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Art Once Shunned, Now Celebrated in 'Queer Archaeology; Queer Abstraction'

By Holland Cotter

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"Untitled (Men)," from 2010, by Matt Lipps, in the exhibition "Found: Queer Archaeology; Queer Abstraction" at the Leslie-Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art.

MARC SELWYN FINE ART, LOS ANGELES; JESSICA SILVERMAN GALLERY, SAN FRANCISCO; AND JOSH LILLEY GALLERY, LONDON

The Leslie-Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art, which has a lively show called "Found: Queer Archaeology; Queer Abstraction" on through the fall, is itself an archaeological project of many layers. The museum officially opened last spring, but has existed in New York, in one form or another, for nearly 50 years.

It originated in a SoHo loft shared by two men, Charles W. Leslie and Fritz Lohman (1922-2010), life partners and collectors of homoerotic painting, drawing and photography. In the summer of 1969, they opened their home as a weekend art salon and were astonished when hundreds of people showed up. It turned out that the type of art they loved, "unambiguously gay" and shunned by conventional museums, had a zealous following.

Soon afterward, the couple opened a commercial gallery in SoHo. But in the 1980s, their focus turned from promotion to preservation. AIDS was devastating the gay art community. Entire careers were disappearing as artists lost homes or died and had work trashed.



Robert Lucy's "Sheba," from 2008.

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COLLECTION OF DAMON GORRIE AND STEPHANIE WATSON

In response, in 1987, the two men formed the Leslie/Lohman Gay Art Foundation, a nonprofit collecting and exhibiting institution, which eventually acquired a new gallery at 26 Wooster Street in SoHo. The foundation was awarded official museum status in 2011, becoming the first accredited gay art museum anywhere. After closing for renovations, it reopened its Wooster Street gallery at double the size in March.

Over the decades, the institution had pretty closely adhered to its founding criterion for what made art gay: basically, the presence of the nude, usually white, male body. But gay culture itself changed. Women, often shunted aside in the early movement, had become a powerful aesthetic and political force. Trans people, once silent, were speaking out. Ethnic and racial diversity increased. Queerness, a concept of difference that floated free from binary notions of sexuality and gender, had evolved. And this more complicated sense of identity, incorporating lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer consciousness, had gone global.

In the new century, under the leadership of Hunter O'Hanian, the museum, which absorbed the foundation, acknowledged these changes. And now, directed by Gonzalo Casals, it fully incorporates them, as is evident in "Found: Queer Archaeology; Queer Abstraction." The male figure is still here, and sometimes nude. But in large-scale watercolors by Geoffrey Chadsey it's a racial and sexual hybrid. In collages by Troy Michie it's physically fractured, its erotic charge interrupted, confused, even canceled out.



An installation view of "Found: Queerness as Archaeology."

RIYA LERNER

And in a photomural by the Los Angeles artist Ken Gonzalez-Day, the body is conspicuous through its absence. The mural is based on one of many photographs the artist has tracked down of lynchings of Latinos, Native Americans and Chinese immigrant men in California in the early 20th century. In the nocturnal picture used here, men milling around a tree look upward, but the object of their attention is missing. The artist has erased the form of the hanged victim, leaving dark, empty space.

The show has a small separate section of abstract work, with pieces by two consistently interesting and

under-exhibited midcareer New York artists, Nancy Brooks Brody and Carrie Yamaoka. And throughout women are major contributors to the show's queer rewriting of history and art history.



An installation view of "Found: Queerness as Archaeology."
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Angela Dufresne recalibrates the gender balances of Gustave Courbet's famous 1855 depiction of his Paris studio in a picture of comparably heroic scale. In a deft, shrewd act of painterly transvestism – or transsexualism – Karen Heagle merges her own portrait with that of the renegade Viennese artist Egon Schiele (1890-1918). And Eve Fowler inscribes the revolutionary, logic-skewing language of the lesbian modernist Gertrude Stein on a large wood panel, a format that brings protest posters to mind.



Eve Fowler inscribes the revolutionary language of Gertrude Stein on a large wood panel in this 2012 work.
MIER GALLERY, LOS ANGELES

In mentioning these artists, I'm talking about some of the most stimulating American figures around, who are joined on this show by others from Argentina, Brazil, Hong Kong, Israel and Lebanon. Taken as a whole, their work would do any museum proud, as would a suite of eight magical little paintings by Sam Gordon. Several feature what look like astrological signs; all incorporate scraps harvested from Mr. Gordon's New York studio floor.

Almost everything in "Found," which has been organized by the artist Avram Finkelstein, a founding

member of the Silence = Death collective, is on loan for the occasion. But a second exhibition, "Expanded Visions: Fifty Years of Collecting," a reduced version of a show that opened in the museum in March, is gleaned entirely from the permanent holdings. Assembled by Mr. Casals, it includes many recent acquisitions and gives a good then-and-now sense of the institution's thinking.

At any point over the past several decades, for example, you might have found, hanging on Leslie-Lohman walls, a circa 1900 photograph of Sicilian youths by Wilhelm von Gloeden, or George Bellows's 1923 print of a men's bathhouse, or one of John Burton Harter's academic 1980s nudes. You would have been far less likely to find the equivalent of Zanele Muholi's portraits of the black South African lesbians, or Chitra Ganesh's feminist mash-ups of South Asian comic strips, or anything at all resembling the doll-like hand-stitched sculptures of the transgender artist Greer Lankton — all of which have recently arrived in the collection and look completely at home in the show.

The museum has a history it can be proud of, a radical one. From the start, it championed an outcast art and stood boldly, unfashionably, by it. Now it is complicating its earlier aesthetic direction without compromising its social mission, which is a tough act to pull off. Whether the museum is, or will continue to be, as advertised, the only art institution of its kind doesn't matter. It's a museum that both stretches "gay" and resists "normal," and for that it's invaluable.

"Make being different your strength" could be its motto. Wasn't that the lesson the 1960s were teaching when Mr. Leslie and Mr. Lohman first opened their home and their art to the public that summer — the summer of Stonewall, as it happened — all those years ago?