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"Gay" is the Watchword At Atlantic Works Exhibit

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The Atlantic Works art cooperative is located in an old brick building, a structure that once housed a ship-building company that built clipper ships. The Atlantic Works building is located in East Boston, not far from Maverick Square.



Passing Up Goats, by Lorin Hesse: just one of a cornucopia of new works exploring the meaning of the word "gay." (Source: Courtesy Atlantic Works)

In the third-floor gallery, paintings, mixed-media pieces, video productions, and installations have been set up. Not quite everything is in readiness just yet: two artists fuss over the hanging of a piece on the wall across from the door. A camera tripod, sans camera, stands before a wide-open window through which a torrid breeze blows.

Eric Hess and Anna Salmeron are talking about the collaborative showing they and sixteen other artists have put together. Anna is saying that the day before, as she and others were editing a video piece, a woman in the room with them kept muttering, "Get behind! Get behind!" The women finally bolted from the room; Anna is puzzled about the meaning of it all. An explanation is offered: in the Scriptures, when Jesus spent his 40 days in the desert, the devil tempted him with various soothing earthly rewards until Jesus finally commanded him to depart with the words, "Get thee behind me, Satan!"

Anna nods at this. It all makes sense. This is not the first time the work for this exhibit has provoked shock or outrage; the art in this room, which include paintings, mixed-media pieces, photography, installations, and video productions, have been created to address one theme, summed up by a single word, the one-word title of the show: **Gay**.

It's turned out to be a potent word, in terms of inspiration and education.

Anna shares a few of the war stories she and other artists have lived through to get to the show's opening, saying, "Many of us had the situation of realizing how difficult [it is for gay people], on a day-to-day basis, how much homophobia still exists. Because you think that we live in a pretty liberal place, and most people around here are better than that. You think about stuff that might happen way out in the country in the South or something, but you don't think it happens here--but it seems like it happens all the time.

"In a way," Anna continues, "it's been a really good education, because we've had to experience what I imagine gay people have to live with."

Anna relates the following to provide a couple of examples: "We were making copies of the show flier, and some guy didn't want to wait on us; when we were editing the video, several people left because they didn't like our video content; we've had some issues with a cable show that said that they wanted to come do a show in the gallery and then they saw the

content and said it wasn't appropriate for daytime television."

Adds Eric Hess, "Yeah, can you imagine? Like I shouldn't be walking around in the daylight."

Says Anne, "It was weird shit." And it all happened as protests against art often do: "Before they had seen any of the imagery."

Eric agrees that the reactions were conjured up "just from the word 'gay.'"

"It's funny," Eric continues, "because on the reverse side of that you also get, 'Oh, that's awesome!' Like it's just so shocking to hear. The show's just called 'Gay'--I guess it's a strong word." Not all reactions are negative, though; says Eric, "When I hand the cards out, people smile most of the time, they just think it's awesome."

Agrees Anne, "We've gotten a lot of positive feedback. When we picked the theme, we thought it would be a fun thing, it would get people going. We thought it would be provocative; I don't think we realized how provocative it would be in terms of how strong people's reactions are, because you figure within the art community there's a high level of consciousness about gay issues, there are a lot of gay artists and gay collectors and stuff like that."

However, Anne says, "It still seems like it's a show that, in the greater art world, you don't have a show on this theme very much, that's this explicit; it always seems more roundabout. It's been really educational for us in the gallery in a good way of making us connect with how much work there remains to be done in on the subject of full acceptance and full human rights of gay people."

Says Eric, "And it's not just homophobia. Laura [Rollins], Anne, and I did a [piece], we built a closet, and we each did a panel wall. Laura was comparing it to other secrets you might have. For me, my panel... I put myself back there when I was still kind of closeted, when I was still coming out to my parents little by little."

Eric relates, "My first job out of college, I worked at MTV, and I still had to stay in the closet there. My very first day, I heard some homophobia remarks and I knew it wasn't a good thing to come out there."

MTV? The same folks who seem to advocate gay rights, who are owned by the same corporation that runs websites like 365Gay.com, AfterEllen, and AfterElton?

"They probably were [in favor of gay equality] on television then, too, but... the people who run it aren't the same people who are on the screen," Eric says, adding that, "society has come so far; that was 1990. And also, the coming out thing was... the last [people] I came out to were my parents, and they had to come out of the closet [of fear and ignorance] themselves, too, and they explained [this] to me a couple of years later, but at first they were horrified."

