

UNDERSTANDING GAY CULTURE

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In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts

By

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The undersigned, appointed by the Dean of the Graduate School, have examined the thesis entitled.

UNDERSTANDING GAY CULTURE

Presented by Mark Alan Mueller

A candidate for the degree of Master of Fine Arts

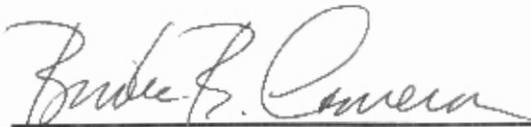
And hereby certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.



Professor James H. Calvin



Professor Bede Clarke



Professor Brooke Cameron

DEDICATION

This written work and accompanying sculptural exhibition is dedicated to Doyle Bennett, my collaborator and life partner. It has been with his physical, spiritual and emotional support during this journey of discovery that we have accomplished this life long dream. THANK YOU!

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Introduction

Perceptions of gay culture have changed dramatically over the last century. Before the Stonewall Riots of 1969, mainstream society chose not to acknowledge the existence of a gay sub-culture. The photographic works of Brassi provide evidence of a culture that hid from view. After the Stonewall riots and the emergence of the gay liberation movement, artists such as Robert Mapplethorpe reacted to the negative perceptions of homosexuality by creating aggressive, shocking works that emphasized the distinctions and differences of gay culture from mainstream society.

Since the 1990's however, a greater acceptance of alternative lifestyles has prevailed and changed perceptions of homosexuality. These perceptions include the idea that many similarities exist between homosexual and heterosexual culture. The thesis work provides examples of the artist's intention to create sculpture that investigates the common humanity of homosexual and heterosexual culture in order to foster a greater understanding and tolerance of a gay life.

Chapter 1

DISCOVERING GAY CULTURE

While many fine books on the history of homosexuality exist and are excellent sources for information, the purpose of this chapter is not to retell the history of homosexuality in society. Rather it is to give a brief overview of what perceptions of homosexuality exist and why.

On a clinical level, a homosexual is an individual male or female, who is attracted to someone of the same sex. (Hogan and Hudson, 1999) They come in all shapes and sizes, races and creeds. They are single, in long-term relationships, mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, aunts, and uncles, even one's best friend. They are like everyone else in society. The only difference is that physically, emotionally and spiritually they are attracted to members of their own sex. Yet, throughout most of modern history the homosexual individual has been vilified as different, aberrant and a sexual deviant.

American sodomy laws established in the early 19th century kept the homosexual rights movement underground until the late 1960's. During the early years of American history, many gay individuals kept their alternative lifestyle in the "closet". The term "Closet" is defined here as "...a state of concealment in which one immured one's homosexuality". (Dynes, Johansson and Percy, 1990) This was perhaps due in part to the perceptions on the part of mainstream society that homosexuality did not exist or, at the very least was not talked about. This

even extended to homosexual individuals themselves, for many were unaware that other like-minded individuals existed outside their local social grouping.

This concealment of sexual orientation led many artists to create works that did not function to exclusively define the existence of a unique culture of homosexuality. Brassi's *A Couple Dancing at the Bal de la Montagne Saint-Genève* is an example of this type of artwork. (Plate 1) This photograph, taken at a Parisian nightclub in 1931 during a society gala depicts a woman dancing with her man. Dressed to the nines in formal gloves and pearls, she addresses the audience with a smile that is slightly mocking and yet genuine at the same time. However, "she" is no woman but, rather, a young man dressed up and disguised as a woman with the use of makeup and feminine attire. The two are out for an evening of dance and public intimacy normally not afforded to them had the "woman" not put up her façade. They look like everyone else in the photograph and yet they are different. The image is "so initially successful in the disguise...that the disturbing element is its faithful reproduction of the normal world". (Ellenzweig, 1992)

Following this concept of façade creation, the thesis artist used his experience as a member of the United States Navy to create *Sailor Boy*. (Plate 2) When one enlists in the navy, one must make a solemn pledge and oath never to engage in homosexual activities. By making this pledge, the homosexual essentially denies his or her own humanity and true self. *Sailor Boy* presents a portrait of a young, well-groomed sailor in the prime of his life.

