

# Vasafizi

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# Hide and Seek with Rebels

## TRACING CONTEMPORARY QUEER ART IN CRACKS AND RIPS

Caroline  
Smith

*I was Cathy's teaching assistant for a photography class at UCLA. The class started at 8am. On the first day I arrived, bleary-eyed and with coffee, Cathy, who was sitting*

*alone in the classroom, ripped open her shirt and said: 'Look what I did!' The word 'pervert' was freshly carved into her chest. Thus began my tutelage with Catherine Opie.<sup>1</sup>*

Los Angeles-based artist Amy Adler's first encounter with the photographer Catherine Opie is a key incident in the understanding of contemporary notions of queerness. The identity of the outsider is graphically visualised here and scratched into Opie's chest in a wilful and transgressive act of marking the body. The etching of the word 'pervert' onto the body of the othered subject provokes a dialogue with heterosexist norms that label difference as deviant and sensational. Opie's dramatic self-exposure, revealing and revelling in cut flesh, invites voyeurism symbolising the slippage between the private arena and the public staging and assertion of difference.

The term 'queer' was reclaimed from its derogatory meaning at the beginning of the 1990s when definitions of gay and lesbian were seen as restrictive. The deconstruction of gender undertaken in works such as Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* demonstrated a crisis in the reliance on essentialist identities and opened up more embracing and inclusive approaches to sexuality. Queer artists have long explored the dissolution of gender boundaries to celebrate multiple positions unanchored to any preconceived notion of heteronormativity. Unabashedly, queer work confronts the dominant gaze, and yet artistic production cannot be detached from the broader mechanisms of the distribution, critique and consumption of contemporary art. This dialogue between the private and the public, from both within and outside of the margins, is always a tenuous one. This is not only because of

the way in which queer art is framed – at the edges of the art world, or as artist Michael Petry states, its subjection to a 'cleansing through a heterosexual filter' – but also because of counter discourses within the work that cannot be assimilated into the mainstream. The art historian Emmanuel Cooper writes:

Intrinsic to queer culture is that it is fleeting and unpredictable, it cannot be encouraged or promoted in any regular or routine way, but must exist in the cracks and rips. (26)

Evidence for this 'cleansing heterosexual filter' is demonstrated in the work of many artists, not least Ron Athey whose show *Four Scenes in a Harsh Life*, performed at Minneapolis's Walker Arts Centre in 1994, became a target for the far Right. Though he had never received funding from the National Endowment for the Arts, his name was brought into the public debate on state sponsorship of the arts, leading – albeit indirectly – to cuts in the NEA's budget the following year. The press falsely reported that Athey forced the audience to handle clothes impregnated with his HIV-infected blood and locked the doors of the auditorium. Footage, however, showed the artist and his collaborators passing out blocks coated with his blood to willing audience members. This media hysteria led to the negative perception of Athey's work, and the artist was consequently unable to perform at publicly funded venues throughout the US, Latin America and Europe for nearly a decade. His first show at a public institution in the US after this extended period of exile was in 2005 at LA's Redcat Theatre, which Athey dryly states 'is the experimental backside to Disney's concert hall'. Athey's status as near invisible outlaw has been created from a right-wing agenda (art policy makers and the media) that peddles zero tolerance of transgressive identities and practices. 'The issue [scandal] became bigger than me or my work,' he says. His one-off show at the Hayward Gallery in July 2006 (as part of its major *Undercover Surrealism* exhibition) is arguably then something of a breakthrough. He performed his important work *Solar Anus*, in which he endures





Michael Petry, *The Milky Way, and Other Fairy Tales (2004)*. Suspended pairs of white glass orbs, dimensions variable. Collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.

a series of sadomasochistic and sexual acts. It is a gloriously subversive and baroque interpretation of George Bataille's eponymous essay, which draws equivalences between language, eroticism, cosmology and crime. Athey uses his body 'as an offering or a fetish symbol. The performance is a catharsis'. At the beginning, he stumbles naked into the crowd, negotiating the sea of people by grasping shoulders to reach the stage, his altar. The crowd is complicit, silent witness to a spectacle of masculine deviancy and sublime fragility in which Athey, as the tattooed and pierced outcast (often symbolised within queer iconography by religious martyrs such as the arrow-pierced image of Saint Sebastian), is seen as simultaneously fractured and doubled by performing both live and mediated via a large-scale video projection. Athey notes:

When I started making theatrical-based performance work, I needed ten to twenty people on stage and multiple video screens. I still think multimedia can be

very effective but I've been challenging myself to strip it down to a one-image durational piece: horrific, yet static.

