

Art after Stonewall

12 Artists Interviewed

It has been 25 years since the Stonewall Riots signaled the beginning of the gay rights movement and the profound social transformation that has accompanied it. Here, a dozen gay and lesbian artists talk about their lives, their work and the culture at large.

BY HOLLAND COTTER

On a June night in 1969 in New York's Greenwich Village, the police conducted a routine raid on a gay bar called the Stonewall Inn. It would have been just harassment as usual, except that this time the men in the bar fought back. Spilling out into the streets, they chased the police off with bottles, rocks and—the crucial ingredient—a united anger.

The celebration this month of the 25th anniversary of the Stonewall Riots is the occasion for the 12 interviews with gay and lesbian artists which follow. Ten of them were taped this spring in New York; Donald Moffett and Zoe Leonard contributed written responses to specific questions. Only one of the artists was actually in New York in 1969. The majority were too young to have known the nascent gay and lesbian movement at first hand.

What is important, in any case, is not the event per se but the states of mind and being that have emerged from it. As a direct result of Stonewall, sexual difference has become an area of open inquiry and exploration in contemporary art, whereas a mere generation ago this content was either suppressed or introduced in highly coded form.

One of the questions these interviews explore is how artists have bypassed such coding or reworked it to create a new language which is both specific to a subculture yet accessible to a larger audience. Other questions include: Is there a "gay art" or a "lesbian art"? Do such labels result in ghettoization and, if so, is this good or bad? What is the role of the gay or lesbian artist in a predominantly heterosexual culture, one which includes the art world?

There is no doubt that much has changed in a quarter century. This is clear in the simple fact that some of the younger artists interviewed consider their sexual orientation "second nature." Yet should one move outside the protective environment of the major cities, or even to the wrong neighborhood within them, one finds cause for worry. Civil rights legislation for gay people has been passed since 1969, usually grudgingly, but it has also been withdrawn. Art has become more bold, but so has censorship. The AIDS crisis continues unabated and government funding for research remains inadequate. There is, in short, no question that should the gay and lesbian community lose its political cohesiveness, we, its members, are all at risk.

As of this writing, plans are in place for observ-

ing the 25th anniversary of Stonewall with a march to the United Nations on June 26, in a gesture of affirmation of international lesbian and gay rights. As the gay and lesbian movement identifies itself with and becomes part of the global political picture and as openly gay and lesbian artists, with their rich personal histories and their diverse and challenging work, become part of the fabric of international art, there is every reason for optimism as we approach a new century.

For William H. Martin (1950-1993)

—H.C.

Frank Moore

Born 1953, New York. Studied at Haystack Mountain School of Crafts, Deer Isle, Maine, 1970; Yale University, BA 1975; Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, 1973; Cité Internationale des Arts, Paris (residency), 1977-79; Sundance Institute (residency), 1988. Currently lives in New York. Most recent solo show at Sperone Westwater, New York, 1993.

I was born in Stuyvesant Town on 14th Street in New York City. My father's family lived in the Adirondacks and in the summer we'd usually be shipped up there. I had a lot of cousins and we congregated at my grandfather's house in an extended family situation. That place had a big impact on my esthetic. I loved it up there. I loved the landscape, the wilderness, that whole rustic thing, that colonial American sense of everything being handmade, earth-connected. I think kids are influenced by the stuff their parents surround them with, and most of what I saw there was WPA-type imagery (prints by Thomas Hart Benton, John Steuart Curry, that sort of thing) and hunting and fishing pictures. Then I started getting involved with art in a different way by going to museums. One of the first paintings that zapped me was an Agnes Martin at the Museum of Modern Art. It was just a red pencil grid titled *Red Tree*. I don't know how old I was when I saw it—maybe 11 or 12—or why it had such an effect. But it did. I still think she's great.

