

Rise of the 'Young Gay Artists' from Brighton

By Austin Scott

The city of Brighton has a longstanding historical association with all things queer. It feels appropriate, then, that the city plays home to a nascent collective of queer artists seeking to explore and push the boundaries of art and sexual orientation. This group, going by the appropriate title of the 'Young Gay Artists', are all undergraduates at the University of Brighton. The goal of this text will be to situate three contemporary gay artists from this group in a historical perspective of queer art, comparing and contrasting each artist's work with relevant and related influential queer works. Each artist profiled submitted work for a Queer Art exhibition to be held at the University of Brighton in May of 2012. The organization is spearheaded primarily through social networking sites such as Facebook, with sporadic meetings held on the University of Brighton campus.¹

Personal interviews with each artist were conducted in a one-to-one setting and recorded, with the transcripts of these interviews then providing the foundation for this essay². Each interview was loosely structured with guiding questions, and provided ample opportunity for the artist to talk about the intersection between their sexual orientation and their work. Additionally, these interviews served as an overview of each artist's inspirations, desires, and working processes. Some artists chose to talk about specific sources and art world luminaries they found influential (some queer, some not), while others opted to relate back to overarching

¹ Due to online harassment and derogatory comments, the Facebook group which serves as the primary catalyst for the group's actions and information center is now regrettably unavailable to the general public, and can be viewed by invitation only. Artist Karol Michalec serves as the moderator for the group.

² I gratefully acknowledge the artists themselves for the use of their time, and Pawel Leszkowicz for the initial contact and facilitation of these meetings.

themes and general ideas about their work and the concepts of art in general. The aim of the interviews was to provide a window into how each artist relates to their sexual orientation as gay men, and then situate their work in a historical context – consequently, the interviews were not intended to be an in-depth exploration of the artist, but represent more of an overview and introduction to each person. An analogy might be to think of them less in terms of long-term relationships, and more of a series of dirty weekends (in typical Brighton fashion). Personal quotes from each artist are all collected from interviews conducted in March of 2012, and have been edited for clarity and for context³.

Each artist uses visual imagery in their own medium to make connections between their identities as gay men⁴ and their views on contemporary gay life, including topics as varied as the political climate for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered people (both abroad and in Great Britain), romantic relationships, and the perils of growing up as a queer person. The various erotics, politics, and sentiments on display through the work of each student provide a window into the mindset of today's most contemporary queer artists. Each artist thusly provides his own unique visual representation of what it means to be a contemporary queer man – representations which are then analyzed and interpreted in the historical context of queer art.

³ I possess recorded files of each interview, digital copies of which can be produced upon request.

⁴ While this essay uses the word queer as a broad umbrella term, it is vital to note that all three of the artists interviewed specifically rejected the term queer in favor of the less divisive term 'gay'. Thus, while the essay will discuss queer artists when referencing a broad populace of non-normative sexualities, when referencing the three student artists, the term gay will be used per their expressed wishes.

Images of each artist's work (when available) have been embedded in this text⁵. Additionally, by situating each artist in a historical framework, connections and comparisons can be drawn between the contemporary state of queer art and its historical background. Through placing each artist in the naturally following lineage of the queer art cannon, this essay draws historical connections from prominent queer artists and links them to the burgeoning talents emerging from the contemporary student art scene at the University of Brighton.

All three artists profiled identify as gay men, and while recognizing the possible limitations this places on conveying a lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered perspective, each artist offers a unique and individual perspective on the current state of queer art. Through their own words, each artist is also able to offer a tantalizing glimpse into the future possibilities for other artists who identify as queer. With their striking visual imagery, all three men explore contemporary concerns while referencing and relating to a rich history of queer predecessors.

Whitney Davis, in his discussion on queer theory in contemporary art, claims that "'Queer theory' has attempted to 'theorize'...certain aspects of the personal, rhetorical, and analytical concerns of [queer life]... to the point of implicitly offering a general theory of all subjective identity and aesthetic creation, of all selves and texts and works of art, as 'queer'" (Davis, 1998, p.117). However, contrary to Davis' assertion, this essay will show a multitude of relationships between queer art and its creators, rejecting his notion of a 'general theory' that can be applied to queer identity and aesthetics. Through interviews and analysis, this essay will

⁵ The majority of the works by the students were untitled, or were in the process of being named. I have given titles when they were made available to me.

highlight the differences, influences, and inspirations of three emerging gay artists, situating them and their work in the current cultural context of contemporary queer art.

