



American Art: Lesbian, Post-Stonewall

by Carla Williams

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Since Stonewall, lesbian artists in America, from installation artists to filmmakers and photographers to performance artists and painters, have become increasingly diverse and visible.

Lesbians in the 1950s and 1960s benefited from both the feminist and the civil rights movements. Within the feminist movement emerged lesbian feminism, which gave rise to groups and experiences that galvanized the lesbian movement and gave many middle-class women the freedom in which to "come out" and embrace their sexuality.

During this time, however, there were few venues and outlets for women's art, let alone lesbian art. One exception was *The Ladder*, the newsletter from 1956 until 1972 of the San Francisco-based Daughters of Bilitis (DOB), the first lesbian rights organization, which regularly included artwork.

The 1960s: Feminism and Abstraction

Explicitly "lesbian" imagery did not emerge until the 1960s. The reasons for this are varied. Many lesbians shied away from sexual content for fear that explicit depictions of their sexuality would be misunderstood within a patriarchal, heterosexual society that was unable or unwilling to understand the nature of those images. Consequently, some lesbian artists made work with "ghetto content"--imagery that was understood only within the community. This strategy made it less likely for their work to be welcomed into a mainstream dialogue.

As the feminist and civil rights movements progressed and women artists persisted, woman-based content began to emerge in the visual arts. The ideas that art might validate women's lives, that previously devalued craft traditions were significant, and that women's bodies were biological vessels of creation and change--these were not concepts that had been previously welcome in the canon, but they increasingly became the impetus for women's art.

However, some lesbian artists who emerged during that decade, particularly New York-based artists such as Louise Fishman (b. 1939) and Joan Snyder (b. 1940), favored a more abstract style consistent with the dominant art movement of the time. For them, the lack of narrative or reference in abstract expressionism proved an apt metaphor for their inability to be open regarding their homosexuality elsewhere.

On June 3, 1968, a galvanizing incident occurred in the art world involving the radical lesbian feminist Valerie Solanas (1936-1988), founder of SCUM (Society for Cutting Up Men) and author of the SCUM Manifesto. Solanas tried to assassinate gay Pop artist Andy Warhol because she believed he had stolen her ideas. While Solanas was certainly mentally disturbed, her claim of stolen authorship and subsequent action, however radical, was keenly understood by women artists whose own groundbreaking works had frequently been overlooked while their male, sometimes gay, counterparts found fame and acceptance.

One year later, the Stonewall uprising on June 28, 1969, at the Stonewall Inn, a gay bar in New York's

Greenwich Village, became the watershed moment in gay and lesbian history and forever changed lesbian visibility in the art world.

The 1970s: Agitation and Change

In the 1970s both New York and Los Angeles became important centers for lesbian artists. However, there were differences between the art produced in the two places. East Coast lesbians were more likely to shy away from explicitly lesbian imagery, while this was less true on the West Coast, where the influence of the dominant art world was not as immediate or as pervasive.

The first Gay Pride parade was staged in New York in 1970 on the anniversary of the Stonewall uprising. Significantly, Fran Winant (b. 1944), a poet, painter, and member of the Feminist Lesbian Art Collective (FLAC), was pictured on the Gay Liberation Front's poster for the march.

As gays and lesbians began to organize and agitate for their civil rights, the necessity for documentation became paramount, and lesbian photographers actively chronicled their communities. Artists such as Joan E. Biren (JEB) (b. 1944) in Washington, D.C., and Tee A. Corinne (b. 1943), Jean Weisinger (b. 1954), and Cathy Cade (b. 1942) in the San Francisco Bay Area photographed the assemblies, marches, meetings, and other events within their communities.

In doing so, they both validated the existence of the lesbian and gay communities at the time and preserved a record for the future. The proliferation of postcards, posters, journals, and other alternative publications indicated a developing and expanding audience for their work.

As their imagery developed, each of the photographers mentioned above also explored a more expressive or artistic side of the medium. Self-representation was both literal, as photographers pictured their own bodies, and metaphorical, as they depicted their friends and lovers. Still, with the feminist agenda governing much of their work's content, many lesbian artists shied away from explicitly sexual depictions of their lifestyles, the end result of which was nearly to neuter themselves in the service of political correctness.

