



American Art: Gay Male, Post-Stonewall

by Richard G. Mann

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During the last three decades of the twentieth century, gay male art underwent a radical transformation. Like individuals in many other professions, gay artists came out of the closet after Stonewall, and they began to treat gay themes openly and directly.

Since the mid-1980s, prominent gay artists have been able to take advantage of opportunities for mainstream exhibitions, which would have been inconceivable earlier in the century. However, the highly publicized (and sometimes successful) attempts to suppress exhibitions of Robert Mapplethorpe's *X-Portfolio* exemplify the threats of censorship, which continue to worry many gay artists.

In the post-Stonewall period, artists of color have challenged the white racist underpinnings of much American gay art before Stonewall. In addition, during the past two decades, queer perspectives have inspired artists to visualize "fluid" constructions of gender and sexuality. Thus, contemporary queer artists integrate sexuality and passion into explorations of other aspects of identity, such as race, ethnicity, spirituality, and family life.

In response to AIDS, artists have created powerful works that help to inspire courage in the face of suffering and loss. Within the limits of this short entry, it is possible to mention only a few representative examples of the many artists active in the later twentieth century.

The 1970s

In the years immediately after Stonewall, a sense of exultation and liberation stimulated artists to create many different types of works, recording and celebrating diverse aspects of gay communities and relationships. *Agit Prop* (1971), a forty-foot-long, collage mural created by John Burton and Mario Dubsy in the "Firehouse" (the Gay Artists Alliance Building in New York City) is generally acknowledged to be the first monumental, group image of the newly liberated gay community. Combining photographs of gay protests with images of African-American political leaders and other cultural heroes, Burton and Dubsy visualized the hope for an egalitarian and just society.

Very different in mood, but equally effective in affirming the solidity of the gay community, are the intimate, domestic portraits of middle-class gay couples by David Alexander. In these colorful paintings, Alexander often includes reminders of gay cultural history that subtly relate his subjects to the long struggle for gay rights.

In his elegantly composed and lit photographic portraits, Peter Hujar (d. 1987) captures the distinct personalities of a wide range of gay and transsexual individuals living in New York, including famous personalities as well as street hustlers and others living "on the fringes" of society. In such characteristic images as *Jerry Rothlein* (1979) and *Nicholas Abdallah Mouffrage* (1980), Hujar defies stereotypical ideas of beauty but, nevertheless, manages to endow his subjects with a sense of great dignity.

A similar sense of dignity and strength imbues the photographs and paintings of New Orleans artist George Dureau, whose portraits of dwarfs, street youths, and amputees are at once erotic and moving.

Mainstream Success and Censorship

By the mid-1980s, the struggle for gay rights had progressed sufficiently far that some openly gay artists attained great success in the mainstream art world. Probably the most prominent of these artists is Keith Haring, who remained active as a "street artist" even after his paintings and sculptures were exhibited at major galleries and museums. His exuberant compositions--densely packed with "comic-book style" figures--had great popular appeal. Thus, he was able to celebrate gay sexuality, advocate safe sex practices, and promote various political causes in widely circulated works.

However, other politically engaged gay artists enjoyed less easy relations with the public than Haring, and many of them became embroiled in controversy. For instance, David Wojnarowicz became absorbed in several censorship battles involving *Tongues of Flame* (1990) and other major works. Combining photographs, paintings, and print techniques, Wojnarowicz created angry and impassioned pieces that linked homophobia to the structures of capitalist society.

Opening in 1975, the Leslie-Lohman Gallery in New York was the first major commercial gallery devoted to the promotion of gay art, including explicit erotic work; by the mid-1980s, similar galleries were opened in several other major cities. However, widespread intolerance for gay erotic imagery was revealed by the intense controversy provoked by two exhibitions of Robert Mapplethorpe's work: a Whitney Museum (NYC) retrospective (1988) and the nationally touring *Perfect Moment* (1988-1990).

The Corcoran Gallery in Washington, D.C. canceled *Perfect Moment*, and, in 1990, Dennis Barrie, Director of the Contemporary Art Center, Cincinnati, Ohio, was tried on the charge of pandering obscenity because he refused to cancel the exhibit. Although Barrie was eventually cleared of this charge, his long, nationally publicized trial demonstrated the limits still imposed on gay expression.