Athey's performances draw viscerally from his life — notably his formative years. He was raised by Pentecostal fanatics in the suburbs of LA in the 1960s, spoke in tongues from the age of nine and was believed to be a latter-day Jesus Christ by the Pentecostal community. He ran away from home as a teenager and subsequently became a heroin addict. He then turned his experience of religion, his HIV-positive status and his sexuality into a performative critique and exploration of his own history. Emerging from the gay fetish club scene, he first performed in the 1980s with his then boyfriend, Rozz Williams. The intensely homophobic climate caused by the impact of HIV became material for his work:



My work directly responded to the amount of death from HIV around me, my own status and the idea of homos cleaning up their act so they wouldn't be separated from the innocent victims. Along with the blood display, live sex show aspects defiantly became present in my work.

## Making History with Stories and Fairy Tales

Athey deploys uncompromising strategies of self-exposure to comment on society's relationship to homosexuality, blood and corporeal pain. This lived experience causes moral panic amongst the more mainstream and conservative elements of the media, the political right and the Christian moral majority. Historically the link between an artist's sexuality and her/his artwork has been clouded by a dominant discourse or erased altogether. In June this year, the National Portrait Gallery held a public discussion titled *Queering the Portrait* that set out to assess and understand interpretations of queerness through its own collection. While the seminar was only a few hours long (and initiated by an external agency: the Pride Legacy Project), it showed that a major public institution was finally open to raiding its own archive in order to assess queerness. One of the speakers, Emmanuel Cooper, made the necessity of storytelling traditions that pass from generation to generation clear. He pointed out that in the absence of an artist's official biography, deeper meanings within the artwork are often unseen. Queer history is not written into the heterosexual canon and consequently it is left open to whimsical interpretation, whispers and hearsay.

Michael Petry, born in El Paso and now based in London, used this oral transmission of queer history to construct *Hidden Histories*, a major document (also an exhibition) of twentieth-century male same-sex lovers. The biographies of Robert Mapplethorpe, Robert Rauschenberg and Felix Gonzales-Torres along with one hundred other men are reassessed to show same-sex lovers working within oppressive political and social climates. He writes:



Michael Petry, BB58 (2006). Glass, EPNS silver object.



Michael Petry, *In the Garden of Eden* (2006). Detail view of yew wood.

A horizontal reading of history as a heterosexual filter must be lifted from prevailing interpretations of the work of same-sex lovers. The exhibition looks at various aspects of these findings by placing examples of works from an unacknowledged queer gaze, and in so doing allows gay/straight audiences the chance to see these works anew.

Shown at The New Art Gallery in Walsall in 2004, Petry's project can be seen as a wider social exploration in which to contextualise his own work. In contrast to the literal and lived arena presented by Athey, Petry transforms materials and their cultural value into sensual installations and sculpture that celebrate male sexuality and desire. Homosexuality is deliberately veiled, implied by the works' titles and woven into the work with codified signifiers and reoccurring motifs. Desire and sexuality are played out through a ghosting of the male gay body as Petry often uses the dimensions of his own body within his installations. This sets up a dynamic interplay between corporeal absence and presence.

References within Petry's work, which include high-value cultural objects such as leather, fresh-water pearls, whole cowhides and solid gold wire as well as the throwaway and déclassé, explore what it is to be a gay man. *The Milky Way and Other Fairy Tales* (2004) was an epic installation in which fifty-one pairs of hand-blown orbs were suspended within the Sundaram Tagore Gallery in New York. Together with pearls sewn into colourfully dyed cowhides on the walls, the work at first glance seemed to present a cosmic constellation where





Michael Petry, *The Treasure of Memory* (2001/6). Blown glass, rope, metal. Collection of the Museum of Arts and Design, New York.