Karol Michalec

As the initial organizer and *de facto* leader of the Young Gay Artist group, Karol Michalec is also its oldest member. Now age 24, he left his native Poland at age 19, in part to follow his artistic inclinations, but also in reaction to the homophobic climate he perceived in his native country. He vividly recalls the public reaction to the now-infamous Polish campaign for queer visibility entitled 'Let Us Be Seen', which depicted same-sex couples holding hands and has been called "the first large-scale coming out event in Poland's history" (Kitlinski and Leszkowicz, 2008, p.94). Michalec says, "back then I was only 13...but I remember people's reactions, how bad it actually was....people throwing paint [over the campaign billboards], just because they didn't want to see it". This early reaction to public displays of homosexuality eventually led Michalec to settle in the United Kingdom. "When I finished high school, I...had the chance to go to England...and I noticed that it was completely different. And I then realized that if I wanted to live my life as an openly free gay person, it was going to happen here [in England] and not in Poland. I can understand why people have to stay [in Poland]...and why people should make gay art still in Poland, but I wouldn't be able to do that".

Michalec's art crosses genres and mediums, and Michalec is the first to admit that he is "all over the place with everything...at the moment. It's sculpture, installation, drawing, photography, costumes...it's a vast world, and it's hard for me to peg myself into one thing". Photography is just one of many areas in which Michalec explores contemporary notions of

being gay. Michalec frequently asks men he meets at parties or through friends to act as models for his work, which touches predominately on themes of sensuality, erotica, and queer sexuality. Many of Michalec's black and white photographs evoke queer photographer Robert Mapplethorpe, with their composition, the placement of their male models, and their shared themes of leather-clad harnesses, bondage attire, and masculine posturing.



Figure 1.1 Karol Michalec, *Untitled Photograph*, (2011)

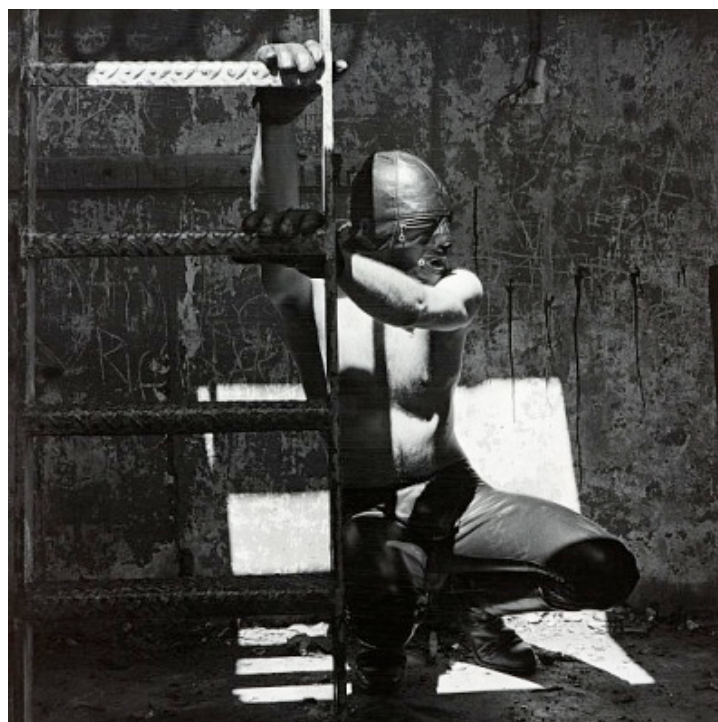


Figure 1.2 Robert Mapplethorpe, *Jim, Sausalito*, (1977)

Michalec's photographs depict men in harnesses or leather, intentionally referencing the elaborate costuming and ritual depicted in both Mapplethorpe's photos and many subsets of contemporary gay life. Mapplethorpe's photos and artistic style, controversial when first introduced to the general public, have been described as "typically combin[ing] rigorously formal composition and design with extreme – often explicitly sexual – subject matter"

(Gonzales-Day, 2004, p.222). Art historian Christopher Reed, when discussing Mapplethorpe's work, states that "definitions of artifice and reality were also provocatively blurred in Mapplethorpe's obviously staged images [which often depicted] men engaged in specialized – often ritualized or highly costumed – sex...this imagery...mixed conventional artistic mastery with violent homoeroticism" (Reed, 2011, p.223). Mapplethorpe's influence on Michalec is evident when comparing each artist's work (Figure 1.1 and Figure 1.2).

