



WHITE COLUMNS

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Review/Art

Gay Pride (and Anguish) Around the Galleries

By HOLLAND COTTER

The 25th anniversary of gay liberation this week has been ignored by New York's major art museums, but a few other public institutions and art galleries have picked up the slack with exhibitions on gay and lesbian themes.

Some of the shows are solo exhibitions; most are large, ad hoc group gatherings that would have profited from judicious nips and tucks. Yet even when overcrowded and wildly uneven in quality, the shows' wealth of individual voices demonstrates why the gay presence has so long been a catalytic force in this city's visual culture.

The New York Public Library

In an often-told story, the gay movement had its political beginnings on June 28, 1969, when the clientele of a Greenwich Village bar called the Stonewall Inn physically resisted

police harassment for the first time. Anybody interested in the specific events of that night or in the history of gay and lesbian life before and since should head directly to the main branch of the New York Public Library, where a remarkable exhibition, "Becoming Visible: The Legacy of Stonewall," is in the Gottesman Exhibition Hall

Despite the inclusion of artists like Charles Demuth, Reginald Marsh and Keith Haring, this isn't an art show at all, but a big, exhaustive display of thousands of cultural artifacts — photographs, books, letters, posters, banners, pamphlets and other ephemera — related to gay life in America from the end of the 19th century to the present.

Drawn from the library's International Gay Information Center Archives, "Becoming Visible" is the first major exhibition on its subject ever mounted, the library says. It includes taped oral history (from which one learns that the Stonewall uprising took place on the evening of Judy Garland's funeral and that the first blow was, in legend at least, struck with a drag queen's high heel). It examines the embattled history of

gay men and lesbians in the military, and it documents aspects of important movements like the Harlem Renaissance and the 60's counterculture in which gay artists played an important part. The picture that comes together is emotionally complex, mixing exhilaration at progress made, anger about rights denied, and sorrow for the lives lost through AIDS.

White Columns

All of those factors, often leavened with humor and a willingness to push acceptable bounds of taste to the limits, characterize the gallery shows on view. Humor is especially evident in the chaotic jumble titled "Stonewall 25: Imaginings of the Gay Past, Celebrating the Gay Present," organized by Bill Arning at White Columns, just a few blocks from the original Stonewall Inn. As is often the case in this pioneering alternative space, the primary curatorial aim seems to be to hang as much art, of as great a variety, as possible. As a result, paintings, sculptures and photographs are crammed together chockablock, and separating the wheat from the chaff is an important part of the visit.

The chaff is pretty dismal in this case, but fortunately there are good, funny contributions from Cary S. Leibowitz and Rupert Goldsworthy, and some of the noncomedic work really shines: Patricia Cronin's startling, delicate watercolors of female genitalia, for example, and Steve Wolf's painstaking re-creations of the covers of paperback editions of the work of gay artists including Jean Genet and Allen Ginsberg. Also noteworthy is Stuart Netsky's installation of mirrors, cosmetics and vials of AIDS medications with a video of Bette Davis in "Dark Victory." Together they constitute a walk-in meditation on beauty and illness.