HYPERALLERGIC
Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

How We Got Here: Portrait of the Artist as a Queer Feminist

by Clarity Haynes on March 14, 2015

Leah DeVun, “Early Morning Goodbye” (2010), C-print, 30” x 40” (image courtesy of the artist)

As long as I can remember, I’ve organized and been involved in artist groups and collectives. It all started with “AYWAKE – Alliance of Young Women Artists Kreating Empowerment,” a small, informal salon I co-founded in college. I had been feeling isolated from other artists in the liberal arts milieu I was submerged in, and I ended up forming friendships in that group that became very important to me. I went on to participate in several other women’s crit groups and collectives as I pursued an art career. In reflecting on this experience recently, I realized that this kind of self-organized community has performed a crucial function in my art making, by providing a lens through which my artwork can be understood — and affirmed — by my queer feminist peers.

I think a lot about Judy Chicago and her struggle to overcome the censorship and degradation that had been attached to the idea of 'the feminine.' In many ways, I relate to her story. To be an artist one has to be incredibly confident, honest, fearless, and grounded in oneself, which includes one's body and desires. I believe this is an extra challenge for women, who until recently have been relatively absent from art history, and queers, who have historically experienced a culturally imposed imperative of hiding. As a young artist, two books made a big difference in my life: ***The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970's History and Impact*** by Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (1996) and ***Lesbian Art in America: A Contemporary History*** by Harmony Hammond (2000). I moved to New York in 2005 to go to grad school, where I studied with artist Patricia Cronin, and soon met a community of like-minded queer feminist artists.

In considering community and how we create it, I became interested in how other artists go through similar processes. When Hrag Vartanian asked me to write on this topic for Hyperallergic, I decided to ask some contemporary artists how they came to be where they are now. I sought out queer feminist artists who are successful, strong, unapologetic, and making compelling work. I'm grateful to Chitra Ganesh, Karen Heagle, Rachel Farmer, Ginger Brooks Takahashi, and Leah DeVun for taking the time to think about their pasts and write something for this article. It's been a true labor of love.

Chitra Ganesh

Installation view of Chitra Ganesh, “Eyes of Time” at the Brooklyn Museum (image courtesy Brooklyn Museum)

My initial engagements with feminism came via encounters with pro-choice and abortion rights activism in the late 1980s and early 1990s when I was in high school. I remember taking a bus sponsored by NOW (The National Organization of Women) to the March on Washington around this time when I was in 10th grade and attending the 1993 Gay Rights March on Washington. I wanted to participate in and learn more about these movements, but felt at odds with the demographics of the space, which, as a young person growing up in one of New York City’s diverse immigrant communities, I felt to be largely older and white. My first sense of the possibility of another more textured and fraught experience of young people negotiating race, sexuality, and class within an urban space was through reading James Baldwin’s *Giovanni’s Room*, which blew my mind.

Through the 1990s I actively sought and involved myself in queer Asian and POC spaces. This was the first time I was exposed to a set of queer cultural idioms, practices, and ways of navigating the world that reflected the context I inhabited. The cultural production in both queer

and feminist spaces, including butch-femme culture, poster making, drag performances, comics and zines, and documentary photography and video, would come to extend profound influence on my own work vis-a-vis articulating alternate subjectivities, the importance of politically charged positions within contemporary art, and the integration of image and text.

The late 1990s saw an exciting emergence of progressive South Asian movements and organizations, including the South Asian Women's Creative Collective, or SAWCC. Founded in 1997 by artist and curator Jaishri Abichandani, SAWCC is a not-for-profit space dedicated to the visibility and advancement of South Asian Women Artists and is still very active today. SAWCC introduced me to a network of peers and mentors, some of whom I continue to work with and many of whom have become lifelong friends.

Within spaces such as SAWCC or SALGA (the South Asian Lesbian and Gay Organization), negotiating my own marginal position within a mainstream discourse was no longer a central concern. These questions took a back seat, allowing me the breathing room to develop my content and experiment with a variety of visual languages and signifiers perceived as outside of or illegible within a Euro-American contemporary art context.

