



## Photography: Lesbian, Post-Stonewall

by Elizabeth Ashburn

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.

Entry Copyright © 2002, glbtq, Inc.

Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>

Since Stonewall, the photographic representation of lesbians has been increasingly recognized as an important subject. The strong emphasis on photographic practice in the last twenty years and the growing access of lesbians to photographic and digital technologies have made possible the development of a significant body of lesbian photography.

While much of this work has been consciously political, Harmony Hammond points out that any lesbian imagery inevitably has a gendered and sexual particularity that questions and disrupts modernist ideas of universality.

### **The Categories of Post-Stonewall Lesbian Photography**

Although the period of lesbian chic in the early 1990s briefly created a palatable and de-politicized lesbianism for the mainstream, it also drew attention to previously ignored lesbian artists. Their work appeared in specifically lesbian exhibitions and in publications such as *Stolen Glances: Lesbians Take Photographs* by Tessa Boffin (1960-1993) and Jean Fraser (b. 1955).

In this 1991 book, Boffin and Fraser usefully divide post-Stonewall lesbian photographs into four categories: documentation of individuals and activities within the various lesbian communities, images of lesbians in the mainstream heterosexual press, photographs that explore a lesbian sensibility, and photographs that deal overtly with lesbian issues.

These categories are useful, but they are not exhaustive. Nor are they mutually exclusive; that is, any particular photograph might fall into more than a single category. Particularly interesting are those images that counteract the traditional invisibility of lesbians and lesbian communities; those that attempt to capture a particular lesbian sensibility; and those that confront specific problems and issues within lesbian communities.

### **Documentation of Lesbians and Lesbian Communities**

Boffin and Fraser point out that, in response to the historical invisibility of lesbians, there has been a concerted effort by lesbian photographers to document all aspects of lesbian existence. Many lesbian photographs fill family albums and have been influential in extending the meaning and definition of family. Through photographing their social lives, significant events, and political actions, lesbian photographers have used the gay press and other publications to create an enduring lesbian archive.

In North America during the 1970s, lesbian photographers such as Cathy Cade (b. 1942) and JEB (Joan E. Biren, b. 1944) documented lesbians of various ages, races, and classes in order to deconstruct the stereotypical images of lesbians that prevailed at that time.

Cathy Cade originally began taking photographs to document her concern for social justice. The Women's

Liberation Movement gave her both an ideology and a subject--political demonstrations against the oppression of women. Similarly, Bettye Lane traveled around the world photographing women's demonstrations, meetings, and events.

At the same time, JEB toured America with slide shows that illustrated the history of lesbian photography. For over twenty-five years, she has been photographing lesbian mothers, a preoccupation she shares with British photographer Brenda Prince (b. 1950).

Other post-Stonewall photographers who document individuals and activities within the various lesbian communities include Judy Francesconi (b. 1959), Chloe Atkins (b. 1954), and Linda Kliewer (b. 1953).

In her series *Women with Women*, Francesconi captures loving and positive images of lesbians. Atkins documents nightclub events in San Francisco and has developed series of photographs of Drag Kings and lesbian athletes. Kliewer has photographed middle-American lesbians and served as the cinematographer for *Ballot Measure 9* (1993), an award-winning film about the fight against anti-gay politics in Oregon.

Theresa Thadani (b. 1960) also contributes to the photojournalistic documentation of lesbians. Trista Sordillo's (b. 1970) photographs in her *Lesbian Invisibility Series*, including "Butch/Femme" (1995), is a continuing project, documenting and honoring friends from her lesbian community. In Sydney, Mazz and C. Moore Hardy (b. 1955) have also extensively documented lesbians, transsexuals, and bisexuals and their community events.

In the 1970s, Nan Goldin (b. 1953) began taking photographs of the gritty reality of those who live outside the spaces of conventional sexual identity. Her slide show of 700 images, *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* (1982), later excerpted in her book of the same name (1986), told the story of her life as a bisexual, intertwined with the stories of her friends. She portrays a morally ambiguous world inhabited largely by drag queens and transsexuals.

### **Universal versus Specifically Lesbian Images**

Images of lesbians have also appeared in heterosexual and mainstream galleries and magazines. These photographs were particularly visible during the brief period of lesbian chic. They were often produced by lesbian photographers who felt that their images were aesthetic and universal and transcended issues of sexuality and politics.

In contrast to the universalizing photographers are those who seek to produce photographs with a lesbian "aura" or sensibility. Mainly active in the 1970s, but by no means extinct today, these photographers search for a female aesthetic. Their work often grows out of consciousness raising efforts and is based on the shared experiences of lesbians and their biological community.

These artists frequently use nature-based imagery and often equate lesbian sex with spirituality. Tee Corinne (b. 1943), for example, in her search for ways to represent a lesbian sensibility, produced mandalas through multiple photographic prints of women having oral sex or through double-exposed photographs of closeups of women's genitals superimposed over landscape backgrounds.

She chose to publish her photographs rather than exhibit them in order to reach a wider cross section of the public and to provide a publicly accessible lesbian history.