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Plate 1
*A Couple Dancing at the
Bal de la Montagne Saint-Genevieve*

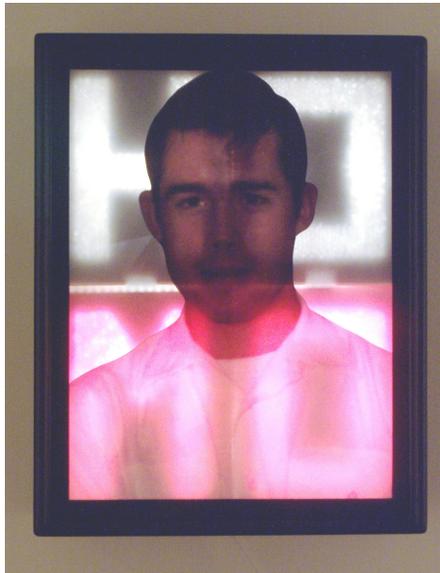


Plate 2
Sailor Boy

This portrait image is, however, just a façade for the hidden truth. The word HOMO, superimposed under the image of the sailor, flashes with red and white letters like a marquee sign. This effect vividly announces to the world his sexual orientation and, even in the face of a subsequent court-martial that effectively ended his career, he continued to deny his feeling and needs.

Both the works of Brassi and the artist exemplify the difficulties of dealing with homosexuality in a repressive society. While the two works come from different times, they both deal with the experience of the individual homosexual in a social group or setting rather than dealing with homosexuality as a unique cultural sub-group.

Chapter 2

DEFINING GAY CULTURE

During the last half of the 20th century, the opportunity for the gay community to define itself as a unique cultural group came during and after the Stonewall Riots of 1969. The riots, prompted by a police raid of a gay bar in New York City called the Stonewall Inn, provided the impetus for those of the homosexual community to declare their existence and demand equal treatment in society. Since the Stonewall Riots, the homosexual community has held annual pride celebrations that promote a "...gay and lesbian visibility, unity, and progress toward equal rights". (Hogan et al, 1999) Conservative political activists, such as Anita Bryant reacted to these celebrations with distinct backlash rhetoric. For the first time, organized opposition to the gay rights appeared on the political landscape. As the confrontational rhetoric continued during the 1970's and 1980's, artists such as Robert Mapplethorpe created works that emphasized the irreconcilable difference between homosexual and heterosexual culture. One work in particular that aggressively expressed his sexual orientation to mainstream society is the photographic work *Brian Ridley and Lyle Heeter*. (Plate 3) Initially on the surface the image of the two men, one seated and one standing, is reminiscent of those snapshots made during life that reveal a moment in time, such a an anniversary or first date, in a relationship. The "...combination of the extravagantly alien, the full leather drag and the utterly domestic..." is what makes this image so disturbing and aggressive. (Morrison, 2001)

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Plate 3
Brian Ridley and Lyle Heeter

Mapplethorpe is essentially thumbing his nose at the established perceptions of domesticity in a relationship. He knew that his audience was mainstream society and would be shocked by the knowledge that gay men did exist.

Creating a sense of shock is also evident in the thesis work *My Toy Box*. (Plate 4) This work contains toys the artist would have wanted during his childhood. Like many children, toy play reinforced the socialization of the artist. Toys have a specific gender role assignment that conforms to "...the polar distinction of masculinity and femininity by rigidly assigning certain oversimplified characteristics to all males and females based solely on their gender". (Diamant and McNulty, 1995) In *My Toy Box*, the toys presented are not the toys one would expect to be in a child's toy box. There are dolls such as Ken and his friend that come from the world of *Barbie*TM. These dolls are not the action figure toys of recent generations, but rather are dolls that are physically pleasing and expected to behave with decorum and good manners. While this may seem a bit out of place for a boy's toy box, what is more disturbing is the compromising position in which Ken and his friend are situated. Ken has his rear firmly planted in the crotch of his companion. His friend in turn has his arms wrapped around Ken with his hand placed squarely in Ken's crotch. To the artist, this work provides a platform to negate the preconceived notions that gender role assignment and sexual orientation are determined through the socialization of a child's toys.