The lineage of Mapplethorpe's 'violent homoeroticism' is clearly carried through in Michalec's sexualized photography, with many of Michalec's leather clad men adopting subservient roles to their dominant masculine partners. Michalec himself draws attention to the intentional emphasis placed on masculine ideals and posturing within his photos, stating, "it was an incredible thing to have two alpha males walking around in harnesses around the studios. Sadly no one walked in...". Michalec's attempt to depict the reality of a specific sexual situation clearly draws from Mapplethorpe's decidedly unglamorous treatment of his photography subjects. Emmanuel Cooper, when discussing Robert Mapplethorpe, states that his "photographs were 'honest', seeking to neither glamorize nor play down the physical and sexual extent of the work...[they frequently depicted] S&M scenes involving chains, straps and black leather, men with trussed genitals, bound and gagged" (Cooper, 1994, p.285). Michalec follows on from Mapplethorpe's attempts at honest depiction with his unsentimental and unflinching photographs, stating that depicting and capturing scenes of a highly sexualized nature remains a goal in his artwork. Michalec says, "I think I would even say the braver I can get, the more I get out of it, the more of a kick I get out of it". Michalec's work seems bound with his ability to depict his own honest versions of queer life, much like Mapplethorpe's

infamous attempts to illustrate the realities of queer S&M subcultures. Not only do Michalec and Mapplethorpe share a similar taste for leather apparel – both place value on the ability of art to provide accurate portrayals and narratives of the people it captures.

In many of his other pieces, Michalec makes explicit artistic references to the disparate legal and cultural statuses of gay men between his native Poland and his adopted Britain. This theme in Michalec's work is reminiscent of similar areas explored by queer contemporary Polish artists. Michalec's more candid (or candidly staged) photography evokes the explicit queer photography of Polish multi-media artist Karol Radziszewski⁶ (Leszkowicz, 2010, p.39). One of Michalec's installations in which pornographic flyers are papered across the floor is reminiscent of the mounted photography collages in Radziszewski's *Fag Fighters* work – however Michalec's piece uses the explicit collages to focus on the private, intimate moments of a queer couple, while Radziszewski's collage work is meant to evoke queer anger and combativeness, with Radziszewski's pieces having been described as “straddling [queer] sex and aggression” (Leszkowicz, 2010, p.41). Perhaps leaving Poland enabled Michalec to also leave behind the explicit aggression embodied by Radziszewski's installation? However, even after leaving his native Poland, Michalec remains aware of the conditions of many contemporary Polish queer artists, stating “I've been subjected to a lot of hatred back home, and I know that if I was an artist in Poland, I wouldn't be making this kind of work.” Thus, it seems that by leaving his home country, Michalec is able to leave behind much of the specifically queer anger embodied by many of his contemporaries in Poland.

⁶ Examples of Karol Radziszewski's work, including installations, videos, and photography can be found at <http://karolradziszewski.blogspot.co.uk/>.

Following in the tradition of many other immigrant artists who identify as queer, Michalec finds his sexuality inextricably bound up with his nationality. While perhaps having left behind his queer anger, Michalec still states he finds the very act of making art at all a rebellion against his home country. Summing up his attitude towards manufacturing art, he says, “the fact that I am allowed to do so, and be a boy making, you know...drawing[s] and painting pictures of boys, and that is accepted here at uni...it’s almost like rubbing it in Poland’s face”. By following historical queer artists such as Mapplethorpe, Michalec is thus able to commiserate with his queer contemporary Polish brethren.

Niall Gormley

When talking about the major themes in his work, 18 year old Niall Gormley is frank when he references the motivation that encourages him to paint. He is forthcoming when mentioning the overall emotion that drives his work, saying that his paintings are “about pain, but not physical pain...more mental pain”. This anguish is evident in each of his pieces – tightly closed lips give no sign of internal pleasure or happiness, while Gormley says his frequent use of dark, ruddy color is intended to represent blood. Discussing his tight-lipped (and occasionally gagged) figures, Gormley states that this lack of ability to communicate majorly informs his work. He says “the idea was...I don’t have a voice...I need to be treated like a normal person sometimes”. With their emotional turmoil and haunting expressions, Gormley’s anguished faces evoke the preeminent queer figure of portraits, Francis Bacon (Figure 1.3 and Figure 1.4).



