

ART SY

Jessica Silverman: "How 5 LGBTQ+ Art World Couples Inspire Each Other"

By Osman Can Yerebakan

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Portrait of Jessica Silverman and Sarah Thornton. Photo by Daniel Hebert. Courtesy of the couple.

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Portrait of Michaela Yearwood-Dan and Elle Stanford. Courtesy of the couple.

Artists have always depended on love. Like water in an unforgiving desert, romantic relationships can be a bountiful source of inspiration, and an exploration of one's own self through a new pair of eyes. For queer artists, this bond between an artist and their beloved has yielded some of the most definitive works of art. From *Sleep* (1964), Andy Warhol's five-hour-long video of his lover John Giorno, to Isaac Julien's dreamy sequences of Langston Hughes's life and loves in *Looking for Langston* (1991), queer artists have long seen these connections as a space for artistic experimentation.

And yet, queer love has been among the most politicized and stigmatized forms of self-expression, and is still highly scrutinized, or even met with violence. Many LGBTQ+ artists, in a spirit of resilience, have brought their physical and emotional yearnings into the core of their practices. From disarming portraits to silently penetrating sculptures, many works of art, both joyous and devastating, have resulted from queer artists' relationships.

Artsy spoke to five queer couples about the power of capturing their romance, the ties that hold them together against the challenges of the industry, and the inspiration they find in each other.

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## Gray Wielebinski and Asa Seresin



Portrait of Gray Wielebinski and Asa Seresin. Photo by Ruby Seresin. Courtesy of the couple.

When Gray Wielebinski booked the ICA London as his wedding venue to marry his partner Asa Seresin, he wasn't expecting another email from the institution's curators soon after: an invitation for his first institutional exhibition, "The Red Sun is High, the Blue Low." The ceremony ended up taking place at the venue concurrently with the show, and the couple got to take their wedding photos in front of his multimedia artworks.

Wielebinski and Seresin initially connected on a dating app three years ago. The first date turned into a days-long romance, which led Seresin, a PhD candidate at Penn University who studies gender, particularly heteronormativity, to postpone his flight twice. The moment was critical for Wielebinski, who, at the time, had just turned 30, gone through top surgery, and opened his first gallery solo at London's Hales Gallery. "We fell in love really quickly," Wielebinski remembered.

The couple's romantic and professional lives overlapped early on, when Seresin penned an essay for the group show "Motherboy," which Wielebinski co-organized in 2023 with curator Stella Bottai at Milan gallery Gió Marconi. Though they have separate practices—Wielebinski focuses on the performance of masculinity in his multimedia artworks, while Seresin studies our complex relationship with desire—their ideas often converge around language, they explained. "Our mutual interest in self-expression has helped me solidify my vision and help translate my focus into a language," said Wielebinski. "I do appreciate that we both have a child-like love, maybe in an obsessive way, about an idea."

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## Michaela Yearwood-Dan and Elle Stanford



Portrait of Michaela Yearwood-Dan and Elle Stanford. Courtesy of the couple

The pandemic was the starting point for London-based painter and sculptor Michala Yearwood-Dan and Elle Stanford's relationship. The couple first chatted on an app in December 2019, two months after Stanford, a culture editor at the *New York Times*, had moved to London from New York. Their first in-person meeting the following month quickly evolved into meetings zigzagging London's emptied-out streets.

