empathetic reaction to the work... they might see their younger-selves or their own children in the imagery. Adults are able to see children as innocent and vulnerable, so they are more readily able to empathize with them. Children don't possess the deceptive artifice that adults typically hone for society. They cannot be held responsible for poor life choices or political agendas. so we don't judge them as we do grown-ups. Adulthood is meant to be an indicator of decisions made. Career, financial success and social status, life-partners, parenthood, political and spiritual affiliation are all measures of goals achieved. These decisions also give others something to judge. Children are pure emotion, possess enthusiastic curiosity and represent the vulnerability that lingers at the core of everyone. Children's

personalities, gifts and predilections are innate, so it is impossible to blame them for who they are. I was born this way and portraying myself as a child is a reminder of that.

My most important reason for using childhood imagery is to respond to the unfair, and frankly creepy, over-sexualization of the LGBTQ community (especially lesbians). To understand what I mean by over-sexualization, one need only look to the slurs that have been historically used to describe people in the LGBTQ community like muff-diver (lesbian) or cock-jockey (gay male.) As sociologist Professor Carrie Robinson said, “Sexuality appears to be an issue that adults have difficulty talking about and very strong religious attitudes about rightness/wrongness.”²⁷ Because sex has been so closely affiliated with morality, especially in the United States which, in my opinion, remains surprisingly puritanical, our culture still regards sexuality as something naughty or dirty, and something that frequently involves shame. Our most cautionary film ratings for example, NC-17 and X, are generally reserved for sexual content as opposed to violent content. Sexual activity, even when consensual, romantic and safe, is often considered more offensive and dangerous to young minds than murder, torture and psychological depravity. Film critic Roger Ebert when discussing ratings said, “Violent action is okay. You can kill people as long as you keep your clothes on and watch the F-word.”²⁸ In our “uptight” culture, one of the easiest ways to disparage someone is to reduce them to a sex act. I will refrain from listing more of them here but, if you search LGBTQ slurs on the Internet you will see that the overwhelming majority of those terms are centered around genitalia or sexual practices, as I

²⁷ Kerry H. Robinson. “Making the Invisible Visible: Gay and Lesbian Issues in Early Childhood Education.” University of Western Sydney Australia, *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood, Volume 3, Number 3*, 2002. 418 <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.2304/ciec.2002.3.3.8>

²⁸ Roger Ebert, “Ugly Reality in Movie Ratings”, www.rogerebert.com, September 24, 2000

listed above.²⁹ Labeling someone as a so-called ‘unacceptable behavior’, in my mind, is a shortcut to robbing them of their humanity.

In speaking of films and their ratings, a glamorized, fantasy version of lesbianism has been a long-time staple of heterosexual male pornography. As author Sally Munt writes “Within heterosexuality, difference and antagonism are eroticized. Difference produces desire...”³⁰ This might explain, in part, why straight men seem to consider lesbians appealing as opposed to threatening. Pornography scenes with two naked women together is doubly oppositional, for the subjects are female and ‘gay.’ In this type of pornography, the idea that the women are there exclusively enjoying each other, by design, is usually mitigated with the introduction of a man into the scenario. This additional actor assures the straight male viewer that even ‘lesbian’ women remain accessible to men like him and that this sort of sex really only happens for the lack of a present man. I cannot begin to count the number of times that I have seen a man smirk and declare that he ‘...doesn’t have a problem with lesbians as long as he can watch.’

I believe that my sexual orientation is not best described in the context of sex but rather by a far more complex set of emotional elements. Before the act of sex, and even before sexual attraction, children develop their own unique personalities with access to feelings like admiration, prioritization, ambition, confidence, and notions of romance (which truly revolve around love, trust, safety, belonging, devotion, effort, reliability, and a feeling of being valued and understood). According to developmental psychologists, Kristen Darling and Laura Lippman, children learn the fundamentals of self-identity and relationships with others before the

²⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_LGBT_slang_terms

³⁰ Sally Munt. *Heroic Desire: Lesbian Identity and Cultural Space*, New York, NYU Press, 1998

age of five.³¹ I, as an adult, would like to be considered, first, as a person with feelings and an individual personality, not as some sort of fetishized misconception. Painting myself at my foundational beginnings, before sex was at all involved, is an effort to bring focus back to the many other elements that make up my orientation and identity, without immediately reducing myself to a one-dimensional, sexualized stereotype.

My wish to be known as a lesbian painter has led my graduate research through a process of introspection, personal investment and artistic risk-taking in an effort to effectively reach out to a diverse audience in an accessible way. I have moved from painting the still-life to landscapes to friends and finally, to myself as I have committed to making my art more personal. Looking at the work of my predecessors in the LGBTQ community has helped me to realize that self-portraits seem to have the most potential to support my larger sociological agenda. Portraying myself as a child and allowing room for interpretation, may encourage viewers of all kinds to pause, engage, empathize and consider themselves in a space of mutual regard.