Figure 1.3 Niall Gormley, *Untitled Self-Portrait*, (2012)

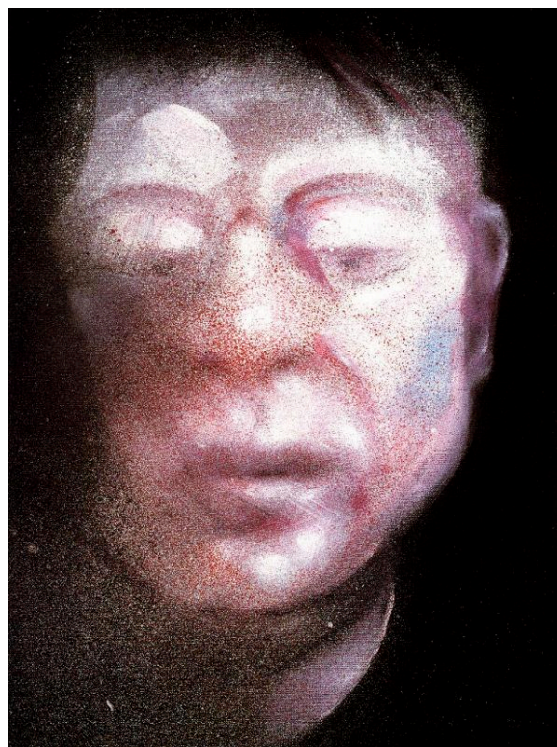


Figure 1.4 Francis Bacon, *Self-Portrait* (1987)

While artists have always used personal distress for professional inspiration, Gormley makes explicit the connection between his sexual orientation and his artistic work. Gormley's emphasis on mental unrest mirrors what Emmanuel Cooper describes as Bacon's attempt to depict "through paint...the violence of the emotions" (Cooper, 1994, p.230). In his study of Bacon's iconography and emotion, Darren Ambrose draws a similar conclusion on the emotion embodied through Bacon's portraits, saying they "have become a visceral means for recording and transmitting with a necessary immediacy the violent intensity of lived and embodied sensation...Bacon is seeking to explore and communicate the intensity of real existence" (Ambrose, 2009, p.12). Bacon's attempts to communicate the reality of his queer existence clearly inform Gormley's portraiture. Gormley parallels Bacon's desire for intense

communication through his own confrontational and emotional self-portraits. Talking about the correlation between his subject matter and his sexual orientation, Gormley says, “[growing up gay] still mentally affects me now”. This internal unrest again appears throughout his work, anchoring Gormley’s unsettled personal narrative with Bacon’s similarly distraught figures (Figure 1.5 and Figure 1.6). A perceived lack of internal agency also informs the portraits of both artists. Darren Ambrose, when describing this aspect of Bacon’s portraiture work, could just as easily be viewing Gormley’s self-portraits when he states that they “seldom appear as passive agents waiting for something to happen, arriving from the outside of the structure, but often appear as waiting for something to occur within themselves and as exerting extraordinary efforts upon themselves” (Ambrose, 2009, p.31). Gormley’s portraits, like Bacon’s, appear perpetually on the cusp of this internal self-occurrence, the emotional effort and mental strain each artist conveys clearly evident in their work.



Figure 1.5 Niall Gormley, *Untitled Self-Portrait*, (2012)

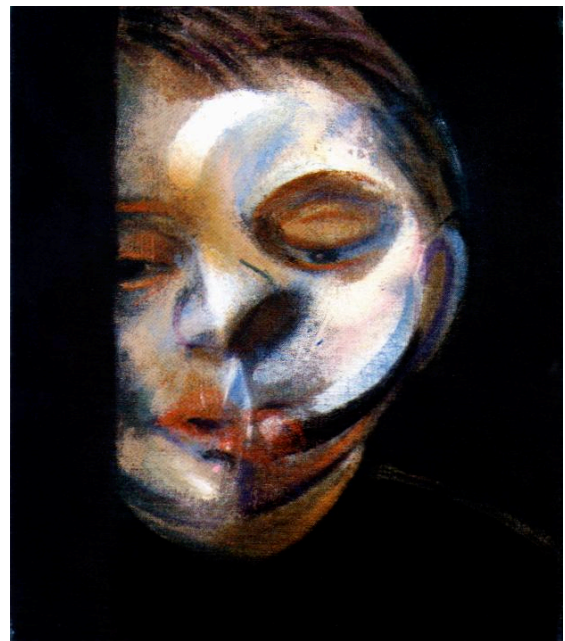


Figure 1.6 Francis Bacon, *Self-Portrait* (1972)

