

Stephen Friedman Gallery

Houston Chronicle
'Stonewall 50' exhibit at CAMH explores LGBT themes
Molly Glentzer
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Image: A mask made of found objects is among the "Remains" series by Leilah Babirye, installed to fill a wall of the show "Stonewall 50" at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston. Photo: Molly Glentzer / Houston Chronicle

Fifty years after the Stonewall riots, a famous catalyst of the gay rights movement, a number of museums and galleries across the U.S. are mounting commemorative shows, looking for perspective and maybe inspiring more activism in a realm where so much has changed, and yet so much hasn't.

With the powerful tool of social media weaponized into a megaphone, every ideology spreads faster these days, including hateful ones. In the LGBT realm, gay rights have made significant leaps. Same-sex marriages are allowed in 26 countries, for example. But in the U.S. and globally, many people feel more vulnerable than ever.

"We're in a state that still wants to legislate which bathroom you can use, and where it's still legal to fire someone for being queer," says Dean Daderko, the curator of "Stonewall 50" at the Contemporary Arts

Museum Houston.

No community is more accepting of difference than the arts world, but until now, shows examining queer identity and issues have been rare — perhaps more reflective of who pays for museums than who runs them.

Daderko wanted to create the sense of small "shows within the show." He has presented small collections of works by 15 artists from a diverse mix of generations, ethnicities, gender expressions, mediums and approaches. The exhibition looks as much to the future as to the past, "to respect the history and protests of Stonewall, but also to understand it as an action that is just as able to be made today if folks feel like they're being oppressed for any reason," Daderko says.

Vivid visions

Some vivid stories unfold, most as personal as they are political, giving the show a spirited soul. Stepping into the CAMH's wide-open main gallery, the first impression is lively and dynamic, animated by the layered sounds of videos.

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Much of what is on view is surprisingly beautiful, even florid: A pink chandelier hangs just inside the door, above a grouping of Anthony Sonnenberg's other baroque, pastel-colored porcelain sculptures. Flowers stuck into the puppet stage set of "Tragedy Vase," however, are left to wither intentionally.

Jean-Michel Othoniel's Yellow Brick Road inspired ceramic installation glitters on the floor, not far away — a subtle reminder that Judy Garland, a gay icon, died two days before the riots erupted outside the Stonewall Inn gay bar in Greenwich Village, after a raid in which many people were arrested simply for being there.

"There's a bit of menace underneath all the beauty. That's important," Daderko says. "It's much more elegant than I thought it was going to be. This is difficult material for a lot of people so it had to connect and tell stories, whether they're material or narrative connections."

Salvaging memories

Only a few of the show's artists are Stonewall veterans. The late, fearless experimental filmmaker Barbara Hammer, who died of ovarian cancer in January, is one. Her corner is especially evocative, with screens displaying a mini-retrospective of works from the 60s, 70s, 80s and 90s.

The real grabber is "Evidentiary Bodies," her tour-de-force last work, layering intense strength and vulnerability in a moving self-portrait of the artist as a dying woman, doing a slow dance with her mortality, sagging butt and breasts and all. The piece fills three walls behind a door strung with film strips that serves as a kind of beaded curtain, also holding a projection.

Houstonians who remember the gay bar Mary's — a sometimes raunchy place that also was the center of the city's gay political life for many years — will also want to spend extra time with works that are more artifact than art: the ragged fragments of the resin-coated bar top created in 1985 with a collage of snapshots that celebrate Houston's gay community at the time and also memorialize friends, lovers, brothers and sisters who were dying during the AIDS pandemic. Judy Reeves and other members of the Gulf Coast Gay and Lesbian Archives salvaged the pieces long after the bar closed in 2009, before the derelict building was transformed into the coffee shop Blacksmith.

Collage techniques make a fine glue for the disparate stories, rendered in a multitude of materials and methods. Leilah Bibirye creates rustic, mask-like assemblages of found objects that reflect her African origins. Chitra Ganesh's site-specific commission is a colorful wall of mythical-looking figures painted as canvas cut-outs and embellished with faux hair, mirrors, fabric and found objects. Paul Mpagi Sepuya's photographs create beautiful abstractions of bodies with mirrors or collaged images. Christina Quarles' paintings of intermingled bodies aren't collage but might have been inspired by it. These are just a few examples.

Unheard stories

Nick Vaughan and Jake Margolin, spinning off of their ongoing "50 States" project to celebrate and uncover LGBTQ histories across the U.S., created a three-channel video in which four drag queens lip synch important gay rights speeches. One was first delivered by Charles Law, Texas Southern University's archivist and an activist, on October 14, 1979 at the National March On Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights.

Because many histories of cis-gendered white men are familiar already, Vaughan and Margolin have tried to focus their work on more marginal communities. They are currently five states into their monumental "50 States" series. A sixth chapter based on Louisiana will premiere next spring at DiverseWorks.

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"When we're being really optimistic, we say we'll finish it in 40 years," Margolin says. "Ultimately, we're setting up a structure for others."

Like Daderko, they appreciate the Stonewall history as a fierce fight against huge opposition that ignited "optimistic possibility" and brought a real shift in consciousness — "this idea that we can make change if everybody fights back," Margolin says. And yet so much more happened, all across the country, he adds. "The idea that it started in San Francisco and New York negates all that happened in places like Houston, New Orleans and Tulsa."

Houston's version of Stonewall happened in June of 1977, after the Texas State Bar Association invited the outspoken, anti-gay country singer Anita Bryant to perform at a meeting here. In response, thousands from the city's LGBT community and its supporters marched in protest.

"Stonewall 50" began as a pet project of former CAMH director Bill Arning, who was forced to resign abruptly last October, for reasons that weren't made public.

Since curation is largely about subjective choices, the show that coalesced is inevitably different than what Arning might have presented. "There are hundreds and thousands of other artists who could have been in this show," Daderko says. "This just happens to be what we made for this one."

A few adult content signs warn visitors about potentially challenging content, and the museum has published a special "family review" describing about half of the show's works to help guide parents through material they may or may not want to share with children.

"We had a lot of conversations about how we steer people through," Daderko says. "Part of it as well is thinking of all these issues around sexuality. It's such a hot button issue and one around which there is often so much shame. It was important to work against that."