At the same time, though, I was captivated by things like Peter Blume's painting of Mussolini, which I don't see hanging at the Modern anymore. I ultimately met Peter Blume. He had a house in Connecticut, a perfect place, a paradise. He'd dug out a pond with a stream running through it and

stocked it with one big fat trout and he'd trained a grape vine to grow up the side of the house and in through an attic window, so the raccoons couldn't get the fruit. His art's out of favor now, but the whole Magic Realist movement that he and Paul Cadmus were a part of has always meant something to me. They were essentially WPA Surrealists, with an emphasis on Americana, and a very moralistic tone—think of Cadmus's *Seven Deadly Sins*—missing in European work.

The stuff I learned about in art school in the mid-'70s, of course, wasn't about any of this and I became an abstract painter. Then as soon as I got out of school in 1976 abstraction fell away like a graft that didn't take and I started painting the figure. I was in a relationship that I was unhappy about so I got a freighter to Europe and found ways to stay for a couple of years. It was a very different scene from New York. Paris was dead as far as contemporary art, but there were all these quirky Surrealist painters like Domenico Gnoli and Alberto Savinio who were also steeped in classical iconography. I could relate to that, to finding ways to use the things you love most about the past, not just abandon them as being retrograde but find a way to make them relevant to the present.

When I came back to New York in 1980, I started meeting a lot of people, among whom were some older gay artists. I learned so much from them. It was like a tunnel back into a past that I would only otherwise have known from books—and those books just weren't being written. I know a lot of gay artists who come to New York and connect with older artists (the relationships don't have to be consummated sexually; they weren't in my case) who themselves had connected with artists before them. There's a whole oral history, traditions and attitudes and perspectives that you can inherit through these relationships. Many people get this sort of thing through family, but for a lot of gay people the art world becomes that ancestral lineage network, where wisdom and history are passed along.

In the mid-'80s, after a period of doing theater design, I returned to painting and had some solo shows. One of the paintings from this time had two figures that you could spin around on a pivot. One was a naked man in the country with a pitchfork, the other was in city clothes and carrying a briefcase. I was trying to figure out who I wanted to be. I'm not adapted to urban living on a regular basis. I

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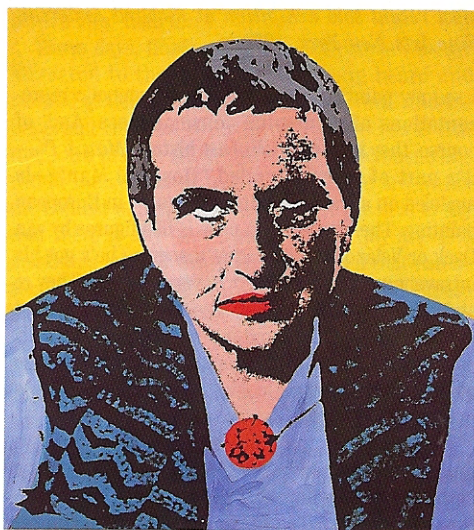
Deborah Kass

Born 1952, San Antonio, Tex. Studied at the Art Students League, New York, 1968-70; Whitney Independent Study Program, New York, 1972; Carnegie-Mellon University, Pittsburgh, BFA 1974. Currently lives in New York. Most recent solo exhibition at Barbara Krakow Gallery, Boston, 1994. Forthcoming exhibition at Jose Freire Fine Art, New York, 1995.

My first big art experience was the Gertrude Stein portrait by Picasso at the Metropolitan when I was about eight. It was also my first big sex experience. There was instant identification (as there was later when I saw Barbra Streisand and read about her and went nuts). There was something about this portrait and this person that mesmerized me. And I figured it out later, going to the Met and MOMA, that Picasso never painted another woman like that, who looked like that, with that kind of presence, who wasn't a *thing!* He painted a person, and this personness overwhelmed me. I don't know whether it was because Gertrude Stein was an artist or because she was a Jewish woman or because she was a dyke, but I'm convinced that at eight I got a lot of this information subliminally.

I later studied art at Carnegie-Mellon. When I came back to New York in 1975 it seemed that being a woman and a painter wasn't much of an issue. Between 1975 and '77 Susan Rothenberg, Elizabeth Murray, Pat Steir, Joan Semmel, Louise Fishman and numerous other women had their first shows. And it was the height of second-wave feminism. For me, age 23 and right out of school, it was extremely encouraging.