Formally, these paintings are meant to be accessible by being free of extraneous information. One way that I achieve this is by steering clear of the many complicated cultural psychological reactions to color (for example, blue being indicative of sadness or yellow as cheery) as well as its loaded implications in gender identification. Since the twentieth century, color has been used as shorthand to signal which things are meant for males and which for females so have been used to widen the gap between genders. Neurosurgeons Paolo Frassanito and Benedetta Pettorini discussed this history by saying, “After World War II, blue was used extensively for men’s uniforms. Therefore, blue became associated as more of a masculine

³¹ Kristen E. Darling-Churchill, Laura Lippman, “Early childhood social and emotional development: Advancing the field of measurement”
Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology, Child Trends, Bethesda, MD. March 2016

color. From the 1940s onward, pink was pushed as a woman's color. 'Think pink' was the marketing slogan to convince women to embrace their femininity."³²

I wanted to avoid brightly colored symbolism, in general, so if I had pointedly used rainbow colors in my work to reference the LGBTQ flag it too would have been too heavy-handed a distraction.

I use black and white in these paintings to also signal that the images represent memory. My paint application gives the imagery a soft, faded quality which places the little girl in the past and is reminiscent of photographs found in old photo albums. Author Christina Baldwin said, "How we remember, what we remember, and why we remember form the most personal map of our individuality."³³ Portraying my own individuality and identity through memory, then, is a way to share myself with the viewer and to, again, evoke a sense of empathetic understanding.

My use of black and white here also directly references the commonly used expression to describe "Truths" as a matter of "black and white." This vernacular is used to describe right and wrong as a simple binary. The inflexibility and historical consequences of breaking issues into two extremes of "good" and "bad" has too often eliminated the possibility of the "in-between" and has consistently been used in the denigration of people, behaviors and ideas. The LGBTQ Community (which has long suffered at the hands of extremism) has learned to instead embrace the idea of identity and human expression as existing on a spectrum or scale existing between extremes. For me, value, both in the artistic and philosophical definition of the word, is found here in the in-between... in the shades of gray.

³²Paolo Frassanito and Benedetta Pettorini, "Pink and Blue: The Color of Gender", *Child's Nervous System* 24 (8) January 4, 2008
www.researchgate.net/profile/Paolo_Frassanito/publication/5673081_Pink_and_blue_The_color_of_gender/links/5406edba0cf2c48563b27fd4.pdf

³³ Christina Baldwin (1991). *"One to One: Self-Understanding Through Journal Writing"*, p.68, M. Evans

My skin tone in all of these paintings is created solely with the use of Ivory Black oil paint and paint-thinner. The warmth in these paintings, then, is made of varying degrees of transparency. Layers of thinned paint allow light to bounce off of the panel's white background to optically blend with the single pigment to create diverse values and provide depth. The black paint, when thickly applied, creates a more opaque and cold darkness but when the underlying light is allowed to show through there is a warmth and subtlety that suggests life. I appreciate the metaphor of letting an underlying light be seen, especially as I am painting portraits of my younger, less guarded and vulnerable self.

The process of balancing the right amount of transparency and opacity, covering and uncovering the underneath speaks to my experience of finding my identity as I grew up. All children need to figure out what to reveal and obscure about themselves as they negotiate social systems but LGBTQ people, especially, need to consider issues of safety when letting themselves be seen. The painstaking adding and subtracting of paint in search of the image is a symbol of what we choose to let show. For me, it feels like a contemplative exercise of tactile and visual discovery. I use my fingers to smudge, apply and lift the paint to define my form. I focus this attention and technique only on my portrait's skin, as anything else in the painting is external to the self. In order for this process of addition and subtraction to be possible, I have chosen to work on wooden panels rather than canvas. On a wooden support, I am able to create greater subtlety in value and line using brushes and my fingertips on a smooth, firm surface. Panels are also better equipped to withstand vigorous and repeated adding, erasing, smearing and finessing in search of the image.

My paintings represent me, as both subject and painter, and my compositional and formal choices are meant to reflect specific experiences referenced in each painting's title. Though all

of the paintings have layers of meaning and may be interpreted in many ways, each painting has a primary intended focus which can be loosely broken down into two categories of either feminist or lesbian observations.

The paintings which mostly center around feminist issues are titled: “Space Taking” (fig. 22), “Drag” (fig. 23), “Dress Shoes” (fig. 24), “Uphill” (fig. 25), “You’re Prettier When You Smile” (fig. 26) and “I, Object” (fig. 27).

“Space-Taking” (fig. 22) shows an edited image of a family portrait. My spot in this portrait is empty and shows only the panel’s background white. My absence symbolically speaks to the issues of visibility/ invisibility and taking up space willfully. In the 1960’s, when the reference photo was taken, women and children were both encouraged to be seen and not heard, so neither my mother nor I are visible. The painting also suggests the vulnerability of the marginalized or the very young in contrast to the dominant culture.

“Drag” (fig. 23) shows a combination of clothes and accessories which are divided into binaries of male/female performative gender indicators. In this instance, the black objects (accessories) are what we might consider typically male and the white outlined dress is traditionally female. The question in this LGBTQ instance is, which is “Drag” to me? My expression in the painting seems ambivalent which is appropriate because I did not generally care for “girl’s” clothes as I grew older and often gravitated towards things that were “meant” for boys. This photo was taken in a time when it was still a bit unusual for women, but especially little girls, to wear trousers. Once feminism helped women realize that inflexible gender roles, including clothing, propped up the patriarchy that held them back, fashions changed. After the age of 5, I only begrudgingly wore dresses for special occasions, as they just weren’t ‘me.’