Mapplethorpe and the artist provide examples of works that emphasized the difference between homosexual and heterosexual cultures. These works defined gay men as being different and antithetical to mainstream culture as well as



Plate 4
My Toy Box

reacting to the negative stereotypical perceptions of homosexuality that were that were prevalent during these times. As the backlash rhetoric of the 1980's slowly subsided, a greater acceptance of alternative lifestyles began to surface. It was in reaction to this trend that the artist felt the need to make a change in his approach to the subject matter of perceptions of gay culture.

Chapter 3

CO-EXISTENCE OF GAY CULTURE

The 1990's ushered in a greater acceptance of alternative lifestyles in mainstream culture. Two television shows that attempt to promote homosexuals as equivalent to heterosexuals are *Will and Grace* and *Queer Eye For The Straight Guy*. As one of the first situation comedies on a major television network to portray the leading character as openly gay, *Will and Grace* initially broke down many stereotypical perceptions of what a gay man is. The main character is an acculturated, approachable, successful lawyer who is openly gay. The antithesis to this character is his friend Jack. This individual cannot hold down a steady job. He is usually only interested in going out to gay clubs and having one-night-stands. His reactions to life's everyday problems are overly dramatic and flamboyant. He is an extreme characterization of an effeminate gay man. This same type of characterization is expressed in the reality-base show *Queer Eye For The Straight Guy*. This show depicts five openly gay men who each week complete an extreme makeover of a heterosexual man in the areas of grooming, clothing, surroundings, food and culture. Both these shows present the image of gay men as ultra-sophisticated, fashion correct, health conscious individuals who are always able to correct the foibles of heterosexuals. In essence, this is replacing one stereotypical perception of homosexuality with another. The ludicrous characterization of gay men in both of these shows indicates a stereotype that is an impediment to the possibility of a amicable co-existence with mainstream society.

This push for co-existence prompted the thesis artist to create works that related more to the common humanity of our cultures instead of to their differences. In conjunction with this change of conceptual approach, this artist also changed the media approach of his works from traditional object-based sculpture to that of performance-based sculpture. This change of media provided the artist the opportunity to invite the audience to participate in his sculptures. Two works that follow these changes in style and content are *Walk In My Shoes* and *GAYMANCAM*. (Plate 5 and 6) *Walk In My Shoes* details a walk during one day in the life of the artist. The unique orientation of the projected image on the gallery floor allows the audience to take part in the journey and experience what it feels like to take a walk in the artist's shoes. A constant cadence to the walk evokes the rhythmic pace of a life lived in motion. Words periodically flash upon the screen to provide the viewer with a descriptor of the artist. These descriptions can be permanent and genetically imposed such as gender, eye color, ethnicity, or sexual orientation. They can be temporary such as weight, driver's license number, or political affiliation. Alternatively, they may be self-induced such as career choices, phobias, or hobby interests. As the video continues, the audience starts to realize that these labels are not necessarily specific to the artist. In fact, these labels are applicable to any member of mainstream society. These create a common understanding that we are all human and live with labels such as these in order to help with the acknowledgement of our presence in society. *GAYMANCAM* on the other hand provides the opportunity for the audience to experience life through the artist's eyes. The monitor, which is placed on a single pedestal, provides real-time



Plate 5
Walk In My Shoes
(Installation View)



Plate 5
Walk In My Shoes
(Screen Shot)



Plate 6
GAYMANCAM
(Installation View)



Plate 6
GAYMANCAM
(Detail View)

evidence of the exhibition via a small camera attached to the top of a helmet. The helmet is attached to the pedestal via a fifty foot cable that allows the viewer the opportunity to wear the helmet and walk around the gallery experiencing the artist's life through his or her eyes. As the novelty of wearing the camera fades, a realization comes to the participating audience member that being gay is no different from being straight, most of the time.