One exception was Corinne, whose close-cropped imagery of women's genitalia combined the erotic and the clinical and both reclaimed desire and demystified the female body.

In 1970 New-York based artist Kate Millett (b. 1934) published *Sexual Politics* and overnight became the spokeswoman for the women's movement. The book sold half a million copies in paperback and landed its author on the cover of *Time* magazine. The bisexual Millett was not only a writer, however, but also a sculptor and mixed media installation artist whose work featured found objects. From the beginning Millett's work was political, addressing United States policy in Vietnam as well as domestic issues such as violence against women.

Although Millett saw sales of her publications fall dramatically after she came out as a lesbian, the relationship between the feminist movement and the lesbian movement remained strong. Many lesbians, for instance, participated in *Womanhouse* (1972), an installation and performances that were part of the Feminist Art Program at the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts), directed by feminist artists Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro.

Womanspace, which was founded in 1973 at the new Woman's Building in Los Angeles, hosted a Lesbian Week. The third issue of the New York-based journal *Heresies: A Feminist Publication on Art and Politics* (1977-1993), was entitled *Heresies: Lesbian Art and Artists*. It was the first non-lesbian journal issue to focus on lesbian work exclusively. Not surprisingly, the editor found it difficult to secure work from lesbian artists, who were reluctant to be identified and segregated.

Lesbian critic and historian Arlene Raven was cofounder of the Feminist Studio Workshop, the educational division of the Los Angeles Woman's Building, which published *Chrysalis: A Magazine of Women's Culture* (1977-1980). She also sponsored the Natalie Barney Collective, which researched and documented lesbian artists.

Through the Collective Raven also founded The Lesbian Art Project (1977-1979), which hosted art and writing groups and regular salons. In 1979 the Project produced *The Oral Herstory of Lesbianism*, directed by Terry Wolverton, a performance for women only which explored the hidden history of lesbianism and called for lesbians to record their stories.

In 1978 New York-based Harmony Hammond (b. 1944), whose abstract work referenced women's histories, bodies, and emotions, curated "A Lesbian Show" at 112 Greene Street Workshop in New York. Including the work of eighteen artists--Hammond, Louise Fishman, Kate Millett, Fran Winant, Barbara Asch, Suzanne Bevier, Betsy Damon, Maxine Fine, Jessie Falstein, Mary Ann King, Gloria Klein, Dona Nelson, Flavia Rando, Sandra de Sando, Amy Sillman, Ellen Turner, Janey Washburn, and Ann Wilson (with Amy Scarola, Etana Dreamer, and Yvonne Lindsay adding their work to the walls during the exhibition)--"A Lesbian Show" is generally considered to be the first important lesbian art exhibition.

While it included readings, videos, films, performances, and discussions organized by Damon (b. 1940), it did not include photographs or erotic art. It focused mainly on abstract work like Hammond's. As with the lesbian issue of *Heresies* the previous year, which Hammond co-founded and on which she had also worked, there was some difficulty in getting artists to be "out" in a "ghettoized" context.

The 1980s: Presence and Recognition

Just two years later, in 1980, "The Great American Lesbian Art Show" (GALAS), organized by six lesbian artists, along with the members of the Feminist Studio Workshop, opened. Its purpose was to highlight the state of lesbian art at the beginning of the new decade. In addition to an invitational exhibition at the Woman's Building in Los Angeles, the exhibition included more than two hundred regional "sister" events and exhibitions in fifty communities and the establishment of the GALAS Archives. GALAS was a rousing success, receiving coverage in the Los Angeles mainstream art press.

The exhibition also marked the first time that work by lesbians of color--African-American Lula Mae Blockton and Cuban-American Gloria Longval--were included in a lesbian art exhibition. Lesbians of color had previously either been overlooked by the majority white, middle-class lesbians, or declined to participate because of particular homophobia within their communities; even Blockton had turned down the invitation to participate in 1978's "A Lesbian Show."