“Dress Shoes” (fig. 24) shows my later reaction to fashion expectations. By the age of 7-8 I had started to make small yet stubborn rebellious gestures against gender-specific clothes. I found so-called feminine clothing restrictive and often physically limiting. I found dress shoes (specifically those for skirts and dresses) to be supremely uncomfortable. I still hate the fact that they demand itchy and constricting hose and that they make long term standing or running virtually impossible. Today I generally consider traditionally “feminine” clothing limiting in mobility and comfort by design and I usually avoid it. Some lesbians (“femmes”) enjoy dresses, panty hose and dress shoes. I suppose my insistence on tennis shoes here, indicates that I, even as a child, leaned a little more “butch.”³⁴

“Uphill” (fig. 25) depicts the naivete’ and confidence of my pre-teen years. It shows a brief moment when I thought possibilities were limitless. While I was already receiving coded messages of how women should act and feel about themselves, I had not yet hit puberty when all of those restrictions fall into place. The thin, painted line beneath my feet suggests the uphill battle that women have to endure to gain empowerment and confidence. In 1991, the American Association of University Women conducted a survey of 3000 children. The study found that “...at the age of 9 a majority of girls were confident, assertive and felt positive about themselves. But by the time they reached high school fewer than a third felt that way.”³⁵ This was certainly my experience. Society’s discouragements to those who are not white, straight and male are accumulative and seem to become more acute as we age. Overcoming the obstacles feels like a precipitous climb.

³⁴ Lisa Walker. “How to Recognize a Lesbian”, *Looking Like What You Are: Sexual Style, Race, and Lesbian Identity*, New York and London, New York University Press, 2001. 183

³⁵ Susan Daley. Little Girls Lose Their Self-Esteem Way to Adolescence, Study Finds, *New York Times*, January 9, 1991 <http://www.nytimes.com/1991/01/09/education/little-girls-lose-their-self-esteem-way-to-adolescence-study-finds.html>

“You’re Prettier When You Smile” (fig. 26) is a response to patriarchy’s wish that females be passive and placating. Women and especially little girls are constantly told by strangers what to do, how to behave and who to be. This image spells out the fatigue and frustration of being ordered to please. I am STILL told to smile by strange men and it is infuriating. It is NOT in good fun. People who wholeheartedly believe they are entitled to determine what other people do with their own bodies makes, in extreme cases, assault and rape culture pervasive. The “Me Too” movement, which was started in 2017 by Tarana Burke, encourages victims of harassment to share their stories and has just started to reveal how widespread abuse is in our culture.³⁶ Sexual harassment is very often expressed as micro-aggressions, like telling women to smile and responding with anger if they do not cooperate.

“I, Object” (fig. 27) Represents the moment when I, as a very young woman, realized that my worth and publicly understood identity was as “body.” My head and feet are missing here as “a body” has no self-determination and no agency. The flat, background-white paint emphasizes the “bathing-suit” areas which have, against my will, become society’s focus. My intellect and personality have no bearing on my perceived value. The pose, as it is portrayed, is also intentionally reminiscent of historical images of Saint Sebastian, bound and vulnerable to arrows of martyrdom. The title may be read as a realization that I am being identified as an object, or it may be read as a protestation. In this case, it is both.

The remaining paintings center primarily around issues to do with my lesbianism. The titles of these paintings are; “Only One” (fig. 28), “Lavender Menace/Gay Marriage” (fig. 29), “Erasure” (fig. 30), “Half a Mile” (fig. 31), “Behaved” (fig. 32), “Smear” (fig. 33) and “Inundated” (fig. 34).

³⁶ <https://www.cnbc.com/amp/2018/01/19/metoo-founder-tarana-burke-has-big-plans-for-the-movement-in-2018.html>

“Only One” (fig. 28) has a title that is open ended as it may refer to my portrayed age, the fact that I was an only child, or to the isolation I felt in being different amongst peers. In this instance, my primary aim is to represent how lonely it felt to feel so different from others. I was unaffiliated with people like me until I started my university studies and discovered gay pride, women’s studies and LGBTQ activism in the 80s and 90s. Until then, I felt as though I was the only girl who loved girls. None of my friends identified as gay and most of the gay characters on T.V. or in movies were either men or tragic women. It was not encouraging. Author Sarah Diemer, spoke about her experience of feeling alone saying, “Growing up as a lesbian, I was told over and over and over by the lack of gayness in books that I did not exist. That I wasn’t important enough to tell stories about. That I was invisible.”³⁷ As it turns out, lots of LGBTQ children feel alone, but they are not.

“Lavender Menace/Gay Marriage” (fig. 29) this title references Betty Friedan’s wish to exclude lesbians from feminism. In 1969 Friedan, the president of the supposedly feminist National Organization for Women, warned that the “lavender menace” of lesbianism could “undermine the credibility of the women’s movement, destroying whatever progress has been made.”³⁸ This sort of fear-driven exclusion, as well as later efforts by Christian conservatives to keep marriage as an exclusive right for straight people, sought to limit rights and respect to only certain groups of people. This image of me, a tiny lesbian in a ghost costume, ironically exposes homophobia as the hysterical, overblown and unnecessary fear it is. Am I a “ghost” - a terrifying Specter of Death? Or, am I just a little girl giggling and running to collect Halloween candy like

³⁷ <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/tag/lesbian>

³⁸ Harmony Hammond. *Lesbian Art in America: A contemporary history*. New York: London: Rizzoli; Troika, 2000. 16

the rest of the children in the neighborhood? This painting symbolizes the ridiculousness of fearing people who simply wish for equality.