Early experiences with contemporary art also marked profound moments of encounter and transformation. This included encountering works such as Martha Rosler's Vietnam war collages, with their nuanced interplay of class, gender, and politics of war and domestic space, the quilts of Faith Ringgold, the velvet-covered sculptures of Anita Dube, the paintings of Martin Wong and David Wojnarowicz, and radical representations of gender nonconforming bodies in Cathy Opie's large-scale photographs.

Karen Heagle

Karen Heagle, “Let Nature Take Its Course, and Hope it Passes” (2011), acrylic, ink, collage, gold and copper leaf on paper, 77″ x 77″ (image courtesy the artist)

In 1992, while an MFA student at Pratt, I encountered a show that was revolutionary for me. *Painting and Culture*, curated by Deborah Kass at Fiction/Non Fiction Gallery, was representational, feminist, subversive, a little vulgar, angry, but not humorless. I had been feeling a vast disconnection with the predominate agenda in the painting department at Pratt. The show resonated with me because it constituted the kind of work I wanted to be making in my studio but had been strongly admonished to avoid.

Inspired by this exhibition, I attended a panel on painting and culture that Deborah Kass was participating in at the former alternative space, Thread Waxing Space. Deb, after listening to a familiar pontification from a male art critic, just stopped him and said, “Your culture is not my

culture." She explained that being a queer female gave her a different perspective on culture than this presiding white male viewpoint, and it struck me that her position was entirely valid. This was a startling awakening for me. Hitherto I had been coerced into accepting the patriarchal notion of culture, which I tried to comply with, setting aside my difference. From that moment on, I felt permission to unabashedly pursue my work.

After finishing my MFA, I wrote Deb a fan mail letter of inquiry. She called me and I began working in her studio a few days a week. As time went on, the mentorship grew in importance for me. Deb and her girlfriend / now wife, artist Pattie Cronin, who I also assisted, were similar to parents. I asked advice on matters both professional and personal. They helped with vetting show opportunities, but also with dating quandaries, and what to wear when going out. These experiences were crucial and formative. Closely observing a two-artist lesbian couple function domestically and professionally became integral to finding my own place in the world.

Rachel Farmer

Rachel Farmer, "Ancestors Huddled" (2012), digital C-print, 12" x 18" (image courtesy the artist)

I was fundamentally shaped by my upbringing within a religious women's community. I was raised in Provo, Utah, in the 1970s and 80s (Mormon, of course). Starting at age 12, the final hour of Sunday's three-hour church service was gender segregated. I would head to the Young Women's meeting while the boys would go to priesthood meeting. Looking back, I can see all kinds of problems with this structure, but at that moment in time I loved it. While I was quiet and shy at school, I thrived within this intimate, women's-only social space.

Gathering weekly for service and social activities, I especially loved hanging out with our adult women leaders, building friendships and getting a glimpse into the mysteries of adult life.

By the time I went to college at Brigham Young University, I was increasingly uncomfortable with the doctrinal and cultural gender disparity within Mormonism. But I quickly found that I wasn't alone in my frustration. The early nineties brought a new surge of Mormon feminism, as quiet conversations and scholarship began to reach the public eye. As a student, I immersed myself in research, and found classes that challenged my sense of the world, including a paradigm-shifting Sociology of Gender class. I was riveted by scholarship detailing the history of my early Mormon foremothers — stories of women banding together to deal with illness, poverty and the daily labor required of all in the 19th-century West. And I was surprised to read stories of women running cooperative businesses, going back East to attend medical school, publishing a women's newspaper (the *Woman's Exponent*) and serving as leaders in the local and national suffrage movement. These narratives continue to hold great emotional weight for me, and serve as a source for my work today.

One of the feminist scholars who helped nurture my growing identity was Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, a Pulitzer Prize-winning historian (*A Midwife's Tale*) and one of the founders of the feminist Mormon magazine, *Exponent II* (still in publication 40 years later). Moving to Chicago in 1995 to attend the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, I finally had access to a world of queer texts, which I quickly devoured — Dorothy Allison, Audre Lorde, Joan Nestle, Leslie Feinberg, memoirs, novels, histories, and more than one book about lesbian nuns. All of these feminist and queer writings gave me a foundation, a sense of a bigger community, and a space to both wrestle with and embrace my varied roots.