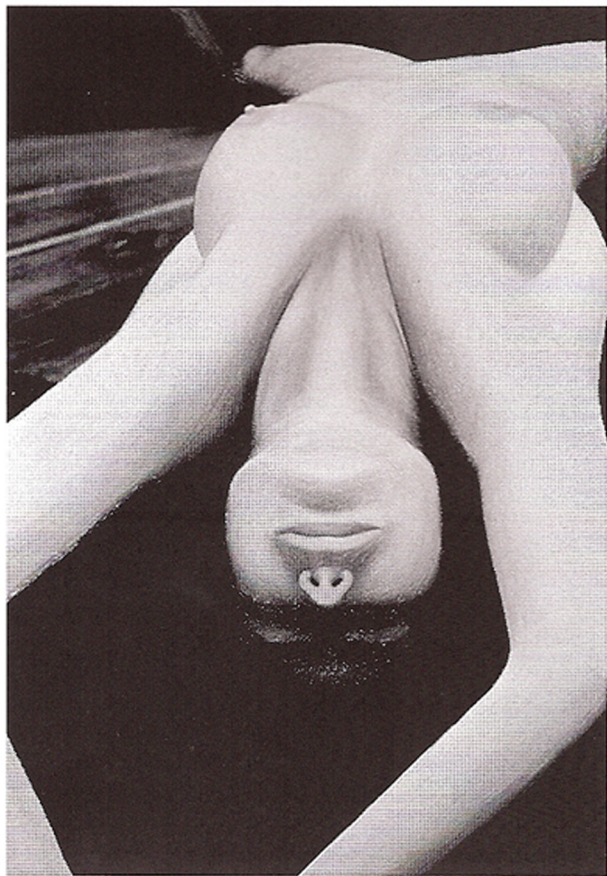
lands are mapped out with jewels, a representation of an ethereal cosmos. However, the pearls on cowhide represent the trajectories of actual ejaculations, traced from 'money shots' in gay porn films and the colour on the cowhides represents the 'hanky code', in which gay men wear different colour hankies in their back pockets as a cruising device to show which sex game fetish is preferred. When a young woman wears a pearl necklace in historical Western paintings it denotes her virginal status. By appropriating this signifier of a perceived purity, Petry subverts historical notions of heterosexual beauty and eroticism into contemporary tropes of homoerotic desire. He 'writes' his own body into the work by the placement of the suspended glass balls — at the centre of the constellation is a ball hung at the height of his testicles. He presents a tapestry of glory holes, porno videos and ejaculate to explore a conflation of public and private desire.<sup>2</sup> *Tie a Knot in It* comprises a variety of balls made by the artist's repeated knotting of materials such as gold, black leather or green twine. A variety of ropes drilled into the wall at neck height enabled the viewer to interact and play, thus the complicity and interaction of the viewer were encouraged. Petry explains:

Each knot represents an ejaculate and represents fulfilment. There's a scary feeling to touching the rope because of the historical implications of hangings and there's also the erotic associations with auto-erotic asphyxiation. I'm using different types of rope — from garden material to paratrooper cord. I like the idea of getting involved with something without knowing.

Similarly, in *The Lovers*, in which Petry combines electroplated nickel silver bowls with solidified molten glass, both mainstream cultural references relating to a kitsch, bourgeois England and the act of bare-backing ('the act of unsafe sex in which a hot fluid passes through into an unsafe receptacle') are combined. The results are a series of heavy, bulbous phalluses with gaping sexualised orifices and amorously fused body parts masquerading as decorative craft-based sculpture. Petry's comments on gay masculinity include a performance with *Web Portraits* in which he asked men from gay chat sites to send pictures of their ejaculations.

They are records of performances. Because it's from the web, you don't know if it's from that man, even if it is from a gay man. You don't know if it's real, but the work is about how people wish to be depicted.





Amy Adler, *Once In Love With Amy* (1997). Five Cibachrome prints, 22 x 30 inches each (detail). Courtesy Acme, Los Angeles.