“Erasure” (fig. 30) addresses the lingering right-wing wish for LGBTQ populations to disappear. Laws that state, either blatantly or more back-handedly, that LGBTQ people do not matter enough to warrant equality continue to be proposed around the country. During the 80’s (read AIDS crisis) and thereafter, it was fairly common for people to suggest that gays should be removed from the country to protect “normal” people.³⁹ The 2016 presidential campaign has led to devastating consequences in the LGBTQ community. The round-the-clock media attention given to what I consider to be a misogynistic, bigoted, ignorant and reckless administration has emboldened the people who still fervently cling to prejudice, violence and even Nazi-ism. I find the increase of hate-crimes to be scary, and even if most people would never resort to murder to get rid of me, some might. According to a January 22nd, 2018 report by The Anti-Violence Project, national data says there was an 86% increase in hate motivated homicides in 2017. They said the increase made 2017 “...the deadliest year yet for LGBTQ community.”⁴⁰ Given that the Pulse nightclub massacre took 49 lives in 2016, the fact that 2017 was more deadly is especially significant. The legislative efforts to eliminate my rights and the culture of bigotry which seems to have members everywhere, both mean to silence, and therefore erase, me and mine.

“Half a Mile” (fig. 31) refers to the idiom, “Walk a mile in my shoes” which suggests that empathy comes from shared experience. In the painting I am trying to walk in my mother’s shoes. As a lesbian, I would not grow up to experience the automatic privileges of

³⁹Curtis M. Wong. Texas Congressman Wants to Put Gay People On an Island To See If They Die Out, Huffington Post, November 2015
https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/louie-gohmert-wants-to-put-gay-people-on-an-island-to-see-if-they-die-out_us_563a4fdde4b0307f2cab9b68

⁴⁰ David Badash. “LGBT People Saw Huge Increase in Hate Crime Homicides Last Year”,
http://www.thenewcivilrights_movement.com, January 22, 2018

heterosexuality that my mother took for granted. I painted more detail in the shoes as they are a symbol of an unattainable commonality but also because they represent my mother. The painting's title also refers to the fact that my mother died when she was in her 40s. She, herself, was only afforded a "half mile."

"Behaved" (fig. 32) speaks to the facade sometimes necessary to assimilate and get along. Unlike marked racial difference, LGBTQ people occasionally have the option to be "closeted." So-called passing has been discussed as a double edged sword. It may be easier for a moment (sometimes it provides safety itself) but ultimately self-censoring equals internalized homophobia like internalized racism and gives credence to the notions of bigotry. There is a shame implied. The smiling mask here represents being in the closet.

Choosing to be 'out of the closet' has its costs. Members of labeled and marginalized groups who 'speak up' and acknowledge their status are too often tasked with representing an entire population. When artist, Zoe Leonard was asked in an interview what it meant to be a lesbian in 1994, she responded "Why is it that the work of minority artists is always examined for signs of difference? Why is it always us - the dykes and fags, the women artists, the black poets, the Asian playwrights who are asked about our sexuality or our race? What does being a white man have to do with Robert Ryman's work or Jeff Koons's? What does being heterosexual have to do with Picasso's? I don't mind being a woman artist. And as a lesbian I'm as out as can be, but it's the double standard that bugs me."⁴¹

I have certainly had moments where I resent the implied necessity of being a "good ambassador" for my community, but given the fact that there are still people who cannot safely acknowledge their identity as LGBTQ and especially since I could, in theory, pass as straight by

⁴¹ Harmony Hammond. *Lesbian art in America: A contemporary history*. New York: London: Rizzoli; Troika, 2000

being in the closet, I consider it an important responsibility and duty to let people know that they are interacting with an out, proud, feminist lesbian. Not a single person in my social circle or in any job I have ever had has had the luxury of dismissing the ubiquity of the LGBTQ community because “they don’t know any people like that.” I refuse to behave or to hide myself behind a mask to make others feel more comfortable, so I make art and I make it clear that I am gay, to be present and to make my voice heard. Every person to see my work will have seen lesbian-made art.

“Smear...” (fig. 33) is meant to call to mind the playground/sports phrase, “smear the queer,” which was common in my youth. To emphasize the phrase, I have physically smeared the paint on my painted, queer self. I chose an image of myself playing softball not only because the title phrase is sports related, but because it so neatly fits into the stereotype that lesbians play softball. I actually believe that there are natural commonalities that lesbians share, so sometimes stereotypes are fitting. The problem, really, is when these generalizations are used as insults rather than neutral observations or indicators of belonging. I feel categories of identity are not necessarily problematic on their own... prejudicial judgements are.