The "closet" installation was, Eric says, "kind of a painful pace to put myself."

But pain can be cleansing, and it can also be a sign of exerting oneself to meet new challenges. As Anne has it, "Most of the people in the show did new work for the show. We kind of stretched ourselves in terms of doing stuff in new media we hadn't done before. It was a cool learning experience. We had a lot of fun."

Eric relates, "A really funny thing, too, is what people thought of when they heard the word 'gay' for the show. One of the artists in here said the show should be about gender, because 'gay' is just about sex. And I'm, like, no; no, it's not. Especially when you're forty and you've been partnered for five years. [Sex] has got very little to do with it." Eric considers what he's just said, and then laughs, saying that his partner "would kill me if he heard that!"

And yet, is it so different from what a straight guy would have to say about marriage, or any form of long-term commitment?

Says Eric, who is a photographer for InNewsWeekly, "I have straight friends, I have gay friends, I happen to have a lot of gay exposure working for a gay newspaper, but it's funny to separate that whole [relationship] thing [from the art]. If you look at my work... well, I guess there is some sex in it..."

Eric stands before his photography piece, nine images arrayed in three rows. The images can be "read" both horizontally and vertically, and they tell stories of how a person changes through time, and how the facets of one's life change, too.

The first three vertical pictures are of Eric as a boy; the center three depict clubbing; and the last three depict domestic scenes. From left to right, each row follows a specific chronology: a childhood birthday party becomes a night at a club and then a domestic breakfast scene; Eric as a sleeping boy moves on to young men kissing under the hot magenta glare of the night life, and then to Eric, now grown, sleeping once again; and a picture of young Eric holding his brother's hand gives way to a scene of two men at a club, barely connecting, and then finally to Eric and his partner holding hands, gazing at one another and smiling.

Says Eric, "This is what I call The Queer Riddle of the Sphinx, [a reference to] that [riddle of], what starts off in the morning walking on four legs, and at noon it walks on two, and by nightfall it walks on three? And [the answer is,] it's Man. So I started off with me as a child, and then the middle part is my 20s and 30s, [a] hedonistic [age]... and then [the last three pictures] is me [today]: even though I'm not on three legs yet, I am kind of settling in."

The show's coup de grace is the installation piece that depicts the metaphorical closet by re-creating a literal closet, but before we get to the closet, Eric and Anna provide a tour of some of the other objects d'art on display.

Peter Pizzi has several works in the show; one, title Effigy, is a little black box with a tiny LCD display inside showing a film of two men dancing. An accompanying page of text tells the story of Pizzi's uncle, who was arrested for having sex with another man and then, upon his release, left for the big city. The uncle subsequently committed suicide. The tiny screen hidden in the box is like a family secret, tucked away and kept in the dark.

Remarks Anna, "He's a really strong artist, but think this probably the most personal piece of his, and it's deeply personal."

Laura Rollins has joined the tour, and she adds, "I think he's kind of proud of the gallery, too, because he's submitted video works and won prizes in a lot of gay and lesbian film festivals--"

"In Chicago and San Francisco," clarifies Anna.

"--but this is the first time we got him to enter some of the video work in our show," Laura finishes, then adds, "We've got serious work and we've got light work. If you look at his slide show over here, that's light work..."

Across the room, a table holds a collection of plastic single-slide viewers. Looking through one viewer, the image of a man's face is visible; other slides show other, more intimate, portions of the male anatomy. It's as though each slide is a separate contemplation, and celebration, of the male form; it's also as though a man had been divided up into bite-sized pieces, each one suitable for prolonged savoring. The title of this work is Peep Show, and it may use contemporary materials, but it manages to feel like a throwback to an 1890s nickelodeon.

Nearby is a flat-screen monitor with Pizzi's third contribution, Mr. Bunny's Coming Out Story, which is another video. Set to Madonna's "Papa, Don't Preach," the video is a series of still photos that follow a man in a rabbit mask as he enters a romance with another guy. It's funny and sweet and surprising.

"The only images I had [growing up gay] were pornography, and angry people like ACT-UP. And Grace Jones, and Rocky Horror."