Barrie's trial was focused primarily on Mapplethorpe's *X-Portfolio*, an extended series of photographs produced largely in the late 1970s, which featured elegantly composed and lit images of fist-fucking and other S&M sexual practices. Expert witnesses, testifying on Barrie's behalf, managed to convince the jury that Mapplethorpe was primarily concerned with aesthetic, rather than sexual, matters.

Sexually Explicit Images

Many of those who publicly condemned Mapplethorpe's exhibitions linked the sexual acts depicted in the *X-Portfolio* to the AIDS epidemic. Confronted with the AIDS hysteria of the late 1980s, numerous gay community leaders called upon artists to avoid explicit depictions of S&M sexuality.

Yet, some artists have continued to create powerful images of the S&M sexual "underground." Prominent among these artists is Mark Chester, who describes himself as a gay radical sex photographer. Although Chester's photographs are often likened to Mapplethorpe's, his work is distinctive in several respects. Although he composes his images as carefully as Mapplethorpe did, Chester avoids the elegant "aloofness" of Mapplethorpe's *X-Portfolio* in order to reveal the intimate feelings linking his subjects to one another and often to himself.

Moreover, Chester seldom depicts individuals who resemble the handsome, athletic young men who predominated in the work of Mapplethorpe. Instead, Chester celebrates the intense masculinity and sensuality of heavysset middle-aged men, wearing glasses; Hassidic leather daddies, clad in the ritual attire of both Orthodox Judaism and the S&M underground; and others who are usually excluded from erotic art.

Racial and Ethnic Issues

The mainstream media, which gave so much attention to the explicit sexual imagery of the *X-Portfolio*, tended to overlook the racism of such Mapplethorpe images as *Man in a Polyester Suit* (1980) and many of his other photographs of African-American men. However, within the gay community, this aspect of Mapplethorpe's work stimulated debate about the dominance of white perspectives in gay erotic art. Prominent cultural critics, such as Kobena Mercer, called attention to the work of gay artists of color and condemned the lack of exposure of their work.

Many recent artists of color have articulated distinctive visions of gay sexualities and communities that challenge the racist ideology evident in much of the erotic imagery created by white gay men. In this respect, their work realizes the goals of unjustly overlooked, earlier twentieth-century artists of color, such as Bruce Nugent.

For instance, in *Tongues Untied* (1989) and other films, Marlon Riggs celebrated the African-American gay community and investigated how it was impacted by racism, internalized homophobia, and AIDS. Another African-American artist, Glenn Ligon has created photograph "albums" and multi-media installations, such as *Feast of Scraps* (1995), which reveal the unacknowledged presence of gay men in African-American families and visualize histories and dreams of love and desire among black men.

The essays and videos (such as *My Mother's Place*, 1991) produced by activist/artist Richard Fung, attack racist conceptions of "rice queens" and present intensely erotic images of gay men within the context of Asian-American families and communities. In such paintings as *Intimidades* (2000), Eugene Rodriguez has explored ways in which such factors as social class, geographic location, and ethnic heritage affect the formation of intimate relationships among Latino men.

Queer Artists

By the late 1980s, the essential structure of "gay" culture, focused exclusively upon same-sex desire among men, was challenged by a queer perspective. Queer artists oppose any limits upon sexual expressions and gender constructions, and, most often, they seek to blur other types of boundaries that limit human experience.

In his photographic tableaux, for example, Lyle Ashton Harris represents the interaction of diverse gender, sexual, racial, national, and spiritual "categories." Enacting diverse "masculine" and "feminine" roles in *Brotherhood, Crossroads and Etcetera* (1994), he and his brother, filmmaker and performance artist Thomas Allen Harris, envision the synthesis of Yoruba and Christian religious traditions and reveal the co-existence of violence and love in families and communities.

Queer perspectives have also been articulated vividly by many performance artists. For example, Chicago-based Lawrence Steger, working in collaboration with Iris Moore, has transgressively explored diverse gender roles and sexual identifications in such provocative, surreal pieces as *Rough Trade* (1994).