Art historian, Edward Said, addressed stereotypes as a tool of oppression by saying, “Stereotypes of the Other have always been connected to political actualities of one sort or another, just as the truth of lived communal (or personal) experience has often been totally sublimated in official narratives, institutions, and ideologies... One must refuse to believe, however, that the comforts of specialized habits can be so seductive as to keep us all in our assigned places.” I think this is a good reminder that stereotypes within a community have different implications than those that are imposed. Looking or acting in a way that automatically

indicates that you belong to a group of ‘Other’ can be fun or it can make you obvious prey to those who want to ‘smear’ you.

“Inundated” (fig. 34) shows my teenage-self metaphorically drowning in the dangers, obstacles and worries I faced in 1985 as I began my “adult” life by moving from Europe to the United States to attend college. I had come out to friends but not to my parents yet. The barely visible words scratched in the white paint beneath my nose were words I had heard to describe gays and lesbians at the time. It felt overwhelming and all-encompassing. My hope here is that the look in my eyes, as well as the sense of creeping panic, will be universally relatable and that the viewer will see the subject in an empathetic way.

CONCLUSION

“Whatever is unnamed, un-depicted in images, whatever is omitted from biography, censored in collections of letters, whatever is missed, named as something else, made difficult to come by, whatever is buried in the memory by the collapse of meaning under inadequate or lying language this will become, not merely unspoken, but unspeakable” – Adrienne Rich⁴²

Our modern, technologically and socially advanced era has its origins in nineteenth century systems that identified, quantified and named in the quest for knowledge and power. Feminist poet and essayist, Adrienne Rich’s quote, above, describes the consequences that come when people and their realities remain unacknowledged. Lord Alfred Douglas, Oscar Wilde’s lover, wrote in 1894 that “I am the Love that dare not speak its name,”⁴³ which referred to the un-speak-ability and resultant shame that people in the LGBTQ community felt until very recently.

I refuse to proceed from a place of shame and I believe that both society and the art world actually benefit most from diverse, empowered individuals. Innovations, advancements and opportunities require unique points of view and an openness to change. Perhaps it is ironic that Western patriarchy’s inflexibility, prejudice and misconceptions have ultimately necessitated self-awareness and reactive self-affirmation in marginalized communities, but it once again indicates the cycle of action and reaction that is ever-present in human culture.

⁴² Harmony Hammond. *Lesbian art in America: A contemporary history*. New York: London: Rizzoli; Troika, 2000. 10

⁴³ Christopher Tinker. *Speak Its Name : Quotations By and About Gay Men and Women*, National Portrait Gallery, London, 2017. 46

Artist, Ana Mendieta, talked about self-actualization by saying, “The Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset said “To be a hero, to be heroic, is to be oneself.” I think this statement is particularly significant to the attitude an artist must have in society. It is only with the awakening that a person becomes present to himself, and it is only with this presence that a person begins to live like a human being.”⁴⁴

Ideally, everyone on earth would have a strong sense of self and embrace their own identity, but as long as hierarchical social systems impose strict rules, roles and external measures of worth on people, (as referenced in my paintings) individuals must act with ‘heroism’ to make their voices heard. I have been inspired by the LGBTQ artists and activists who over the past 150 years have used persistence and diverse expression to prove that there is no one ‘right way’ in art or in life. I intend follow their example and positively contribute to the continuing LGBTQ legacy with my life and my art.

⁴⁴ Charles Harrison and Paul J. Wood. *Art and Theory 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, New York, Wiley, 2003. 1064

FIGURES



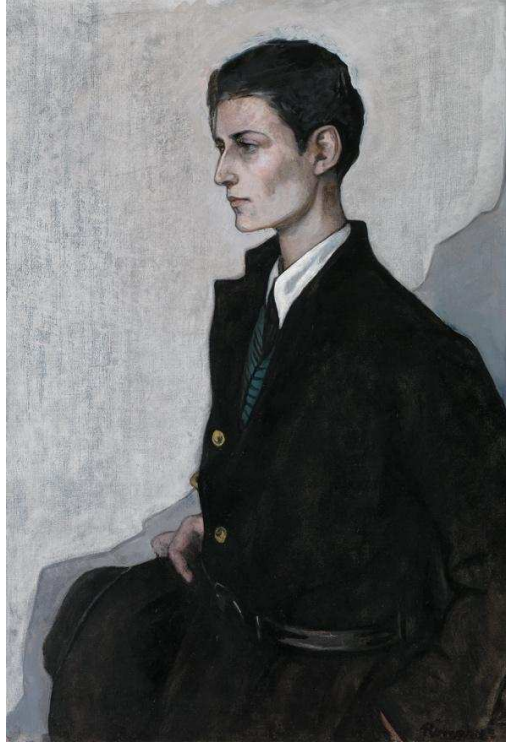
(fig. 1) Lord Frederic Leighton, Daedalus and Icarus, 1869



