



Winant, Fran (b. 1943)

by Ruth M. Pettis

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Poet, painter, and activist Fran Winant was one of the early participants in the Stonewall-inspired gay rights movement of the 1970s. Through her poetry and visual art, she helped define the role and sensibility of lesbians in the contexts of gay liberation and radical feminism, especially during the 1970s and early 1980s.

A native of Brooklyn, Francine Ellen Winant was born on October 28, 1943. As a child, she showed precocious talent for both writing and drawing. Somewhat late in pursuing higher education, she received a B.A. in studio art from Fordham University in 1975. She also attended the School of Visual Arts in New York City.

One of the founders of the Gay Liberation Front in 1969, Winant early embraced the gay liberation movement that emerged in the wake of the Stonewall Riots. The following year, she appeared with other members of the group on the "Come Out" poster designed by Peter Hujar, announcing New York's first gay pride march. Her exuberant poem that records the event, "Christopher St. Liberation Day, June 28, 1970," is a celebratory anthem that captures the upwelling energy of the moment: "our banners are sails / pulling us through the streets / where we have always been / as ghosts / now we are shouting our own words."

Winant had a natural affinity for the convictions driving the gay and feminist consciousness-raising efforts of the 1970s. She had been writing poetry since childhood, but had been unable to share her deepest desires. To express her feelings about women, and to keep her classmates from discovering them, she invented a secret language, which she describes as "a metaphor for an inner language of the socially inexpressible." The new political fervor of the 1970s afforded a long-awaited opportunity for Winant to speak out.

Recognizing the need for lesbians to shape their own identities, Winant joined RadicaLesbians when it split off from GLF in 1970, and helped organized the first all-women's dances and poetry readings in New York. Hers was one of the early voices to articulate the new movement's vision for lesbians.

In "Christmas" (1973), Winant recalls older lesbians who walked "shoulders tense motions awkward / two women / both staring down at the ground / unable to push back / one more hostile glance." In "Happy New Year" (1971), she depicts two older women in a bar, "their hands on the table / like exposed weapons." In her tribute to "Gertrude and Emily" (1973), Dickinson's story is characterized as the "myth of a spinster / wounded by emotions / too deep for physical touch"; while Stein is described as one whose consciousness "couldn't be allowed to make sense."

In the early 1970s, Winant and her then-partner Judy Grepperd founded Violet Press in order to publish Winant's poetry, as well as that of others. Among the volumes of Winant's poetry published by Violet Press are *Looking at Women: Poems* (1971), *Dyke Jacket* (1976), and *Goddess of Lesbian Dreams* (1980). The Press also published Winant's and Grepperd's anthology of lesbian poetry, *We Are All Lesbians* (1980).

A member of the Feminist Lesbian Art Collective (FLAC), Winant began exhibiting her paintings in 1974.

These are personally charged and often symbolic of both a spiritual and physical bond between humans and animals. In numerous portraits of her dog Cindy, such as "Dog with Secret Language" (1975) and "The Kiss" (1981), a spare use of brush strokes effectively renders canine body expressions from interesting perspectives.

The secret language she invented in childhood, a blend of math- and Greek-like symbols, is often worked into the backgrounds of her paintings. Her passion for animals is inextricably linked with her feelings about how gay men and lesbians are denied full humanity in a society that allows the "murder" of less visible, and therefore unprivileged, species.

Winant's art work has appeared in groundbreaking exhibits, such as "A Lesbian Show" (1978); "Extended Sensibilities: Homosexual Presences in Contemporary Art" (1982); as well as in the "Lesbian Art and Artists" (Fall 1977) and "Sex" (May 1981) issues of *Heresies* magazine. These outlets provided not only space for the artists' work, but also forums for helping defining lesbian art. Like those of many of the other artists and curators who participated in these pioneering exhibits, her priorities were not those of an art world professional seeking commercial success. Rather, she participated in these endeavors in an effort to help create and enable a women's art community.

Winant is also author of two plays, "Closer Since the Shooting" and "Play 1,2,3,4," both performed in New York in 1969.

Winant received an Isaacson Poetry Award in 1968; a New York State Arts Council CAPS grant in 1978; and a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship in 1989. Her poetry has appeared in many anthologies, and her art has appeared in numerous exhibitions, including several at the Leslie-Lohman Gay Art Foundation in New York.

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About the Author

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