Martin Wong's career exemplifies the reluctance of queer artists to be confined by any pre-existing categories. His paintings of the 1980s, depicting the African and Latino communities of New York's Lower East Side, were originally dismissed by critics because they did not conform to the era's limiting "identity politics," which held that artists should articulate only the perspectives of their own ethnic/racial groups.

Such powerful works as *Little Got Rained On* (1983) and *The Annunciation According to Mikey Pinero: Cupcake and Paco* (1984) visualize spiritually and erotically charged narratives, loosely based on the writings of Miguel Pinero, with whom Wong had an intense, stormy relationship. In *Ms. Chinatown* (1992) and other characteristic paintings of the 1990s, Wong explores multiple gender and sexual possibilities, as he fuses memories of his childhood in San Francisco's Chinatown with the glamorous and decadent representations of that community in Hollywood movies and tourist mementos.

Responses to AIDS

Artists have helped to articulate the diverse responses of the gay and queer communities to the devastation wrought by AIDS, which broke out in 1981. Angry about the seeming indifference of the medical establishment and about the widespread stigmatization of those diagnosed with the disease, some artists resolved to use their work as a tool to organize the affected communities to agitate for change.

Gran Fury, a collective formed by six New York-based artists, created bold and direct poster designs, such as *SILENCE=DEATH* (1986), which depicted the Gay Liberation pink triangle and the title/slogan in white against a black background. Disinterested in monetary rewards, Gran Fury donated most of their works to ACT-UP.

Frustrated both by the failure of scientists to develop a cure and by the impact of AIDS on its own members, Gran Fury largely withdrew from the political arena and produced its final (untitled) posters in 1993. Against a plain white background, inscriptions in small black type call upon viewers to contemplate the consequences of AIDS.

Donald Moffett is among the artists who dealt with AIDS-related issues in both street posters (such as his anti-Reagan *He Kills Me*, 1987) and exclusive, carefully made works, sold through prestigious galleries (such as the installation piece, *You and Your Kind Are Not Wanted Here*, 1990).

Félix González-Torres created an extensive body of work, which called attention to the spiritual and emotional impact of AIDS without engaging in simplistic rhetoric. In *Bed* (1991), a photographic image of an unmade bed, and other billboards designed for specific locations in New York, Los Angeles, and Munich, he expressed the conflict between public and private, experienced by those under surveillance by the government and the medical establishment because of their HIV/AIDS status and their sexual orientation.

In opposition to mainstream conceptions of persons with HIV/AIDS as isolated and stigmatized, artists have represented the strong families and communities that embraced them. In this vein, San Francisco-based photographer Albert Winn created deeply felt and intimate images, recording the experiences of himself and his friends, such as *Brothers* (1991) and *Tony from My Writing Group* (1994).

Duane Michals narrated responses to the deaths of loved ones in photographic tableaux, including *Dream of Flowers* (1986) and *The Father Prepares His Dead Son for Burial* (1991).

In *Untitled (March 5th) #2* (1991), González-Torres utilized two bare light bulbs and extension cords to develop a complex piece to mourn the death of his partner, Ross Laycock.

Many artists have used traditional religious imagery in innovative ways as they sought to articulate their feelings about the losses caused by AIDS. For instance, Thomas Woodruff memorialized friends, such as *Ruoy Eman* (1992), through paintings of skulls, with Crowns of Thorns and other Catholic symbols. For these pieces, Woodruff utilized ornate frames, which recall Baroque altarpieces.

Delmas Howe spent six years working on *Stations: A Gay Passion* (completed 2001), an assemblage of sixty monumentally scaled paintings, drawings, and lithographs. Utilizing a figurative language ultimately inspired by the Italian Renaissance and incorporating numerous references to the Passion of Christ, this series celebrates both the intense sexuality of the New York gay community during the 1970s and the heroic suffering of persons with AIDS.

Through such pieces, Howe and other recent artists have fulfilled the traditional function of art to uplift the human spirit in the face of profound crisis.

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