(fig. 2) Simeon Solomon, *The Bride, Bridegroom and Sad Love*, 1865



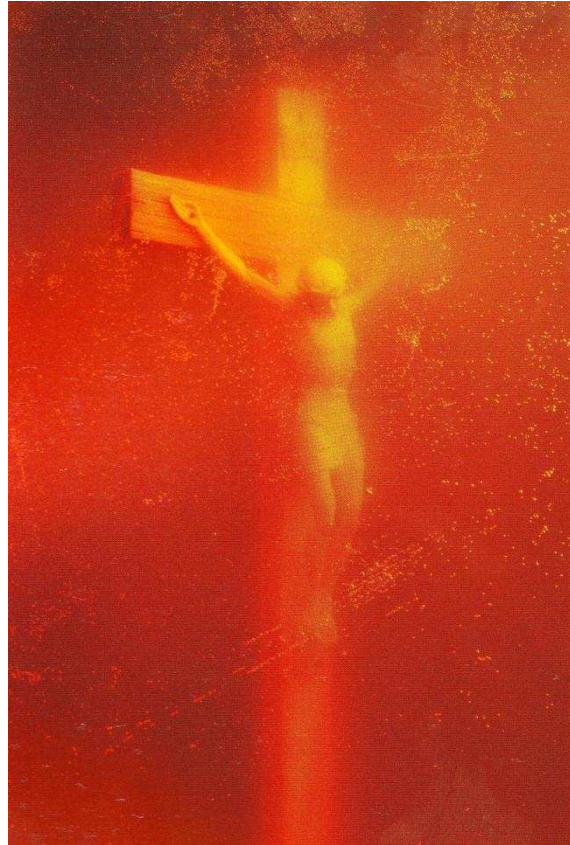
(fig. 3) Henry Scott Tuke, A Bathing Group, 1914



(fig. 4) Romaine Brooks, Peter (A Young English Girl), 1923-24



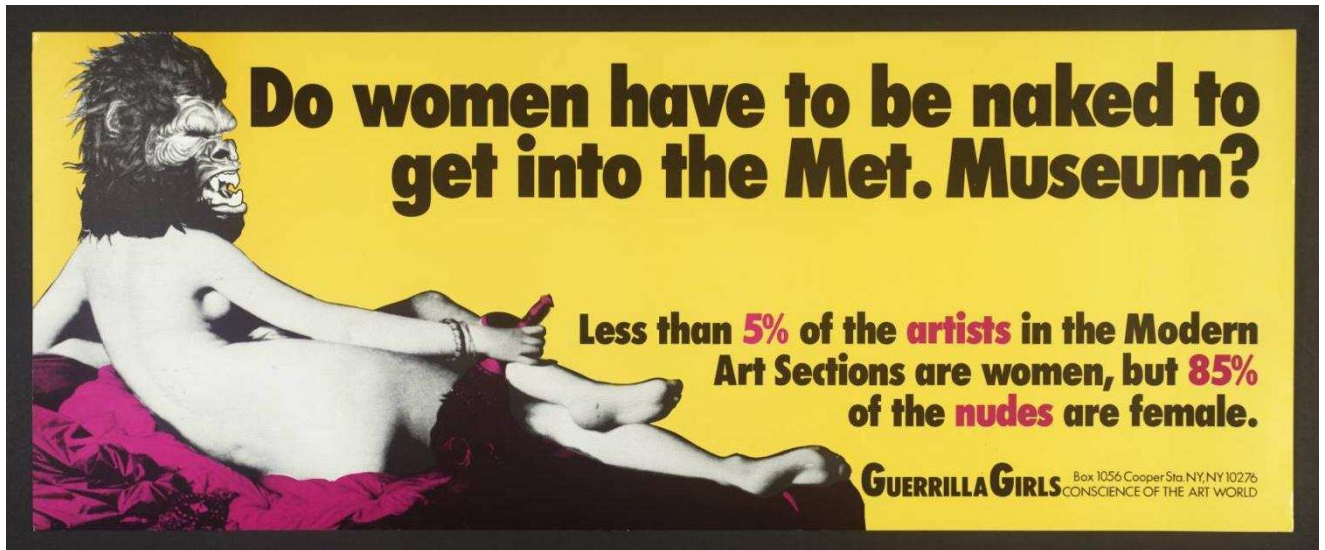
(fig. 5) Gluck, Self Portrait, 1942



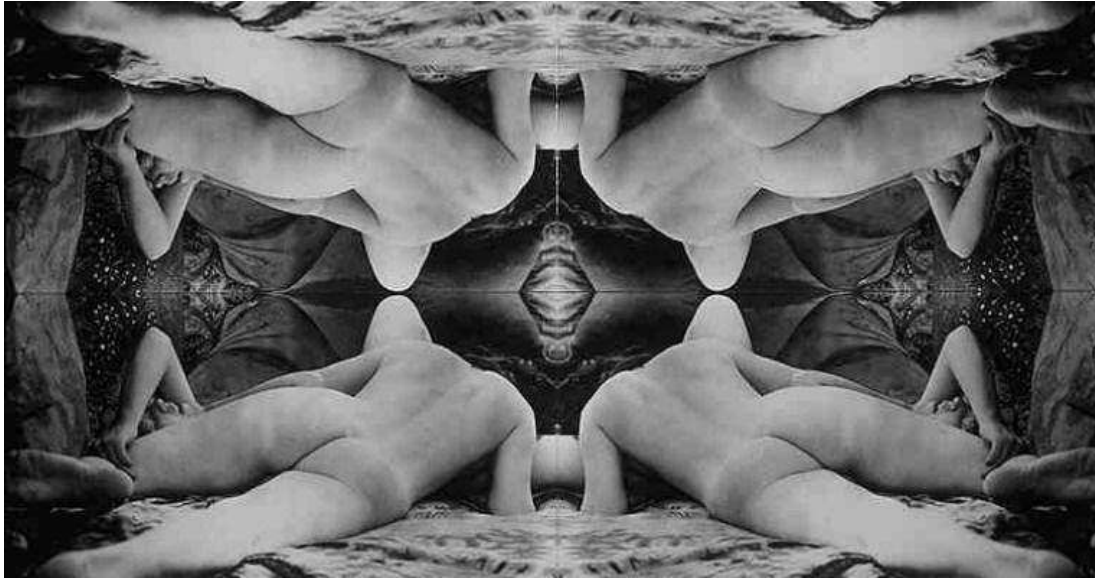
(fig.6) Andres Serrano, Piss Christ, 1987



