



Leslie-Lohman Gay Art Foundation

by Douglas Blair Turnbaugh

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Life partners Charles Leslie and Fritz Lohman shared an intense interest in homoerotic art and began to build a collection together from the time they met in the early 1960s. At that time, explicit erotica and particularly gay male erotica, no matter how famous the artist who created it, was almost impossible to see. It was hidden from public view, for then it was literally a criminal offense to display it.

In 1969, Leslie and Lohman held a weekend, invitation-only exhibition of their collection of "secret art" in their loft in SoHo. There was great interest and many people attended, so over the next few years further exhibits were held, until in 1975 the two men rented a space and opened an art gallery, perhaps the first in the nation to be exclusively dedicated to promoting explicitly gay art.

In the same spirit of support for gay art, in 1977 Leslie published an illustrated monograph, *Wilhelm von Gloeden, Photographer*, which was influential in the resurrection of von Gloeden's work in the years to come.

Although the Leslie-Lohman gallery did not make money, it was a *succès d'estime* and inspired others. By 1980 there were six gay art galleries in New York City, creating a new and vibrant social and cultural circuit for an avid gay public. Then the AIDS crisis struck, and in the terror many gay businesses that had celebrated gay sex, particularly baths, bars, and movie houses, closed or were shut down. Among these casualties were art galleries.

By the late 1980s, Leslie and Lohman had reconsidered, with a raised consciousness, the issues of gay art and gay liberation. They decided to address these issues by setting up a foundation, in order to have the same tax-exempt status enjoyed by religious, educational, philanthropic, and other not-for-profit organizations.

In 1990, after relentless work by their lawyers--and homophobic responses challenging the organization's goals and purposes--the Leslie-Lohman Gay Art Foundation came into being. Its name is the first time the word "gay" appeared in the federal government's registry of not-for-profit organizations.

The foundation has three primary purposes: 1) to provide free space to exhibit gay and lesbian art; 2) to preserve the estates of gay and lesbian artists, particularly their erotica; and 3) to establish and maintain a collection of work by and an archive of material and information about gay and lesbian artists.

Although work on exhibit may be for sale, the gallery does not sell anything. Rather, it puts artists and collectors in touch with one another to make their own arrangements.

Quentin Crisp called the Leslie-Lohman Gay Art Foundation a truly underground gallery, as it is located in the basement of a building at 131 Prince Street in New York City.

Since its founding, the foundation has shown the work of 550 artists in more than 200 exhibitions; and its

permanent collection has grown to approximately 1,000 pieces, including paintings, sculpture, drawings, and photography.

Artists' groups meet at the gallery, films and videos are shown, and a lecture series presents well-known historians, critics, and artists to speak on the subject of gay art, its history, psychology, and aesthetics. The foundation also provides information on the means by which collectors and artists can protect their art work beyond their lifetimes.

Charles Leslie says, "We regard our work as part of the gay liberation movement."

A goal of the foundation is to have its own building, to house a museum, library, and archive, and adequate space for changing exhibitions. Contributions in aid of the foundation's purposes are tax-deductible.

Fritz Lohman died on December 31, 2009.

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About the Author

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