### **Overtly Political Images**

In their final category, Boffin and Fraser place photographs that clearly deal with lesbian issues in an overtly political way. Among these issues are the form and control of depictions of lesbian sexuality, the struggles against homophobic attacks, the de-politicizing and co-opting of lesbians through lesbian chic,

and the conservative tendencies in postmodern theory.

The photographers who confront these issues often embrace strategies of representation informed by aspects of postmodernist practice, such as appropriation, pastiche, charade, irony, and parody. They retain a belief in a progressive and transgressive photographic practice despite their understanding that a politics of resistance can no longer be based on the unity and coherence of a lesbian aesthetic or experience.

Consequently, lesbians subvert and appropriate popular forms such as cartoons, westerns, soap operas, and Hollywood films to question representations of marginality and difference.

Deborah Bright (b. 1950), for instance, inserts images of herself as "butch-girl" into the conventional narrative stills of earlier Hollywood films. She exploits the gaps, elisions, and contradictions of the genre to assert a previously banished lesbian presence.

Similarly, Australian photographer Fiona Arnold (b. 1958) uses found objects and photographs of herself to produce quirky and amusing pastiched images such as *The Dirty Dozen* (1995).

Another Australian photographer, Tina Fiveash (b. 1970), appropriates images from magazines and advertisements of the 1950s to create a missing lesbian history. She constructs environments for her photographs in order to re-present a contemporary dream of the past through her sexualized historical gaze.

Using a photographic booth manufactured in Japan that morphs digital images of offspring for couples, Michelle Barker (b. 1969) and Anna Munster developed the installation piece, *The Love Machine* (1995), where they are presented as a couple, together with their "instant" morphed family, an Asian boy, a Caucasian girl, and an African-American girl.

Since 1991 Jill Casid (b. 1966) and Maria DeGuzman (b. 1964), as the queer feminist partnership SPIR-- Conceptual Photography, have been working in collaboration with each other and with friends and colleagues to produce narrative photo-text sequences and single images that attempt to transform myths, stereotypes, and icons and visualize ideas in a seductive form.

This work is an extension of many of the issues they have been exploring in their scholarship, including the negotiations of identity construction; the performance and performativity of ethnicity, gender, and "orientation" (sexual and otherwise); and the connection of the "image" to the "cliche."

### **Depictions of Lesbian Sexuality**

The depiction of lesbian sexuality by lesbians had one of its earliest manifestations in JEB's photograph of herself and her girlfriend kissing in the early 1970s. By the 1990s the development of a queer S&M culture and the increased numbers of female-to-male transsexuals had greatly broadened the range of experience available to photographers.

Masculine iconography, such as gay male pornography, has been exploited by photographers such as Della Grace (b. 1957) in order to challenge the normative image of lesbian sex and to comment on the economic power and privilege of the gay male.

Grace insists that she is not mapping gay male sexuality onto the lesbian body, but is using a "butch" or fetish iconography for the purposes of self-conscious parody. Now the "hermaphrodyke" Del LaGrace Volcano, he has recently focused on images of Drag Kings and female-to-male transgendered persons.

In New Zealand, Rebecca Swan (b. 1968) has also extensively documented the experiences and identities of transsexuals.

In her photographic series, "Dirty Girls in London" (1988), Jill Posener (b. 1953) stages passionate and blatant images of lesbians making out in familiar public locations. She claims that these images are political acts analogous to lesbian graffiti in making lesbian sexuality publicly visible.

Catherine Opie (b. 1961) combines her documentation of the queer leather community with a larger interest in community and identity. She sees lesbian identity as fluid and expanding, offering opportunities for playing with gender-bending through performance and cross-dressing.

In her "Portrait" series, Cheryl Smith explores the tension between absence and presence, between gaining and losing a sense of community.

Opie, Chloe Atkins (b. 1954), and many other lesbian photographers have produced lesbian pornographic shots for magazines such as *On Our Backs*. These images, and the sexual activities they depict, are often the subject of bitter controversy among lesbians.

In 1990, Kiss and Tell (Susan Stewart, b. 1952; Persimmon Blackbridge, b. 1951; and Lizard Jones, b. 1961), an art collective in Vancouver, used the intense debates around sexual practice to create the photographic exhibition "Drawing the Line." Their photographs depicted a continuum of lesbian sexual practice ranging from kissing to whipping, bondage, and voyeurism.

This project encouraged viewers to comment by writing directly on plastic over the prints. The collective hoped to allow a wide and diverse range of views to be expressed.

### **Advertising Images**

Since 1990 the increasingly conservative climate in many parts of the world, censorship in the United States, and political action around AIDS have generated a refocussing on the body and a new style of visual activism.

Through the lesbian arm of Queer Nation, the Dyke Action Machine (DAM) team of Carrie Moyer (b. 1960) and Sue Schaffner (b. 1964) used slick photographic designs on bus and telephone kiosks to critique the marketing of family and the construction of difference through advertising.