I had been completely male-identified as an art student. When I started coming out as a lesbian in



Deborah Kass: Chairman Ma #21 (Gertrude), 1993, silk screen, acrylic on canvas, 46 by 42 inches. Collection Alice and Marvin Kosmin, New York. Courtesy Jose Freire Fine Art.

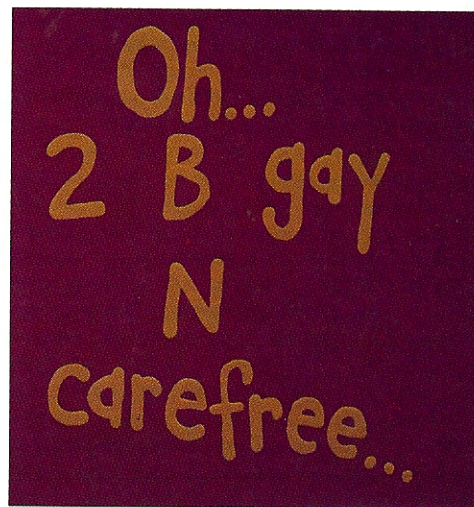
New York the work of these women was revelatory. There was something about being sexually identified with women that made me want to see my own reflection in art in ways I never had considered before. Seeing the work of Elizabeth Murray was exactly the same experience to me as reading Adrienne Rich's poetry. It was about seeing somebody with a real formal base who reinvented formalism by adding personal content. I never could have said it that way at the time, but when I looked at Murray's painting I knew she was talking about me. It was very exciting.

The other artist I loved right from the start was Andy Warhol, and it's Andy who inspired the series of silk screens of Gertrude Stein and of Barbra Streisand from the film *Yentl*, an image I titled *My Elvis*. I find Andy so fascinating because he was the first queer artist—I mean queer in the political sense we mean queer. While some of his homosexual contemporaries were into coding and veiling and obscuring, Andy really made pictures about what it was like being a queer guy in the '50s. He was the first big queer-boy artist and he really made these pictures of the inside of his queer brain, from the women's shoes on.

And for me to look at that work as a lesbian is fascinating. I think: what would it look like if Andy was a lesbian? Because for me his work is defined by his gayness. It's all about queerness, so I ask what would it be like if he was a woman, not to mention a Jewish woman. Not to mention my age and a Jewish woman? Who would he be obsessed with? That *Before-and-After* nose job painting he did in the '60s was such an experience for me as a Jewish girl on Long Island. It had such a different resonance in my community than it did to Andy in his community. And it's that difference that I'm really interested in. I spent a lot of time thinking why Andy didn't do Barbra, even though Barbra was such a star when he was doing those paintings.

He didn't do Barbra because she was just like Andy, an outsider because of her ethnicity, as he was because of his queerness. They were in the same position, culturally, and he wasn't looking for his own reflection; he was looking for his glorified reflection, the reflection of a perfect American butchness, a perfect American glamour, as defined basically by Hollywood, a glamour that he was incapable of attaining because of his gayness, his immigrant family and his looks. For me there's the ethnic aspect of how, when Barbra hit the scene, people like my parents disliked her because she was "too Jewish." Why doesn't she fix her nose, why doesn't she change her name? But to be an adolescent coming across Barbra Streisand was the most exhilarating moment of identification. I'm sure it's how a lot of gay boys felt about her at my age, 13 or 14. It was an identification with powerfulness, talent, with being yourself and being different at the same time. She was my version of Andy's ideal image of Elvis. Gertrude was an extension of this project. There's a case to be made about standing outside a culture—the way Gertrude said she had to live in

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Cary S. Leibowitz/Candyass: Oh 2 B Gay N Carefree . . . , 1994, latex on wood.

Cary S. Leibowitz / Candyass

Born 1963, New York. Studied at Pratt Institute, 1981-83; Fashion Institute of Technology, 1983-84; University of Kansas, BFA 1987. Currently lives in Brooklyn. Most recent solo exhibitions at Galerie Nicolai Wallner, Copenhagen and Ynglingagatan 1, Stockholm, 1994.