By using similar colors to many of Bacon's works, Gormley instinctively relates his own pieces back to Bacon. The isolation of Gormley's singular figures also corresponds to his expressed loneliness growing up in a stifling heterosexual environment, and again mirrors the omnipresent separation and alienation figured in Bacon's work. Many of Gormley's pieces also deal (either explicitly or indirectly) with Gormley's religious upbringing, echoing one of Bacon's similar reoccurring themes - a trait that Ambrose calls Bacon's "mysterious and aberrant form of spirituality" (Ambrose, 2009, p.42). Gormley willfully acknowledges religion as a thematic influence, referencing his Catholic heritage and sardonically stating that "it's always fun to play about with using religious...passages".

In addition to the queer influence of Francis Bacon, Niall Gormley's portraits also evoke a more contemporary portrait artist – lesbian identified painter Sadie Lee. Gormley's figures mirror the confrontational portraits of Lee's sexual dissidents in their refusal of visual comfort and insistence on confrontation with the viewer. In both instances, the subjects of Gormley and Lee's portraits remain defiant figures, with each artist exploiting the tension and intentionally uncomfortable relationship between the viewer and the artwork. For the work of both Gormley and Lee, portraits become more than objects to be gazed upon – they intentionally confront and discomfort those who view them with a ferocious intensity.

Given their similarities, it is no surprise then that both Gormley and Lee express a shared sense of ambiguity as to the role of their sexuality and identity in their art. Lee states, when discussing the role that her sexual orientation plays in her art, that "...sometimes people may have to be lured into looking at something, allowed to decide for themselves whether or not they like it and then be told what it is they're looking at" (Lee, 1996. p.120). Gormley

expresses a similar sentiment regarding his relationship with those who would view his art, stating that he would prefer not to immediately identify his work as queer, saying “I let the audience decide for themselves what the work is about”. Gormley expects those who see his portraits to “work out what my life is about as they view each piece...I always prefer if everyone has a different opinion of my work”. This shared attitude towards the artists’ biography is indicative of a post-modern approach towards sexual orientation and artwork, articulated most clearly by Christopher Reed’s statement that:

Definitions of art and homosexuality are...constantly evolving. If...they were [once] fundamentally linked, it seems that the twenty-first century may see them drift apart once again. To some extent, this reconfiguration of art and homosexuality around myriad forms of individualistic expression represents a liberation from expectations for both artists and homosexuals. (Reed, 2011, p.247)

As Reed states, this shift towards a more interpretational aspect of the subject is a recent development in queer art, and can be seen as a move away from earlier, explicitly confrontational artists and themes. Whereas queer artists once felt compelled to directly draw attention to their sexuality, many contemporary artists, including Gormley and Lee, are allowing their work to become more malleable in the hands of their audience, and present their sexual identity as only one facet of their larger personal oeuvre. Though each artist is influenced by their sexual orientation, both Gormley and Lee express a desire to shift away from the expectations placed upon specifically queer artists.

Though his work and inspiration may draw from darker aspects of his personality, Gormley is optimistic about the purpose of his portraits. He says “if it causes a stir, really aggravates many people, that can actually be quite a good thing sometimes, because you know your work is actually doing something...pushing its message out there”. Despite his reluctance to make immediate his sexual orientation through his work, Gormley recognizes the queer history of portraiture, and is confident of the medium’s continued ability to address contemporary topics of sexuality, stating simply that “people underestimate portraiture”.

Alexander Glass

More than any of the other artists profiled, Alexander Glass embodies the shifting relationship between homosexuality and art. While he recognizes and is proud of his sexual orientation, he is reticent to ascribe links between his self-identification as a gay man and his art. Glass does claim that he doesn’t “want to make work...that is made for a straight audience. It’s made for me. It’s made out of a gay perspective. In some way, there ought to be some sort of knowledge about my sexuality”. However, despite recognizing this gay perspective, Glass rejects the idea that he makes specifically gay art, saying “I don’t want to leave people out...I don’t want to say ‘this art is for this person’”.