Other significant exhibitions of the time included "The Third Wave," mounted as an anniversary exhibition of "A Lesbian Show," featuring about half of the artists who participated in the earlier show.

In 1982 "Extended Sensibilities: Homosexual Presence in Contemporary Art," featuring works of painting, drawing, and sculpture, took place at the New Museum in New York. It was the first exhibition to address homosexuality as a subject in art. Eight of the eighteen artists were lesbians: Betsy Damon, Nancy Fried, Janet Cooling, Lili Lakich, Jody Pinto, Carla Tardi, Fran Winant, and Harmony Hammond.

The curator, Daniel J. Cameron, put forth three categories of gay art content: homosexual content, or stereotyped images; ghetto content, or work that is easily recognized only by the gay community; and sensibility content, "work which is created from the personal experience of homosexuality which need not have anything to do with sexuality or even lifestyle." The latter category was further subdivided into three types: "the homosexual self," "the homosexual other," and "the world transformed."

Though overall the exhibition failed conceptually and was criticized for not being "political or gay enough,"

it became the best-attended show to that date at the New Museum and generated a necessary dialogue regarding gay and lesbian representation in art.

As postmodernism with its anti-feminist rhetoric redefined aesthetics and fueled the 1980s art boom, lesbian artists redefined their content to be less abstract, more political, and more sexually explicit.

An important element of this shift was the emergence of working-class artists and artists of color such as Chicanas Judith F. Baca (b. 1946) and Yolanda Lopez (b. 1942), and Hulleah Tsinhnahjinnie (b. 1954), a Seminole, Muskogee, and Diné "two-spirited" person--a term she prefers to the more white cultural term "lesbian." Their work deals primarily with issues of self-identity and representation.

Photographers such as Jill Posener (b. 1953), Zoe Leonard (b. 1961), Laura Aguilar (b. 1959), Kaucyila Brooke (b. 1952), and Gay Block (b. 1942) found the medium ideal for investigations of race, gender, and representation. As the most democratic art form, photography could easily incorporate both "high art" and popular culture references, frequently inserting the lesbian body into mainstream scenarios, as in Deborah Bright's (b. 1950) "Dream Girls" series (1990), in which she deftly replaces the leading men in famous film stills with photographs of her butch self getting the girl.

Millie Wilson's (b. 1948) 1989 installation "Fauve Semblant: Peter (A Young English Girl)," based on a Romaine Brooks portrait of lesbian painter Gluck (née Hannah Gluckstein, British, 1895-1978), imagines a museum retrospective exhibition for a fictional lesbian painter while paying homage to those two real, largely forgotten predecessors.

Lesbian sexuality, in particular the sexual outlaw, is explored in the work of Della Grace (b. 1957; now known as Del LaGrace Volcano), an American artist working in London, whose images incorporate S/M and gay male iconography. It is also an important subject of the work of Catherine Opie (b. 1961), whose portraits of her own S/M community and transgendered and drag friends claimed the traditional genre of portraiture for these marginalized--and previously unseen--subjects. Self-representation, including portraits of community, had become crucial.

The 1990s and 2000s: Queer is Here

After 1980's "GALAS," there was not another major lesbian-themed exhibition until lesbian curator Pam Gregg's "All but the Obvious: A Program of Lesbian Art" at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE) in 1990. ABO established a queer lesbian sensibility and consisted of performances, readings, film, and video in addition to the visual art exhibition with works by Laura Aguilar, Janet Cooling, Catherine Opie, Millie Wilson, Kaucyila Brooke, Della Grace, Nancy Rosenblum, Tracy Mostovoy, Collier Schorr, Laurel Beckman, Beverly Rhoads, Catherine Saalfield, Jacqueline Woodson, Gaye Chan, and Monica Majoli.

Gregg's "Situation: Perspectives on Work by Lesbian and Gay Artists" (1991), co-curated with Nayland Blake, followed in San Francisco, and the decade saw numerous exhibitions and spaces devoted to lesbian art from California to Houston ("Out! Voices from a Queer Nation," 1991) to Boulder, Colorado ("2 Much: The Gay & Lesbian Experience," 1993).