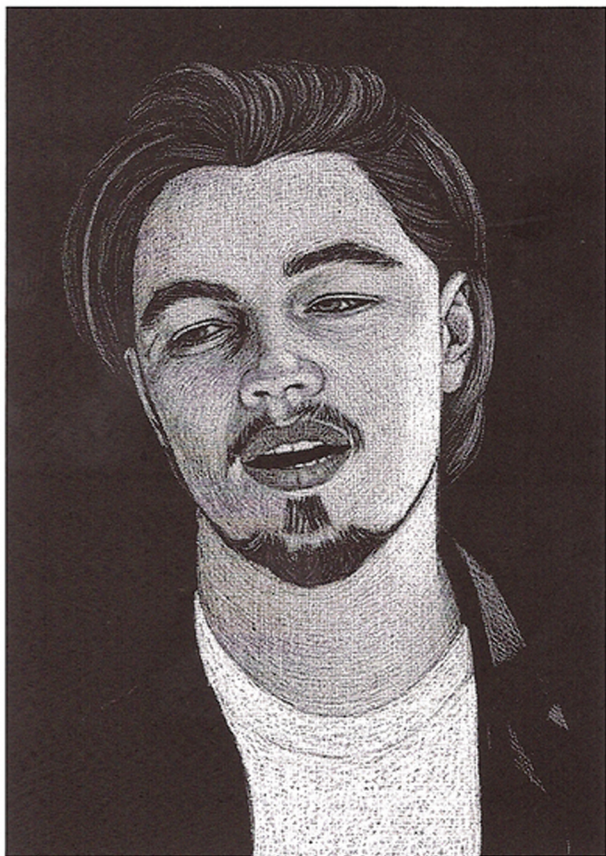
Petry explores desire and pleasure by symbolising the act of both private practice between gay men and the public consumption of porn movies. He states: 'I don't make work about me having sex. I'm not interested in being a voyeur.' However, he recounts a humorous anecdote of an older female viewer who once asked him why the work was titled *London Cops* when she was looking at the pearls on dyed blue leather. Petry is clear that it is not his role to articulate the queer references in the work. 'There's written documentation of that,' he states. 'If someone wants to know, they don't have to look far.' This statement is evidence of Petry's ability to play with multiple cultural meanings. In other words, the queer component can remain knowingly hidden and it is this act of remaining both hidden and visible that is key. Where the work is shown and to whom it is shown is significant as it causes interference with the dominant gaze. US editor Amy Scholder writes:

Whilst essentially sharing an outsider position queer artworks are nonetheless contingent, however marginally, upon the signs and narratives of dominant culture. They are about being marginalised for a sexuality that deviates from the norm, yet engaging with the world, reading cultural works with a subversive gaze. This position is informed by the

knowledge of sex as power, and is aware of the subversive possibilities of that power. (178)

### In Pursuit of Fictional Selves

The genre of photography has traditionally provided rich potential for the subversion of this power. The still image's indexical relationship to reality, together with its alignment as a document fixed in time and place, have enabled artists such as Wolfgang Tillmans to show a young generation previously absent from UK media representation. Catherine Opie made visible the LA leather dyke community when she photographed the series *Being and Having* in 1991. Amy Adler, who was under the tutelage of Opie, has worked with portraits taken of her as a child and in her late teens when she had been seen as a model and object of desire. Adler subverts patriarchal power by fabricating the work in different media and, at each evolutionary turn, destroying the older work and laying the past to rest. The resultant images nod to the blurring of media in the work of Chuck Close, and the replication of historical artworks by Sherrie Levine (Duchamp's *Fountain*) — both of whom have influenced Adler. Her series 'Once in Love with Amy' (1997) takes portraits made of her by an older woman when she was nineteen. She states that:



Amy Adler, *Amy Adler Photographs Leonardo DiCaprio* (2001). Six Cibachrome prints, 48 x 60 inches each (detail), 2001. Courtesy Acme, Los Angeles.





Kelli Connell, *Interrupted* (2002). Digital Lambda Photograph, 30 x 30 inches.

Using photos taken of me when I was nineteen was important because it implied that I had chosen to be there, and that I was looking back at her, not just being looked at by her. This, I believe, causes the position of the viewer to 'slip' from the assumption that it is a male gazing at a younger woman's body. Possibly, this 'slipping' is 'queer' in the sense that it shifts from an established, 'heteronormative' position. Sometimes the desire enacted in my work is in fact, 'heteronormative'. I want to be able to work with that option available as well.

In her series, 'Amy Adler Photographs Leonardo Di Caprio' (2001), desire is played out by the tactic of subversion. In these photos the actor, Hollywood's poster boy of youthful androgyny, is drawn as a seemingly ordinary boy from the street. Pale, dishevelled and coy-looking, his eyes never confront the viewer, leaving intact an imagined private and intimate relationship between him and Adler, aided and abetted by Adler's act of writing herself into the title of the series. She explains:

I picked him for the seeming impossibility of my having a moment alone with him. I kept secretly hoping he wouldn't show up at the various openings I had with the work because I felt the intimacy needed to remain between us and us alone for the piece to really exist.