(fig. 7) Robert Mapplethorpe, Self Portrait, 1975



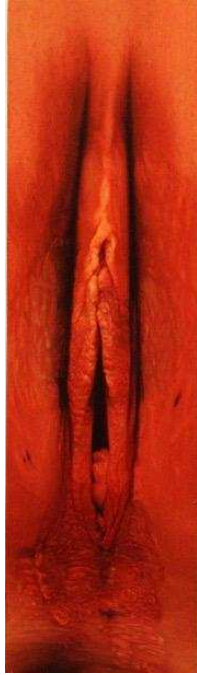
(fig. 8) Guerrilla Girls, 1985



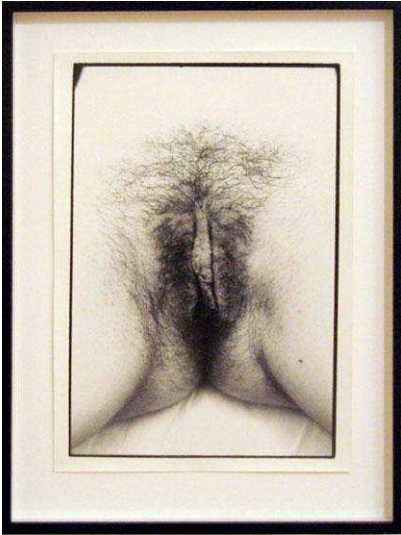
(fig. 9) Tee A. Corinne, Yantras of Womanlove #31, 1982



(fig. 10) Joan Snyder, Heart On, 1975



(fig. 11) Judie Bamber, Untitled #1, 1994



(fig. 12) Zoe Leonard, Documenta IX, 1992



(fig. 13) Catherine Opie, Self-Portrait/Pervert, 1994



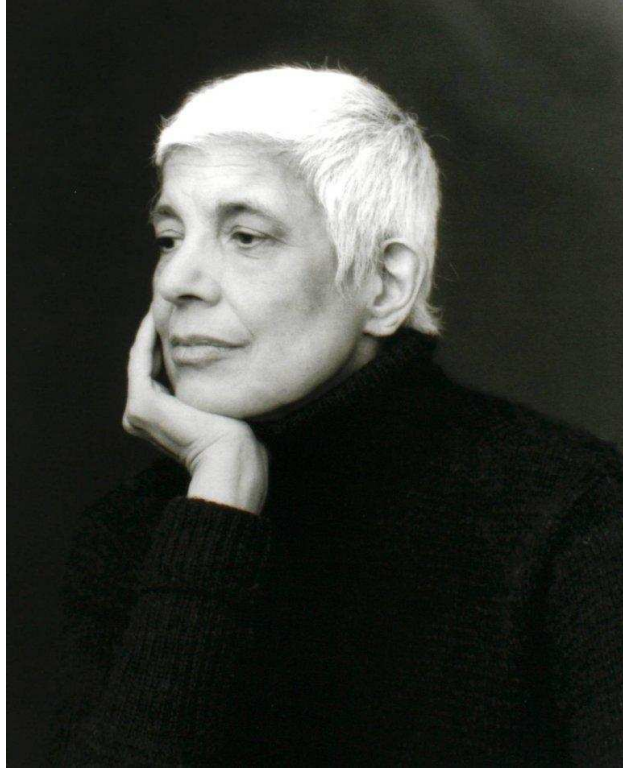
(fig. 14) Diane Arbus, Self Portrait 1949



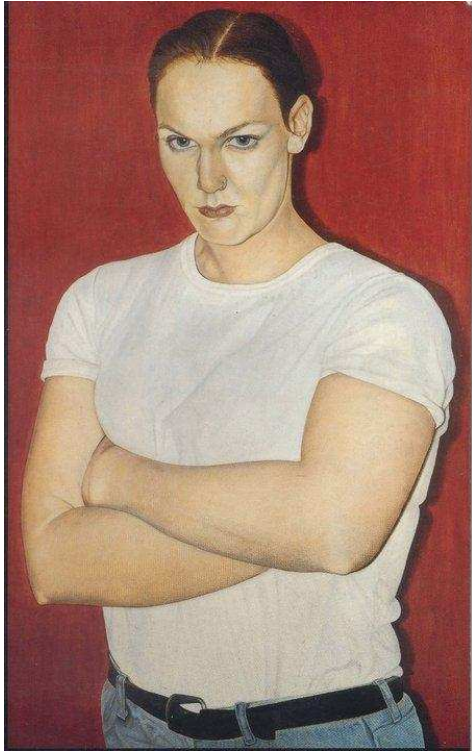
(fig. 15) Lucien Freud, David Hockney, 2002