Ginger Brooks Takahashi

[Ginger Brooks Takahashi] LTTR, “Untitled (Walking With LTTR #2),” photograph (image courtesy the artist)

My first experiences being part of an artist scene were in Philadelphia, where I lived in the early ’00s. I was part of Space 1026, a studio centered around a communal print shop and gallery space. The scene around Space 1026 was mostly non-queer artists, people coming from suburban countercultural perspectives, who found expression in screen-printing and wheat-pasting their prints around the city via bikes. My counterpoint was living in West Philly, amongst an anarchist activist punk scene whose political work included AIDS activism, fighting gentrification, and unlearning racism.

I met a larger group of queer and gender self-determined artists when I moved to New York City, in 1999, and after my time in Philly in 2002. I found my way to Paper Tiger, a video-making and media literacy collective, very much the artist as activist model. This was one of the ways I came to locate myself and navigate the city outside of my own movements. Another was through self-organized events at DUMBA, a queer anti-capitalist live/work space in Dumbo. I remember being at the very first Queeruption. My mind was blown at a DIY sex toy-making workshop, seeing the variety of forms people were making for penetration, and the big event was a queer dance party turned sex party.

I came up amidst punk scenes in Oregon in the ’90s and my collaborator K8 Hardy did too, in Texas, amongst people self-organizing performances, releasing music recordings and most importantly, zine culture. Impacted by all these modes of do-it-yourself expression, and being young dykes in New York in the early 2000s, we set out to create a potential platform for our peers — queers, feminists, activists, perverts and outrageous people. We wanted a discursive

space outside of other existing institutions, a space that could define itself by the work in it. And so we sent out a call for submissions for a queer and feminist art journal called LTTR, naming the first issue Lesbians to the Rescue.

For five years, LTTR published a yearly journal and hosted release parties, performances, and film/video screenings. Looking back on each issue of the publication, I can see how our circles grew, as we got to know more artists. We became friends with people who we might have called mentors or teachers, and related as friends. Together we created spaces for experimentation and celebratory expression.

Leah DeVun

Leah DeVun, “Everywoman” (2012), C-print, 23.5″ x 31″ (image courtesy the artist)

My first experience with feminism was, of all things, at a Fugazi concert in Olympia, Washington, in the early 1990s. I was near the stage when some moshing punk guys knocked me to the ground. Death by stomping seemed imminent, but a hand reached down and pulled me to my feet and out of the crowd. The hand was connected to a girl, or a grrrl really — one of a group of riot grrrls who banded together to protect women at punk shows and claim space near the front of the stage. They talked to me after the show and gave me some of their Xeroxed zines. This initiation into collective feminist action — and, with it, a world of bands, publications, art and politics — has continued to be a touchstone for many of the ways that I still think about space, resistance, and rescue in my own artwork and writing.

My artwork has mostly been in the form of photographs and installations that explore feminist history, queer subcultures, communes and collectives, aging and beauty, reproduction and technology. Many of these topics have been central subjects of feminist critique, and that legacy has had a strong influence on me. Judging from the number of recent shows, films, and workshops dedicated to it, feminism — especially its past forms in riot grrrl and the activist movements of the 1970s — seems to be enjoying a massive resurgence. Several events in New York City this year have tried to imagine the future of feminism, creating new networks and opportunities for discussion (and disagreement). This seems to be an opportune time for feminist artists to think about our relationships to previous generations of activists, to revisit some of their more radical and utopian visions, and to pose questions about what feminism still hasn't accomplished. I think it's also incumbent upon us not just to advocate for the inclusion of a few individuals from historically marginalized groups (including women/people of color/queers) in high-profile exhibitions and collections but also to offer a more critical consideration of what "success" means, and to think about what alternative structures for making and presenting our work we might prefer to create. In a sense, the lessons of my 20-year-old encounter with the mosh pit might not be such bad advice for navigating the art world now: Stand together when you're getting knocked around — and make sure no one's left on the floor.

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