Adler's portraits, whether she is in them or not, engage with the notion of herself as an elusive character who simultaneously occupies the role of model, photographer, director and painter. For the viewer, chasing an image of Amy through the various media she uses means imagining a series of fictions that interact with our expectations of the portrait and of photography. She offers up the possibility of playing other ages and genders, creating an archive of identities, ones that read as 'queer', as the positions remain unfixed, unanchored and unresolved.

Mutating identities are also explored in the work of Texas-born photographer Kelli Connell. Her series titled *Double Life*, started in 2001, is an ongoing enquiry into notions of the self and gender in photographic portraiture. The series charts the lives of two lesbian lovers who re-enact scenes from a modern-day relationship: make love, go out and get drunk, go on holiday, drink early morning coffee, hang out the washing and





Kelli Connell, *Window Shopping* (2005). Digital Lambda Photograph, 25 × 40 inches.

try for a baby. However, whereas Adler's work is played out between the cracks of various media and various selves, Connell's work comprises 'realistic' moments from a fictional autobiography. Her model (played by photographer and friend, Kiba Jakobson), takes on the role of both lovers. Connell creates these realistic but impossible scenes through the use of Photoshop. Jakobson is not a representation of another subject, but

she becomes my 'self' and an 'other', just as the roles that she plays are at once the same person and two different characters in a relationship. One of the main reasons I decided to use a model was to be able to have control over this, especially as I needed to make sure that eye contact and physical touching would need to look believable between the two 'selves'. Doing this by using me would be very difficult. People still believe that these are self portraits – even when I am standing right next to the image. Even the model sees less of her inner personality and more of mine in the work.

Connell's work draws on the performance of private behaviours and public signifiers that are the composite elements of the family photo album. Documenting rites of passage and the marking of age through dress, uniform and hair are fundamental to a family's memory bank. However, by appropriating conventions from fashion photography and blurring the staged *mise en scène* with the aesthetics of the snapshot, the real with the mirrored

double, Connell subverts the comforting domestic role played out by the family album. She shows instead the performance of gender and the photo as constructs, where the double disrupts a reading of the images as signifying a 'real', lived relationship. Queer artist and curator Nayland Blake writes of queer artists needing to reconstruct the institution of family in order to show a different lived experience:

Queer people are the only minority whose culture is not transmitted within the family. Indeed, the assertion of one's queer identity is often made as a form of contradiction to familial identity. Thus for queer people all of the words that serve as touchstones for cultural identification – family, home, people, neighbourhood, heritage – must be recognised as constructions for and by the individual members of that community. (12)

*Interrupted* (2002) shows the arm and torso of what is assumed to be a man (identified only by the masculine shirt). It is the only appearance made by a third character in the series and suggests a sudden, disquieting intrusion. The image can be read in many ways. Though the ominous character is actually Jakobson, the image reminds the viewer that this queer world created by Connell is sharply different to and at odds with a perceived mainstream hetero-normative one. On another level, Connell is drawing on notions of a





Kelli Connell, *Pregnancy Test* (2004). Digital Lambda Photograph, 30 × 40 inches.

female masculinity in which maleness – seen through the character's shirt and posture – is independent of gender and can be performed at will.<sup>3</sup> Connell states:

The model is very 'feminine' in real life. I have always been fascinated by the ambiguity of androgynous males and females. I am interested in the spaces in between the definitions – straight, gay, bisexual – and how these spaces are always moving. A couple of males came up to me after a lecture and thanked me for being so honest. They said that they could identify with the 'selves' in the work. They felt that a lot of pressure was put on how males should be in society and that even though the characters in my work are female, this work made them ask questions.

Connell draws references from queer art history to which she was exposed at art school in the late 1990s. Catherine Opie and Claude Cahun have both influenced her. Adler also stresses that nowadays there is more queer representation:

My own views were shaped in the 1970s and 1980s where characters like Jodie Foster, River Phoenix and Mariel Hemingway held a lot of charge for their

ambiguous sexuality. I grew up making projections – for example imagining that film *The Blue Lagoon* represented first love. To me that meant with a girl I was in love with. I learnt to make my own story stretch around the heteronormative one. Today I don't think kids have to make the same kind of enormous leap as I did.