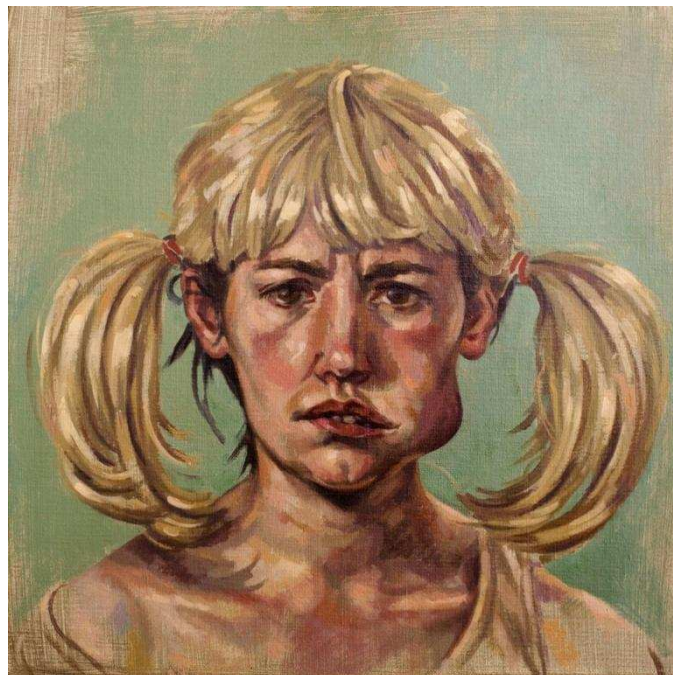
(fig. 16) David Hockney, Lucien Freud, 1999



(fig. 17) Annie Liebovitz, Susan Sontag, 1999



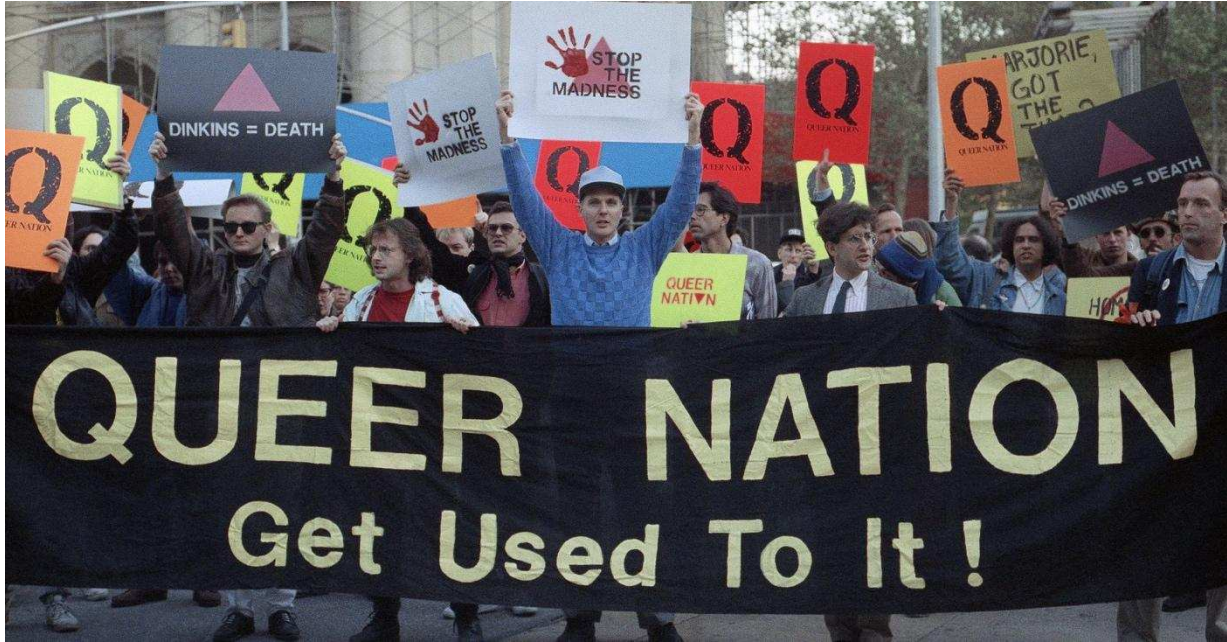
(fig. 18) Sadie Lee, Raging Bull, 1993



(fig. 19) Roxana Halls, Gobstopper, 2013



(fig. 20) Sarah Jane Moon, Tamson Kilburn, 2013



(fig. 21) Zoe Selsky, Queer Nation Protests in NYC, 1990



(fig. 22) "Space Taking"



(fig. 23) "Drag"



(fig. 24) "Dress Shoes"



(fig. 25) "Uphill"



(fig. 26) "You're Prettier When You Smile"



(fig. 27) "I, Object"



(fig. 28) "Only One"



(fig. 29) “Lavender Menace/Gay Marriage”



(fig. 30) "Erasure"



(fig. 31) "Half a Mile"



(fig. 32) "Behaved"



(fig. 33) "Smear"



(fig. 34) "Inundated"

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