Glass’ reluctance to have his self-identification as a gay man explicitly direct the direction of his art highlights a shift amongst many contemporary queer artists - the intentional breaking away and separation of an openly queer artist’s work from their sexual orientation. Art historian Christopher Reed articulates this division when he writes that “rapid changes in ideas of what it means to be either an artist or a homosexual have shattered these identities

into so many competing concepts that neither retains enough meaning to be much use in defining the other” (Reed, 2011, p.230). As a contemporary artist, Glass embodies the trend in contemporary art towards a casual sublimation of queer identity in an attempt at broader artistic expression and wider audiences.

Indeed, while Glass, age 19, does consider himself a member of the University of Brighton’s Young Gay Artist collective, he is skeptical of the group’s impact, and even expresses slight indifference on its purpose for existence. Glass says “I don’t think we [the Young Gay Artist group] have any sort of voice at the moment, and I’m not sure that we need one...there’s segregation [in being a gay artist] which is just natural, but it’s not necessarily a negative thing”.

Glass’ sculptures embody his open-ended approach towards his sexual identity in his art. Made in groups of two, with each couple approximately under a foot tall, Glass’ figures depict male same-sex pairs in physical contact with each other, including men with linked hands and pairs embracing. While Glass states that “the initial figures were two men, holding hands”, he disavows any intent or commentary on queer life. “I didn’t have any idea what I was doing when I first started [making the pairs]...I just wanted to make these stupid little [figures]”.

Though he derides what he deems his ‘stupid little figures’, Glass’ inspiration for the work clearly has some basis in male coupling, be it homoerotic or homosocial. With their monochrome grey colouring and their close physical contact, the pairs resemble the work of contemporary queer sculptor Guy Reid, whose installations have also focused on same-sex pairings in a similar fashion. The most prominent example of this influence, Reid’s *Facing the Bogeyman*, is a self-depiction of the artist and his male lover, and has been described as “a fear of loss associated either with the death of an individual or the end of a partnership” (Figure 1.7)

(Petry, 2004, p.124). Glass alludes to a similar thematic influence in his work, saying that he initially started manufacturing the figurines after the dissolution of a relationship. “The images I was making these couple from [were] in my mind from the relationship that I had”, says Glass, stating that the process “was quite cathartic”. However, unlike Reid, Glass is reticent to identify his figures as embodying a specifically queer sentiment or meaning, in spite of their same-sex pairings. Glass says that “hopefully [in] the way the forms are made, [they] become a bit more universal”.