### Trouble in the Ghetto

Increasing the exposure of queer work is not only reliant on it being written into mainstream art history. What is also important is how the notion of 'queer' itself is shifting. In the mid-1990s an exhibition at Berkeley's University Art Museum in the US was a landmark in its promotion of queer aesthetics. Curated by Nayland Blake, 'In A Different Light: Visual Culture, Sexual Identity, Queer Practice' sidestepped artists' biographies, choosing instead to survey works from straight and queer artists over the last thirty years. It aimed to explore the resonance created by queerness independent of sexuality. Sexual orientation was unspecified so that the meanings of objects and artworks could float free to enable a fresh dialogue between the past and present. Blake asserts that gay and lesbian aesthetic styles intersect with mainstream art





Nicole Eisenman, *Alice in Wonderland* (1996). Ink on paper, 30 x 22½ inches.

practice in complex ways and are not constrained to an artist's sexual identity:

If identifiable gay or lesbian aesthetic styles or sensibilities exist, they exist in multiplicity, and in complex intersection with mainstream art practice. They are emanations of complex, fluid sociological constructs, never simply gay or lesbian. (6)

In this broad cross-generational context, the impact of visual arts, together with the intersection of genres and relationships between writers and artists was explored. Works were organised thematically under pithy titles such as 'Self' and 'Drag'. It was a seductive tactic in which queer history (notably the identity politics of the 1980s, the political and social climate in which gay and lesbian work was made) is seen to be dislocated from and imagined anew through the perspective of the present. Shifting the question from how gay and lesbian artists are making work to how queer artists look at the world serves as a universalising strategy and is inclusive of a wider art-making community that identifies with queerness. In this light, Turner prizewinner Grayson Perry's work could be situated within this new paradigm. His engagement with transvestitism, his subversion of the domestic and traditionally female craft-based practice of making ceramics, together with his curiosity about

transgressive practices such as sadomasochism that are embedded in his recent show, *The Charms of Lincolnshire* at Victoria Miro (2006), certainly suggests that his work may be read as queer on one level. Catherine Grant, an art historian and speaker at *Queering the Portrait*, discussed Sam Taylor Wood's *Sleep*, a portrait of footballer David Beckham that evidently pays homage to Andy Warhol's movie *Sleep* (1963). The work, she argues, can be read 'queerly':

David Beckham is shown sleeping, shot from the perspective of lying in bed next to him. This portrait is a tongue-in-cheek acknowledgement of what we might want to get out of a picture of him — namely a fantasy of being intimate with him. Rather than presenting him in a traditional portrait manner, this could be seen as a portrait of desire, rather than a portrait of individual celebrity. Whose desire is being portrayed is up to the viewer.<sup>5</sup>