In 1991 British-born lesbian artist Nicola Tyson opened Trial Balloon in a section of her New York studio loft, an all-woman, semi-commercial gallery that highlighted the work of lesbian artists and was the first in more than twenty years to focus on women artists.

At the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s gay and lesbian artists found themselves at the forefront of arts funding controversies. In 1990, lesbian performance artist Holly Hughes (b. 1955) became one of the NEA Four, along with Tim Miller, Karen Finley, and John Fleck. These artists, all of whom had been awarded individual grants by the National Endowment for the Arts (and all of whom, except Finley,

are gay), were charged with indecency and their grants rescinded.

They sued and their grants were reinstated, but the climate for government support had shifted and the decade was marked by conservative reaction and controversies regarding artistic representation, particularly when it related to gays and lesbians and people of color.

However, despite the controversies, by the 1990s lesbians no longer restricted themselves in terms of sexual or political content. New generations of artists, while owing--and acknowledging--a debt to the lesbian feminist work of the 1970s, constructed work based on their own experiences in a more pluralistic culture. Lesbian exhibitions such as Seattle's "Gender, fucked" (1996) blurred the distinctions between masculine/male and feminine/female in work dealing with transgender politics through representations of drag, passing, tomboys, etc.

Lesbian artists in the 1990s found drawing and painting once again viable media for lesbian expression, as they used appropriation to recontextualize art history. Trial Balloon's 1992 exhibition "Part FANTASY: the sexual imagination of seven lesbian artists explored through the medium of drawing," was perhaps the first lesbian show to focus on the significance of media as well as content.

In her continuing work, artist Deborah Kass (b. 1952) smartly appropriates the work of Andy Warhol, replacing his gay Pop icons with her own lesbian ones. Nicole Eisenman (b. 1968) draws, paints, and constructs Amazons, flipping the script on men and art history in lesbian scenes and castration fantasies. Zoe Leonard, Mary Patten, Judith Bamber and others create work using "cunt" imagery to reclaim art and the female body for lesbian audiences.

Artists such as Tammy Rae Carland and G.B. Jones go even further in referencing lesbian popular culture to reassert lesbian sexuality. They derive imagery from pulp novels, women-in-prison films, and lesbian porn. Carland is also co-founder with musician Kaia Wilson of Mr. Lady records, an independent label that distributes lesbian videos and films. Mr. Lady is also home to lesbian performance art band Le Tigre, comprised of Kathleen Hanna, Johanna Fateman, and JD Samson. (Founding member and filmmaker Sadie Benning, no longer with the group, was a pioneering video artist as a teenager in the 1980s.)

Performance, a mainstay of early feminist art, has become an important element in lesbian culture through the work of Le Tigre, Phranc, The Butchies (Wilson's band), Jocelyn Taylor, Shu Lea Chang, and others. Queer activists such as Dyke Action Machine (DAM; Carrie Moyer and Sue Schaffner), The Lesbian Avengers, and fierce pussy (Carrie Yamaoka, Joy Episalla, Pam Brandt, and Alison Froling) incorporate elements of performance in their "actions."

At century's end a conservative backlash began: in 1998 the NEA Four lost an appeal by the government to the Supreme Court and eventually lost their grant funding. At the start of the new millennium, however, lesbian art is experiencing a pluralism and visibility it has never previously enjoyed. The proliferation of alternative venues from lesbian sex journals to 'zines to cartoons to websites to concerts is an important development for the future of lesbian art. Lesbian artists in America, from installation artists to filmmakers and photographers to performance artists and painters, are increasingly diverse and visible.

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Mr. Lady Records: <http://www.mrlady.com>

<http://www.disgrace.dircon.co.uk>

Lesbian photographers: <http://www-lib.usc.edu/~retter/photolist.html>

Queer Arts Resources :<http://www.queer-arts.org>

About the Author

Carla Williams is a writer and photographer from Los Angeles, who lives and works in Santa Fe. Her writings and images can be found on her website at www.carlagirl.net.

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