Bo Petran's piece is a mixed media creation, which is unusual for Petran, who usually works with paint. Barbed wire in a glass-enclosed frame wraps around a pink triangle with a photo of the gates at Auschwitz at the back, reading, ARBEIT MACHT FREI. The piece was inspired by a trip to Europe, during which Bo visited a

Holocaust memorial and asked about the estimated 100,000 gay victims of the Nazis and their death camps. The people at the memorial--so eager to discuss other groups rounded up and murdered by the Nazis--were reluctant to talk about queer victims. This is Bo's poignant commentary on the injustice done over sixty years ago, an injustice that reverberates today.

Laura pauses before her own two-item creation, titled Something for Her and Something for Him, which consists of two wedding cake toppers, one featuring two male figures and one two female figures. Both sets of figures are wrapped in blueprints of some sort, with ribbon and tiny festive lights twining about their feet.

Laura explains the work, saying, "This piece obviously is referencing same-sex marriage, something that I'm very proud of as a Massachusettian, if that's a word..."

Laura continues, "It's a celebratory piece, or a pair of celebratory pieces. The blueprint is constructed from enlarging the Velveeta cheese box, and then making blueprints out of it, and then making Xeroxes out of the blueprints because Xeroxes are more archival. Velveeta is something that I think is a fairly homogenous substance that a large percentage of people relate to, so it's taking something very normal and kind of cutting it up and reconfiguring it."

Laura adds, "I guess if I really wanted to, I could branch out and have a cottage industry of making same-sex wedding cake toppers, because I had to create these myself."

Eric interjects, "I should use one of these in our wedding next year."

"I will be happy to make one for you, as my gift to you -- because you can't buy them, you certainly can't buy them at Michael's or Jacobson's in the South End or any wedding supply store that I went to," Laura tells him.

Eric points out a painting by Julie Vinette, titled Incarcerated (Young men drinking, reading poetry, and making love). Eric explains that the painting, which is made of colorful vertical lines that resolve into figures, is about male relationships in the prisons of China.

An LCD display tucked neatly into a black frame shifts from one cartoonish lone drawing to the next; the sequence seems to be single frames taken from a Superboy comic. So high is the resolution and so stark the black lines against a white background that it would be natural to take the work as a static, Lichtenberg-like work celebrating (or perhaps satirizing) the vapid kids' books of decades ago, with an unconsciously unwholesome, post-modern edge; then the image changes to the next frame. It's art as electronic wonder. The artist in this case is Lorin Hesse, and the name of the piece is Superboy.

Hesse is also the author of a large, colorful canvas called Passing Up Goats. The canvas is dominated by a pair of nude, pink woman strolling hand in hand through a landscape populated with vintage cartoon characters; it's a delightful and subversive work, something that would be equally at home in the Getty Museum or Pee Wee's Playhouse.

A triptych of cupcakes with pink icing--jolly little treats--decorates one wall. Eric explains that these are the work of Karen Kemp. They are simply titled Cupcake, #1 - #3.

"I thought more people would use the word 'gay' in the happy, Webster's Dictionary version that's not about same sex relationships," says Eric. It seems that Kemp's work is the only example of the word's quaint, older meaning, and they do look delicious.

Two winged, haloed papier-mâché looking elephants dangle from the ceiling. That is, they are papier-mâché if papier-mâché can appear to be smooth as porcelain; they are listed as "mixed media." "At first I thought they were piñatas," Eric confesses in an almost shamed tone. They are the work of Melissa Tyler, who named them The Fairy Elephants in the Room.

There's more--lots more: pencil sketches and a tape outline on the floor of a body lying before a pink triangle inside of which are the super-imposed faces of Ronald Reagan and George Bush the First, an orange shadow of the phallic Washington Monument spilling down the wall and across the floor, a photo of two men sharing a shy kiss, a painting of a pair of ceramic ducks. Finally, the tour comes to the closet.

Anne provides a preface. "It was a cool thing to think about: 'Okay, what keeps people in the closet?' We had the idea of the closet, and it was, 'Oh, that's cool!' but then we had to sit down and talk and think about what we wanted to do. Initially, we wanted to put up a lot of pictures of closeted individuals, but then we thought that was kind of putting the blame on the people who are in the closet, rather than thinking of the closet as a social construct, and [asking] what kind of hatred and dear keeps people in there."