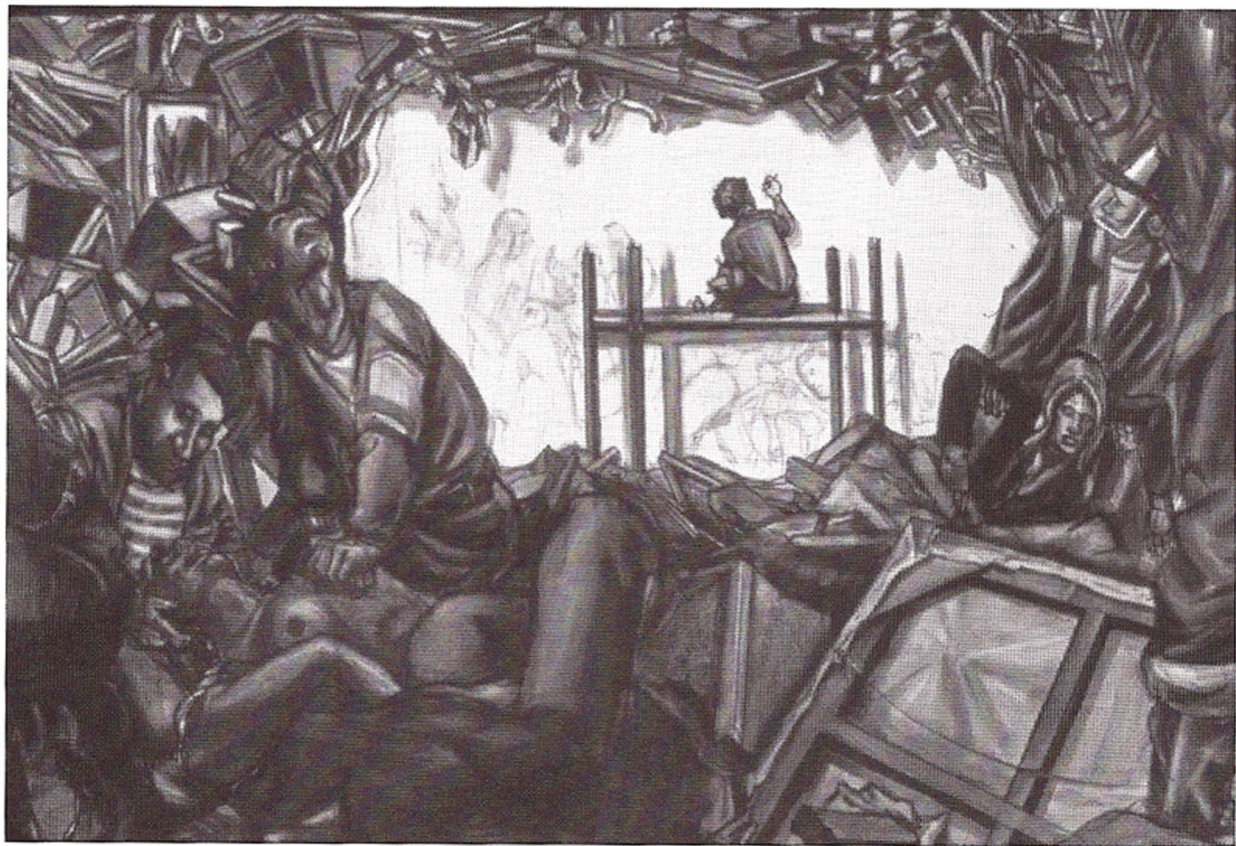
This is arguably a more inclusive approach that engages with work seemingly existing neither in one place nor another in terms of gender and sexual orientation. It is interesting that some of the artists exhibited in *In A Different Light*; Karen Walker, Nan Goldin, Catherine Opie and Nicole Eisenman, were also shown two years earlier in *Bad Girls* at the ICA and at UCLA. Both exhibitions explored a highly diversified feminist movement through works that were anti-ideological. *Bad Girls* was criticised for ghettoising women's work into a slick and dismissive brand where women regress into mere girls who play up, act naughty and are dismissed to the back room to make artwork. Eisenman has resolutely distanced herself from the label lesbian or even feminist artist. She states:

I would never think about these terms in 1994. The labelling of *Bad Girls* — the tag, the bad girl lesbian artist — was external to my way of working. I don't work from a political place. It's my personal viewpoint. There are artists who set out to deliberately deal with identity in their work. I didn't set out with that mission; I just stumbled into that ditch by accident.

Eisenman's work — resolutely queer, post-punk and ferocious — uncompromisingly challenges the canon of male art history. *Self-portrait with Exploded Whitney*, a vast neoclassical mural that covered the walls of the Whitney Biennale in 1995, depicted the Museum bombed, its paintings scattered as administrators and the press attempt to grab the remains. Eisenman is seen with her back to the viewer, painting the only remaining wall. She draws on the vernacular of the underground comic genre and appropriates freely from art history.

I looked at a lot of the old cartoonists when growing up, Ernie Bushmiller, George Herriman, Saul Steinberg, Chas Adams and Edward Gorey. My parents had all that stuff lying around the house. But that stuff wasn't underground, it was in the daily newspapers and the New Yorker magazine. I got into underground comics in





Nicole Eisenman, *Self-portrait with Exploding Whitney* (April–June 1995). Wall mural for the Whitney Biennial.

college — the early 'zines in the 1980s were all about boys and their punk bands, I dug that scene.

Her drawings and paintings depict females as warriors, Amazons and superheroes to subvert the image of the female subject as passive object. *Alice In Wonderland* (1996) shows her version of Lewis Carroll's heroine, where Alice's head disappears up the trademark skimpy hot pants of Wonder Woman. Elsewhere, her family portrait, where members mutilate genitalia, eat excrement and masturbate in front of one another, fractures the white-picket fence profile of the all-American suburban family. In *Cowgirls* (1996) the protagonists urinate and defecate as they take a break from duties, presented within a rococo frame. She creates a chaotic world seen through a lens of urban realism in which everything — including politically correct references to dyke culture — is assimilated into her universe. From pop culture to porn to classical art, irreverent humour is at the core of her practice:

The humour is not conscious. It has just happened. Comedy is tragedy for funny people and its sources are the same: it's the big bog of pain we all slog around in. I have claimed in the past not to be angry but I don't think I recognised my anger as 'anger'. I think I'm SO angry it's off the charts and doesn't even compute as anger. It computes as humour. Shit seems funny to me. But mostly 'hurty' funny. Once you give any

thought to the politics of an identity, you can't be angry.