Another piece that invites a participatory opportunity for the audience is *Exclusion*. (Plate 7) The work presents a vignette of urban domesticity. A table holding a lamp, two pictures, and a flower arrangement is, for the artist, indicative of what a normal scene of domestic life would be. A video of a bird continually hitting the outside of the window provides an analogy to the viewer of the artist hitting the "glass wall" of mainstream society attempting to become part of it. The walls, shades and other domestic paraphernalia allude to barriers between the homosexual and mainstream society. This interactive piece also allows the viewer to prevent the bird from becoming part of the scene by either closing the shades or turning out the light. By participating in either of these actions, the viewer becomes that part of mainstream society that tries to maintain the status quo by preventing gay culture from co-existing with mainstream culture. Yet the bird continues to knock against the "glass wall" to insist on a common humanity between the cultures.



Plate 7
Exclusion
(Installation View)



Plate 7
Exclusion
(Screen Shot)

Two strictly documentary video works that provide arguments of common humanity between our cultures are *Journey* and *7 Days*. (Plate 8 & 9) *Journey* presents an image of the artist in the throws of deep sleep. A subtle twilight glow surrounded by the deep black of night bathes the image of the head. This emphasizes a common sleep state. As the video progresses, statements and words interpreted as the dreams and thoughts of the artist become audible. The statements begin slowly and coherently only to progress in speed and incoherency as the night continues. No indication as to whom or what the statements are about is given. However, after a time, the statements take on a familiarity to the audience. This familiarity becomes disquieting as the realization sets in that these thoughts and fears are similar to those of the audience. The audience realizes then that they might be party to an individual's intimate thoughts and fears that very well could be their own. As *Journey* ends, *7 Days* begins. This video work consists of seven boxed black and white video loops of the artist during a typical week. Rising from sleep, getting ready for the day, proceeding through the day, relaxing in the evening and retiring at the end of the day are common to all people. Arranged in a linear fashion, the seven boxed video loops represent the days of the week. The video projects a mundane normal existence similar to the way the artist lives his life.

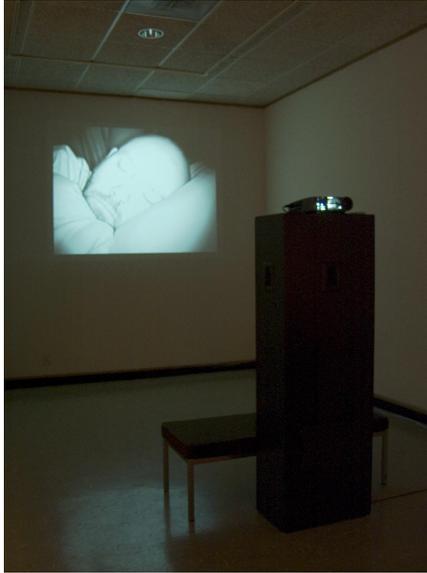


Plate 8
Journey
(Installation View)



Plate 8
Journey
(Screen Shot)

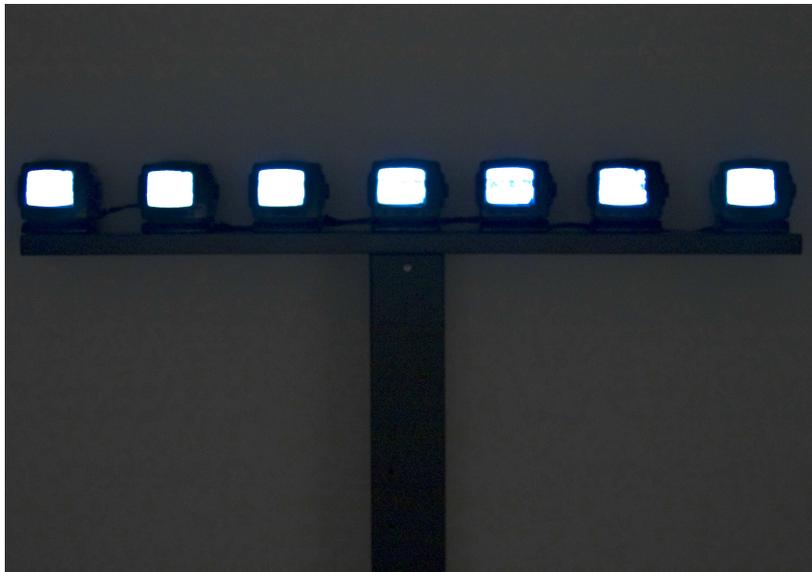


Plate 9
7 Days
(Installation View)