I tried cleaning up for you but I get very distracted. Well, here's something. It's the catalogue for my show in Japan last fall. There was a lot less English spoken there than I expected. It was great because they treated me like I didn't know anything, which I like. I wasn't left alone for a minute. In 1987 when a friend gave me a little rubber stamp of the word "Candyass," I started using it as an esthetic thing on drawings. Then I added it to my name because I thought it sounded like a Jewish accountant and a rap singer working together. The Japanese don't have a word for "ass" so the catalogue says "Candybottom."

Here's something else. This is total gay-boy art, done when I was 13 years old. At the time, my dreams of grandeur took the form of drawing complete fictional suburban neighborhoods. All-American. It's almost as if they're by Grandma Moses, or her faggy great-grandson. See, each of the houses is different. It's pathetic, I know.

Even when I was in first grade I wrote essays about how I wanted to grow up to be a famous architect like Frank Lloyd Wright; my Aunt Sheryl had given me a book on him. The closest I've come to him is these two end-tables. I found them at a cheap furniture auction and they were so ugly I bought them. Afterwards I found his name stamped underneath. Actually, my three big heroes are Peter Saul, Andy Warhol and Robert Venturi. And I love Emilio

"White straight men need to come out in the world and compete with the rest of us. They shouldn't be scared. Vacate, baby!" —Deborah Kass

Pucci, but he's not a hero. My wallet's a Pucci. Even if people don't think I look stylish, I know I am.

I actually studied architecture at Pratt but I hated the department. I switched into painting, then into interior design, which I also hated. I always fought with the teachers because I wanted to do what I wanted to do. So I went to FIT in 1983. I thought, "Oh, they'll be more decorator oriented." Pratt was into, like, restaurant design. At FIT the teachers were more welcoming. Some famous designers came for crits. I'd seen their work in magazines for years (I'd had a subscription to *Architectural Digest* since I was 10) and I got asked to be an intern for some of the designers. But they were such awful, awful people. I thought, this isn't what I want my life to be.

I had a romantic notion about going to the Midwest. I looked at schools in Iowa, Indiana and Kansas. I liked Kansas the least so I picked it. It was just the way I was doing things at the time. I went and had a good time. I liked the art-history department and got a job in the art library. It worked out well, though the art department wouldn't let me be in the final graduation show. They didn't like my work. "We can't let younger students think they can get away with this," they said. So I gave myself a show in a classroom. We had Partridge Family music in the background. I included porno collages and poem-paintings on cardboard that said things like "Wish, fish, dish, Lillian Gish." All the librarians came. Some people bought stuff. Everything was 10 or 20 dollars. One of my favorite pieces said, "I love you more than Michael Jackson." I had no idea how profound it was.

At the time I liked the Starn Twins' work a lot so I moved to Boston. I thought there was this new genre happening there. There wasn't and I don't think the Starns actually lived there when I got there. I stayed for a few years. I thought, "I'm never going to show," but someone said the ICA has a local roundup every year called "Boston Now." I was determined to let everyone see what a loser I was, so I sent the ICA a totally psychotic letter and I got into the show. Then everything snowballed and here I am.

I have no problems at all with being called a "gay artist." My work is about me and I'm gay. A few years ago I made "Go Fags" and "Homo State" pennants. When I was in a group show at the Hirshhorn I put the words "Gay Art" in my piece rather than do an outrageous image that would just give the opposition more air time. For Stonewall I'm thinking of doing pink, white and blue yarmulkes. When I was in school all the artists I heard about seemed to be intellectual heavyweights. I thought, well, I have no theories, so I'm stuck with myself. That's when I started doing autobiographical stuff. I get annoyed when some people are against labeling. It's the way the world is. Everything gets a label and if it hasn't got one it's just because no one's talked about it yet. What's the problem with people on the street wearing red ribbons for AIDS? It may not be enough for a member of ACT UP but for a lot of people it's taking a big step. To make my work in the privacy of my own house is easy but it takes a lot more effort for someone to hang it up in their house and deal with the utility man or whatever.