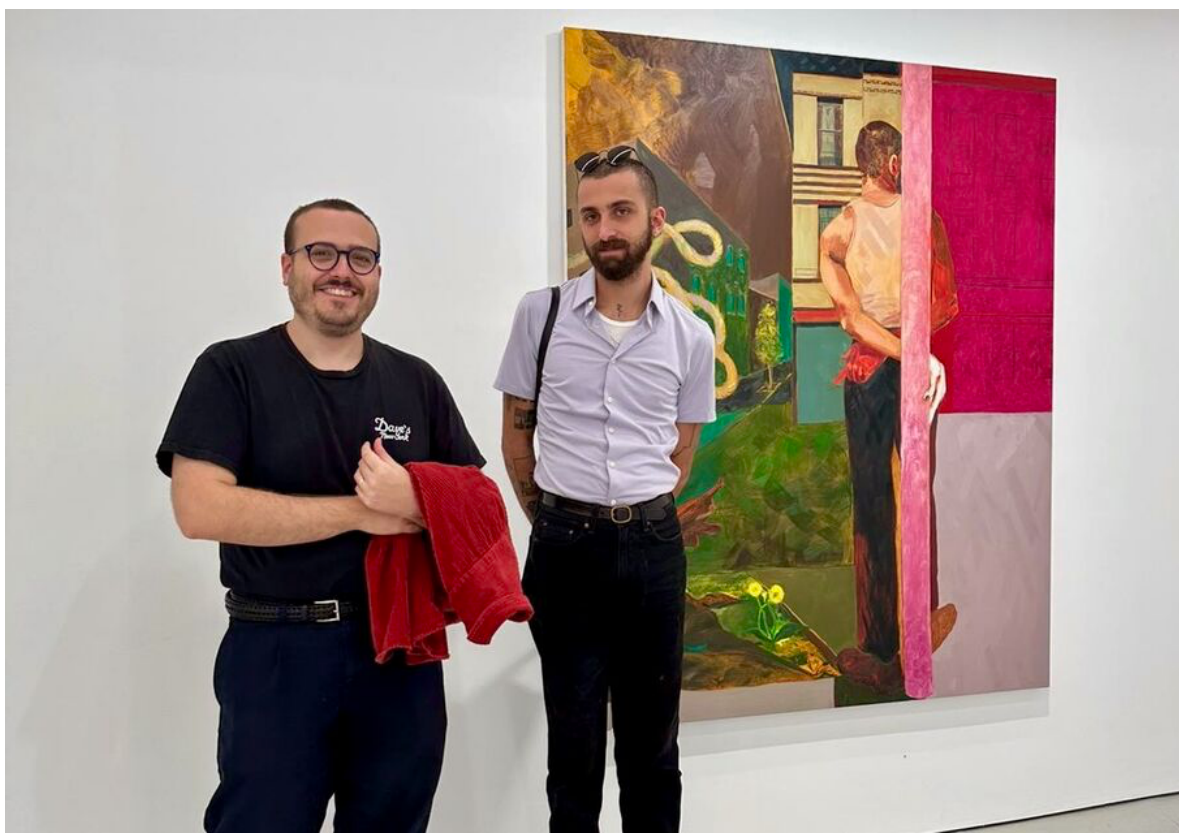
"We immediately witnessed each other's most vulnerable moments and raw feelings, and this made us move faster than usual in the relationship," said Stanford. As a journalist who had "almost" studied art history in college, she was immediately impressed by Yearwood-Dan's studio practice. The painter had just opened her first solo gallery show at Tiwani Contemporary when they met and, for the first time, she was able to make a living through her absorbing paintings of distorted flora. "Seeing works in progress and visiting museums together has shown me the layers of creating abstraction," Stanford said of her partner's work.

For Yearwood-Dan, this relationship provides the support in what has been a formative time in her career. The painter was contacted by Marianne Boesky Gallery on Instagram in October 2020 with an interest in a Zoom studio visit, leading to a small presentation at the Chelsea gallery's project room in 2021. In 2023, she presented a larger show at the main space. "I have been fortunate to grow my practice in a loving space where late-night studio time and sometimes prioritizing our careers are understood," added Yearwood-Dan, who thinks their relationship has made her more "feisty about what needs to be achieved."

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## Anthony Cudahy and Ian Lewandowski



Portrait of Anthony Cudahy and Ian Lewandowski. Photo by Benoît Porcher. Courtesy of the couple.

Anthony Cudahy and Ian Lewandowski first met 11 years ago in a typical fashion for the 2010s New York art scene: They collaborated on a zine. Cudahy invited Lewandowski to publish his photos in the biweekly publication he worked on, which evolved into a date, and, eventually, a marriage with a dog. The painter and the photographer now work from neighboring studios, a walking distance from their Brooklyn apartment. "Our practices have always been adjacent, not only physically but also thematically," says Lewandowski, whose photographic portraits depict queer elders, friends, or himself—currently on view in the solo shows "Reflector" at No Place in Columbus, Ohio, and "Again, again" at Aurora Photo Center in Indianapolis.