It's necessary to step inside under a pole from which hang shirts and wedding gowns. The closet is pretty big as closets go, but still it's hot and stifling, claustrophobic. To the left is Eric's montage: black and white photocopied images repeated in horizontal rows: Grace Jones. Striking pornographic images, the most mild of which are two young men engaged in anal intercourse. The only color is in the form of cutouts of the characters from The Brady Bunch, stand-ins for Hess's family, with scrawled red words in dialogue balloons. Mother: "It's your father's fault. He should have taken you to a prostitute." Brother: "You'll break your mother's heart." Sister: "Please don't be gay." Father (wearing bright red lipstick): "You're ruining your life for cheap thrills." Also: "All gays should be locked up for life in a psychiatric ward." And the housekeeper: "Those magazines under your bed..."

Eric explains that "the black and white, which is the background, were the images of the gay world that I had growing up in suburban Connecticut; I just didn't know anything about it in the early 1980s. The only images I had were pornography, and angry people like ACT-UP. And Grace Jones, and Rocky Horror.

"And of course, a lot of this stuff seemed scary to me then, and a lot of it I embrace now, but I wasn't at that level [back then]."

And those dialogue balloons? Are they actual quotes?

As it turns out, yes, they are. Says Eric, " These are all the messages I got. They were just really scared, because this is what they thought the gay world was, too, and they were really scared for me, too... People are like, 'Oh, that's so horrible! Did your mother really say that? Your mom and you were really close!' And I say, 'Yeah, she is my best friend, but at that point, it was hard for her.' And she came around," Eric says, beaming. "She was in the gay pride parade two years later, wearing a big hat!"

Anne's portion is the panel at the back. It's a collage dotted with photos of little children holding signs saying things like, "God Hates Fags," and "Turn or Burn!" and wearing t-shirts reading "God Hates Fags.com" in huge letters. There's also what looks like a photo-shopped photo of Alex Rodriguez running to a base, carrying a purse and wearing a pink uniform, matched by a separate image of a baseball jersey reading, "GAY-Rod."

Anne can hardly explain her work, she's so beside herself. "I tried to fill out every ugly sort of... and there's so much of it on the Internet... this

hideous... all this sort of 'not normal' stuff, the sort of thing you have in your head about straight being normal, and anything not exclusively straight being a deviation," she says.

"And Laura found this whole huge website dissing Alex Rodriguez, where he did some wrong play in the World Series that everyone thought was unsportsmanlike, so there was this huge website that's sort of dissing him, and the dis is that he's gay. Is that, like, so gross? That stuff is so out there, and people don't even question it!"

Anne points out several vials of blood pinned to the wall. "This is my blood. I wanted to think about people not wanting their children's' teachers to be gay, that whole 'tainted blood' thing..."

Eric and Anne call Laura into the closet to explain her panel, which is located to the left. It's more minimalist, and in approach it has a graffiti style to it. There are drawings of the kids with the hateful signs, and another iteration of the pink-uniform wearing Rodriguez. The sentence, "I promise to act less gay" is scrawled neatly across the wall multiple times.

Laura says, "My panel is kind of meditative thing for me. One thing that was a motivator to me was this image here that's over in Anne's panel, children set up to be haters. That's what I chose as a central image, and then I also wanted to reference what a guilty or shamed kid might do... Bart Simpson or whatever... when they've misbehaved and they're made to, in this pedantic but somewhat meditative way, to exorcise their desire to participate in this behavior, which is why I have that 'I promise to act less gay, I promise to act less gay' repeated throughout."

The day is only getting hotter, and the small crowd inside the closet are feeling it. Everyone is sweating. This only feeds into the meaning of the piece.

Says Anne, "Being in the closet is really stifling and hot."

Eric agrees, "It's not supposed to be a comfortable place to be. But then we were also looking at [how] for some people -- "

Anne completes his sentence: "It's a shelter in some respects."

"And they can maybe live [in] the Brady world [if they stay in the closet]," says Eric. "And I associate myself with Cousin Oliver," he adds, laughing. "I never really fit in."

Everyone steps out of the closet. It's a blessed relief. Eric looks back at his panel, at the words from his terrified family that he's recorded there in scarlet ink. "It's just like anything that's new to people, they just have to see it and experience it," he ruminates.

"And that's kind of what this show is probably about."

Gay is on display at Atlantic Works, 80 Border Street, East Boston, through August 29.

Kilian Melloy reviews media, conducts interviews, and writes commentary for EDGEBoston, where he also serves as Assistant Arts Editor.