Hugh Steers: Man & IV, 1994, oil on canvas, 65 by 47 inches; from the "Hospital Man" series. Courtesy Richard Anderson Fine Arts.

I do think some of my art embodies a certain kind of gay sensibility, even if it is the sensibility of an eight-year-old and hard to define. Maybe it's camp. Take my historic lesbian series of painted porcelain couples I bought on 14th Street. I used to love things like this when I was a kid—little porcelain birds and flowers—and I just can't get away from it. I also really love multiples. I like it when I meet someone at one of my shows and they say, "Oh, I have a whole wall of your stuff, a Candyass shrine," because they could afford to buy lots of little things rather than just one big expensive thing that they have to treat like a relic. I give a lot of stuff away or sell it cheap. I'd like to say it's being democratic but I think it comes from being an obsessive shopper myself. I'm always making too many of any edition because I think, "Oh, this one's going to be really popular" and I'm afraid I'll run out. I hate the thought of telling someone, no, I don't have any more of those left.

Also feminism is just a natural way of thinking for me. I grew up with a soft-core version of it. My mother's sort of young, just 21 years older than me, and when I was a kid I was always on her side. I think I was in third grade when Billie Jean King was playing Bobby Riggs and, of course, I thought Billie Jean King should win. The only problem I've ever encountered with feminism was in Lawrence, Kansas, where a group of separatist lesbians treated me like an awful person because I was a man, which made me feel both guilty and angry. I mean, I walk around every minute of my life feeling like a total fag who's going to be beaten up and I always wish that I could be a woman who could break down on the side of the road and someone would come and help me instead

of saying, "Why can't that faggot fix it himself?"

I wasn't really around the art world before politically gay art was there. I think I've had it easy. I've been shown because the art world is receptive to what I do. I know it's not always going to be this way no matter how much people say it will be. I've looked at enough old art magazines to notice that if you look at back issues you discover you've never heard of anybody. I don't mind. I mean it's a little upsetting but I don't take it too personally. I probably will be really out of fashion soon but I don't know what else to do. On the other hand, things come back into fashion. That's what I'm hoping. I haven't sold that much stuff, so in 20 years or so a good 1,200 of my pieces from the late '80s-early '90s will be ready to be rediscovered. When I moved some of this stuff down from this room to the basement my roommates helped me. It just took us forever and when one of them said, "Why don't you burn it?" I said, "Please, that's my retirement fund!"

It's too good to hope for that art with a gay content will change homophobic attitudes, and I definitely don't want to start thinking my art is important for any reason. I hate self-important art. It may be why I keep a comedic tone, or maybe that's just the only way I know how to deal with things. It's something I can do well. I can edit a funny sentence. I like being at my shows if I can because it brings the work down out of the art level. If the artist is there, especially if it's someone who looks like me, I think a lot of people think, "Oh, it's easy" or "It's stupid" or "I like it," but they don't bring this worshipful thing to it.

Hugh Steers

Born 1962, Washington, D.C. Studied at Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, 1991; Yale University, 1985; Parsons in Europe (France and Italy), 1983. Currently lives in New York. Most recent solo exhibition at Richard Anderson Fine Arts, New York, 1994.

I see my paintings as allegories or symbolic representations of a personal consciousness. And, of course, they include a lot of art history. *Man & IV*—it's part of a series called "Hospital Man"—is modeled on a tradition of power figures in European painting. The hand-on-hip pose is like figures by van Dyck or Velázquez. Instead of a sceptre he's got his intravenous stand; the bed is very Empire. They're style elements that suggest a certain kind of subject matter and then confound it. I think there's actually something faintly angelic about the image, with the white hospital clothes looking like a baby-doll dress or a christening gown.

In another painting I finished recently I show two nude men lying in a hospital bed. One of them has a catheter entering his chest and the other man kisses the point of entry. The Hickman catheter is a rubber tube inserted into the main artery to your heart; it's for medication to prevent AIDS-related blindness, which is of concern to me. The device is such a weird invasion of the body. Once it's implanted you have to keep it in, and a lot of people die of infection

"Abstract Expressionist work was an appropriate language for me as a queer. I didn't have to explain myself." —Louise Fishman