Plate 9
7 Days
(Screen Shot)

These works provide an opportunity for the audience member to recognize themselves in a piece regardless of their sexual orientation. With recognition comes awareness of the common humanity of people. Moreover, with awareness comes the understanding that gay men are fellow human beings and not stereotypes of a sub-culture.

Summary

Throughout the thesis, gay culture has been examined through its stages of development over the past century. This was done not only through a process of historical investigations into gay culture, but also by comparing works by artists representing various time periods of the culture's development with examples of the artist's thesis work.

Before the Stonewall riots, no clear understanding of what a homosexual individual was existed. The photographic work from Brassi, *A Couple Dancing at the Bal de la Montagne Saint-Geneviève*, as well as the thesis work *Sailor Boy* dealt with the experience of the homosexual individual in a repressive society.

Through the realization of a unique cultural identity, the opportunity to define gay culture arose. After the Stonewall riots, a blossoming of gay cultural identity began to take shape. The growth of a larger gay culture that shared individual and social values promoted a mutually antagonistic attitude between mainstream culture and itself. Robert Mapplethorpe's work *Brian Ridley and Lyle Heeter* expressed his social values in an overtly aggressive manner. Similarly, *My Toy Box* negates preconceived notions of gender role assignment in toy play and challenges the viewer with the realization that sexual orientation begins at conception and is not a conscious choice.

Present also are the changes in perceptions of gay culture. While these perceptions are for the most part positive, they still provide dangerously ludicrous characterizations of gay men. In response to these characterizations, the artist

initiated a change in the content and media of his sculptural works. Placing more emphasis on the benign co-existence of gay culture with mainstream society, works such as *Walk In My Shoes* and *GAYMANCAM* provided the audience an opportunity to empathize with the homosexual individual. *Exclusion* provides another opportunity for the viewer to become part of the solution or part of the problem in a greater understanding of gay culture. Both *Journey* and *7 Days* reiterate the artist's argument for a common humanity between the cultures.

In the final analysis, it is the opinion of this writer that we have indeed witnessed a dramatic change in perceptions of gay culture. No longer is there a denial of the existence a unique culture within mainstream society or amongst homosexual individuals. Gone too, is the confrontational rhetoric of the 70's and 80's. A greater acknowledgement of alternative lifestyles exists today, however, ludicrous stereotypes of gay culture continue to persist in the media and mainstream society. In order for a greater understanding and tolerance of a gay life in our society, we must abolish these characterizations of gay men and instead push for the concept of co-existence within mainstream society. It is our task then to make use of every line of communication possible, including fine art, to achieve our goal.

For the thesis artist, sculpture is that one line of communication to help reach the goal of co-existence. In the past, he has reacted aggressively toward the prevailing norms of society by creating works that shocked and disturbed the viewer. However, as time has passed, there has been a conscious effort to emphasize the common humanity between our cultures in the works. Paramount

to the artist is that his life should be a positive representation of what gay culture is. Gay men are not sexual deviants out to subvert the young of American or a source of flawless designer health and beauty tips trying to clean up the straight men of America. Rather they are just ordinary men, determined to live ordinary lives. It is his fervent hope that with this thesis work; just one person may fully understand why the gay community says, "We are just like everyone else".

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IMAGE SOURCES

Plate 1. French, *A Couple Dancing at the Bal de la Montagne Sainte-Geneviève*, c. 1931. Photo by Gilberte Brassi. Illustrated in Allen Ellenzweig, *The Homoerotic Photograph*. (New York: Columbia University Press), p. 68.

Plate 3. *Brian Ridley and Lyle Heeter*. The Estate of Robert Mapplethorpe. Illustrated in Paul Morrison, *The Explanation for Everything*. (New York and London: New York University Press, 2001), p. 100.