Eisenman has recently brought out a fanzine, *Ridykelouse*, published through her gallery, Leo Koenig in New York, an irreverent and hilarious take on contemporary dyke culture. Including work by Kathe Burkhart, Nicola Tyson and Eisenman herself, it is celebratory and politically incorrect. Charles Saatchi's *Dick*, Christian Lemmerz's image of male genitalia dumped in a toilet, is one example. It is a sharp reaction to the serious, out and proud stance of younger collectives in New York, such as Lesbians to the Rescue (LTTR), formed in 2001, which engage in creating diverse spaces for queer artistic production as a tactic of resistance towards the dominant discourse. The group has a strategy of building queer communities by producing a fanzine and organising performances and screenings (the most recent seen within the *London Gay and Lesbian Film Festival*, 2006). The collective reinvents the mainstream notion of the outlaw by using post-punk strategies and celebrates queer artistic production at the margins.

There are multiple strategies employed by queer artists. Detached from the dominant discourse, their work constructs other pleasures, reconfiguring the body, appropriating archives and genres, imagining biographies and claiming a counter-heritage. Is queer art still in and out of the margins,



and in the cracks? Most of the artists featured in this article have gallery representation, enjoy solo shows and their work has been critically evaluated within funded publications. Arguably, their position within the art world extends and perhaps, in some cases, overwrites their queerness. Nicole Eisenman states that there are ‘undoubtedly these cracks that have been cemented over by the academy. Gay work is part of the establishment but the “gay” part is left in those cracks.’

Throughout the research for this article, Eisenman’s quote has continually rung true. Several artists did not wish to be included and one is left wondering if the term ‘queer’ is seen as being too loaded, too outdated or just too particular to be attached to artists and works that can obviously be read in a myriad of ways. Not to identify one’s work as queer has the lure of attracting wider audiences and greater funding opportunities. LTTR makes a point of stressing that the collective is self-financed and therefore free from the economic values and agendas of investors. Eisenman ironically asserts, ‘we are all feminists now’, and by extension, if Judith Butler’s vision was correct, with the future dissolution of heterosexual categories, perhaps we are all queer, our identities in a constant state of flux.

Certainly queer work that resides in a ghetto is problematic as it can seem to place work in a category into which all marginal identities neatly fit. Work in the ghetto remains largely unseen and stands independent of the mainstream. Yet, however loaded and reductive the perception of the term queer this work needs to be exposed, celebrated and critiqued. The collision of transformative and transitory exchanges between work that is read queerly and normative discourse cannot be overlooked. Public institutions are slowly opening their traditionally conservative doors to what niche events and queer scene hotspots have been doing for years — such as Bar Wotever in the UK that screens queer film and stages performance. At the margins or in the mainstream, there is a provocative dialogue between normative and queer discourse that continues to set the latter apart. Queer work, whether read queerly or created from an artist’s biography cannot be commodified. Key to its spirit is reconfiguring lived experience so that we may look anew at cultural history. Those crammed into the Hayward Gallery straining to see Athey’s spectacle and viewers of Petry’s work who become integral

players are performances that rely on a complicit public rather than the notion of queer culture as fleeting and hard to promote. Those cracks and rips that Cooper identifies are now not so much the static places within which queer art resides and should be celebrated, but the very acts of queerness itself.

## Notes

- 1 All quotes from artists, unless specified, are from interviews carried out by the author; May–August 2006.
- 2 A ‘glory hole’ is a hole made in the wall of a lavatory cubical for the purpose of anonymous sex.
- 3 Judith Halberstam writes extensively on the essentialism of fixed masculinity in culture that cannot be performed but threatens mainstream discourse, which is conversely accepting and encouraging of a femininity that is performed at will. She explores the acceptance of drag queens in popular culture and the rejection of ‘kinging’ or drag kings in her book, *Female Masculinity*, Durham and London: Duke University Press (1998).
- 4 Interview with Grayson Perry for *Attitude* magazine, September 2006. Perry states that he imagined himself in the public situation of winning the Turner Prize — and thinking that the most humiliating act would be to accept the prize in a dress, as Claire, his transvestite self.
- 5 Art historian Catherine Grant speaking at *Queering the Portrait*, 4 July 2006, at the National Portrait Gallery.

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