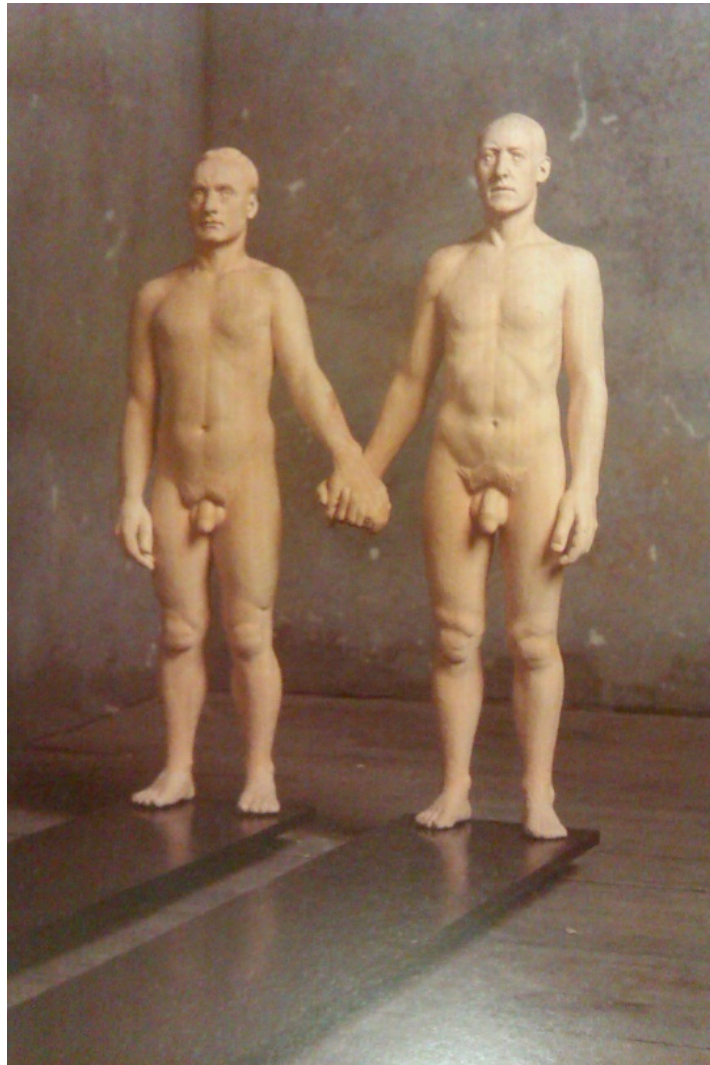


Figure 1.7 Guy Reid, *Facing the Bogeyman*, (2000)

This desire for universality in his work illustrates one of Glass' underlying artistic convictions – despite using same-sex desire as a catalyst for many of his pieces, Glass is loath to adopt the mantle of a queer artist, saying that “[identifying as a gay man] is not a big informer on my life at all”. Glass also feels uncomfortable with the interpretation of his male figures as homoerotic, declaring that he doesn't “know what the [difference is] between erotic and romantic”.

Glass' discomfort in being defined as a queer artist and his distrust of (and lack of use for) terms such as 'homoerotic' display first-hand the tempestuous nature between many contemporary artists and queer identities. While Glass himself is comfortable on a personal level identifying as a gay man (a term he prefers to 'queer'), he is less comfortable putting the same label on his art, even when inspiration from it comes from same-sex attraction. Christopher Reed eloquently describes this tension by asserting that “definitions...change as their social and representational contexts change. No one is completely exempt from, or completely trapped in, prevailing notions of art or identity. To be aware of – and not threatened by – the variability of these concepts frees us to choose, and perhaps change, our position(s) in relation to them” (Reed, 2011, p.255). Thus, Glass' tumultuous relationship with the definitions placed on his work is indicative of the attitude many queer contemporary artists have towards their own work and its connection (or lack thereof) with their sexual orientation.

Therefore, when Glass says, in reference to the possibility of representing explicit themes or taboo topics in his art, “I don't think there are boundaries”, it becomes easy to apply this boundless mantra to his own work. Glass' preference for blurred distinctions and malleable definitions becomes embodied in and through his statement, with his rejection of the

constricting terms often bestowed on queer artists (both contemporary and historical). Whereas Christopher Reed states that “the rise of the term queer reflected the loss of faith in the coherence of ‘gay’ or ‘lesbian’ identity, and was intended to unite a wide range of constituencies opposed to conventional notions of sexuality and gender”, contemporary artists such as Glass show yet another possibility in the evolution of terminology (Reed, 2011, p.231). Though influenced by queer artists such as Guy Reid who intentionally presented their sexual orientation in their work, Glass wilfully refuses such defined boundaries. In doing so, Glass is able to embody and represent the fluid dynamic that many contemporary artists have with contemporary notions of queer identity and their artistic work.

Shifting Identities and the Changing Role of the Artist

As shown by the members of the ‘Young Gay Artist’ organization, the function of contemporary art as made by queer people exists in a state of flux. Some contemporary queer artists, such as Karol Michalec, still invest their work with the ability to subvert and transgress, harkening back to previous generations of queers who rebelled against art establishments and heteronormative depictions of the world. Other contemporary artists, like Niall Gormley, draw upon uniquely queer experiences to inform their work, using their status as sexual minorities to imbue their pieces with emotion and defiance, while referencing seminal queer artists. Still many current artists remain unsure and ambivalent about the role of contemporary queer art in a larger context, a position represented by Alexander Glass.

Possible reasons for this myriad of diverging identities may include positive changes in the social and political status of queer people in Great Britain, leading some in the art world feeling as though art dealing with gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered themes is passé. It

is telling that of the artists interviewed, only Polish-born Karol Michalec explicitly sought to voice political dissidence through his work. Another reason for this divergence of identities may be a post-modern recognition of the inadequacy of a catch-all identity to encapsulate same-sex desire.

Regardless of the reason for the current state of contemporary queer art, when placed in a historical context, connections and traditions amongst past and present artists become obvious. While visual representation serves a different function than in previous generations, each artist (both contemporary and historical) serves to explore and convey the condition of queer people through their artistic endeavors. When examined as a collective, the explicit themes relating to same-sex desire, emotion, and identity in Brighton's 'Young Gay Artist' group reveal its distinctly queer lineage.

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