With their ambiguous emotional subjects, both artists capture forms of queer intimacy, and the artists appear in each others' work, occasionally in direct likeness. Cudahy's moody paintings portray distorted interiors in hazy tones, in which bodies—anonymous or attributed—inhabit these malleable places. The artist will have concurrent solo shows this fall at the New York spaces of Hales and GRIMM, following the galleries' joint Cudahy shows at their London spaces last year.

It was a challenge, a decade ago, for the couple to venture together into unpredictable careers as queer artists. "We didn't know what our careers would look like," said Lewandowski. "When there is a lack of foundation for what the future might be, having someone else going through a similar phase by your side, also crazily wanting the same thing, was encouraging."

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## Hilary Harkness and Ara Tucker



Portrait Hilary Harkness and Ara Tucker. Photo by Ara Tucker. Courtesy of the couple.

Painter Hilary Harkness and writer Ara Tucker began their relationship on April Fools' Day in 2013, but their bond became serious soon after. Brought together by a mutual love of racquet sports, they have since been intertwined in each other's work lives, as much as their romantic lives. For example, Harkness created the cover art for Tucker's 2022 book of surreal comical short stories, *How to Raise an Art Star*. Conversely, Harkness has also integrated the figure of Tucker—who has been shown in battle scenes or as a model for Josephine Baker—into her paintings that rewrite stories of mistreated historical female figures with a titillating edge. Agency and curiosity inhabit her heroines' effortlessly determined ambitions. Warriors, aristocrats, rebellions, and sexual beings, they claim their real estates in tales of yore, painted in Harkness's brisk gestures.

When Harkness came back home from her first day at the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Copyist Program in 2018, she decided to make a new version of Winslow Homer's 1866 *Prisoners from the Front*, but paint the soldiers as Black. This became the "Arabella Freeman" series, named after a historical, fictional free Black woman, shown in Harkness's recent solo exhibition "Prisoners from the Front" at P.P.O.W, her first in a decade.

Between Tucker occasionally taking over the painter's Instagram account and Harkness snatching objects—such as a skull—from her partner's writing studio to implement into her paintings, the couple has cultivated an organic form of creative exchange. "As a queer couple, we are trying to demystify things and bring others along with us instead of slamming any doors behind us," said Tucker.

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## Jessica Silverman and Sarah Thornton



Portrait of Sarah Thornton and Jessica Silverman, with family. Photo by Daniel Hebert. Courtesy of the couple.

Art fairs are hardly the most rosy backdrops for love at first sight. However, stars aligned for art dealer Jessica Silverman and critic Sarah Thornton during Frieze London in 2011. Silverman's booth, a solo presentation by queer German artist Susanne M. Winterling, was "one of only two good stands at the fair," according to Thornton. Their tastes continued to coincide: After the critic stepped into the mixed-media installation, she realized that the then-emerging Jessica Silverman Gallery also represented Tammy Rae Carland, whose photography series "Lesbian Bed" had been one of her highlights from that year's Istanbul Biennial.

Fast-forward 13 years, and the couple lives in San Francisco, where Silverman has grown her eponymous enterprise into a Bay Area powerhouse. Thornton, whose 2008 book *Seven Days in the Art World* is a classic on the contemporary art market, recently released her newest title, *Tits Up: What Sex Workers, Milk Bankers, Plastic Surgeons, Bra Designers, and Witches Tell Us about Breasts*. Included in the book is Silverman's journey with breastfeeding their baby, Echo. "The experience of watching Jessica give birth and breastfeed was highly influential in the book's structure," Thornton said. A screenprint from the "Milk Fountain" series by Loie Hollowell (whom

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Silverman represents) illustrates the chapter with an abstracted hallucinatory rendition of an overflowing fountain of the white liquid.

While they might seem worlds apart, the influential critic and tastemaker dealer lend each other new perspectives. "I am the sounding board—I hear about everything, but now I much better understand how artists live and sales are done," explained Thornton. When Silverman signed Judy Chicago into the gallery a few years ago, Thornton was her biggest champion. "Jessica has a more adventurous side than most dealers," she added. "We are feminists and diversity is a driving force for programming."

A decade on from that initial Frieze meeting, the couple's taste has become harmonized. "We come to an agreement on the best painting in the room fairly quickly," said Thornton. "Jessica's eye is more adventurous than my conservative take—I need to see the next body of work to come around."

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