In Australia the Word of Mouth collective used the "Lovely Mothers Project" (1993-1994) to oppose lesbians losing custody of their children. To change public perceptions of lesbians as mothers and daughters, they used street posters and billboards.

Similarly, Chloe Atkins won an award in California for a billboard showing a lesbian couple, one of whom was very pregnant, with the caption "Another Traditional Family." Lesbians also challenge ideas of "individual genius" when they use various modes of collective photographic practice.

Lesbian photographers have also transformed advertising to make a lesbian presence visible. In Australia, for example, Kay Schumack (b. 1953) has utilized the format of advertisements to examine lesbian pool room culture and street presence, while Marion Moore (b. 1958) used her series "Centrefold" (1996) to subvert the stereotyped perception of lesbian body image.

Jill Posener, formerly of London and now in San Francisco, was photo editor of *On Our Backs* for two years and in 1996 co-edited *Nothing but the Girl* with Susie Bright. She has produced two books of political graffiti photos (*Louder than Words* [1986] and *Spray It Loud* [1982]) that include lesbian graffiti attacking mainstream advertising.

Tessa Boffin's series of photographs called *Angel Rebels: Lesbians and Safer Sex* (1989) considers the

influence of AIDS on lesbians and how they can maintain their sexual expression despite the vilification of homosexuals by the mainstream press. Boffin frequently performed in the London nightclub scene as her lifestyle became her art practice as a "queer pervert faggot boy-girl drag queen."

### **Non-Anglo Lesbian Photographers**

Non-Anglo lesbians are increasingly active in exploring the multiple problems of cultural displacement.

In 1986 Laura Aguilar (b. 1959) began her *Latina Lesbians* series intended to document positive images of Latinas to counteract negative stereotypes and increase racial understanding. She recently exhibited 33 black and white prints of her own corpulent body posed against a landscape of other women of various body types. Her images are at once defiant and subversive.

Photographers such as Gaye Chan (b. 1957), Hanh Thi Pham (b. 1954), Jean Weisinger (b. 1954), Zane Paraiso Montoya (b. 1966), and Hulleah Tsinhnajjinni (b. 1954), in the United States, and Mumaz Karimjee (b. 1950) and Ingrid Pollard (b. 1953), in the United Kingdom, produce images that establish non-Anglo lesbian identities.

The aboriginal artist Rea (b. 1962) uses her digital photography to address the racist treatment of Koori people in Australia. She likens the black woman's body to that of the lesbian's as equally invisible.

Sometimes at odds with their ethnic communities' beliefs and values, these artists work across a range of oppressions, including especially homophobia and racism, to assert their racial, political, and sexual identities.

### **Conclusion**

The rapidly expanding range of lesbian photography is beginning to redress the paucity of images available to lesbians and other members of subcultures that remain largely invisible or misrepresented in mainstream culture.

### **Bibliography**

Ashburn, Elizabeth. *Lesbian Art: An Encounter with Power*. Sydney: Craftsman House, 1996.

Atkins, Chloe. *Girls' Night Out*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998.

Biren, Joan E. *Eye to Eye: Portraits of Lesbians*. Weatherby Lake, Mo.: Glad Hag Books, 1979.

Blake, Nayland, et al., eds. *A Different Light: Visual Culture, Sexual Identity, Queer Practice*. San Francisco: City Light Books, 1995.

Blank, Joani, ed. *Femalia*. San Francisco: Down There Press, 1993.

Boffin, Tessa, and Jean Fraser, eds. *Stolen Glances: Lesbians Take Photographs*. London: Pandora Press, 1991.

Bright, Deborah, ed. *The Passionate Camera: Photography and Bodies of Desire*. London: Routledge, 1998.

Bright, Susie, and Jill Posener, eds. *Nothing but the Girl*. New York: Cassell, 1996.

Goldin, Nan. *The Battle of Sexual Dependency*. New York: Aperture, 1986.

Grover, Jan Zita. "Dykes in Context: Some Problems in Minority Representation." *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography*. Richard Bolton, ed. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989. 163-203.

Hammond, Harmony. *Lesbian Art in America: A Contemporary History*. New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 2000.

Kelley, Caffyn, ed. *Forbidden Subjects: Self-Portraits by Lesbian Artists*. North Vancouver, B. C.: Gallerie, 1992.

Kiss & Tell (Susan Stewart, Persimmon Blackridge, and Lizard Jones). *Drawing the Line: Lesbian Sexual Politics on the Wall*. Vancouver, B. C.: Press Gang Publications, 1991.

Neumaier, Diane, ed. *Reframings: New American Feminist Photographers*. Philadelphia, Penn.: Temple University Press, 1995.

Smyth, Cheryl. *Damn Fine Art*. London: Cassell, 1996.

### **About the Author**

**Elizabeth Ashburn**, Professor and Head of the School of Art in the College of Fine Arts at the University of New South Wales, Australia, is author of *Lesbian Art: An Encounter with Power* and numerous articles. She is co-president of the Australian Center for Gay and Lesbian Research.