

Stephen Friedman Gallery

NBC News
12 queer artists whose work is making us pay attention
R. Kurt Osenlund
13 December 2019



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From a veteran Latinx performance artist to an Instagram phenom, a nonbinary lettering whiz to a visionary from Uganda, these artists are mastering their mediums.

“Art exists where language fails.” Illustrator Marcos Chin first heard this quote last summer, when he attended a talk by lesbian cross-disciplinary artist Sheila Pepe, and it stuck with him. Chin, a queer Asian American creator based in Brooklyn, is one of a dozen LGBTQ artists to catch our eye and land on this list, which spans backgrounds, disciplines, ethnicities, sexualities and gender identities. Dozens more could have joined their ranks, but the hope of these few is to represent many — and what binds them together isn't nails, glue, paint or thread, but one common virtue amid this pivotal period for queer culture: When language just won't cut it, art fills the void.

Leilah Babirye

Sculptor / New York, NY



Image: Leilah Babirye. Photo: Serichai Traipoom

After fleeing the dangerously homophobic conditions of her native Uganda and gaining asylum in the U.S., Babirye had only art to claim for herself — she left behind family, friends and her girlfriend for the sake of her own survival. Today, she can work from anywhere, creating forms “carved using traditional African techniques mixed with found objects including metal, plastic and wood,” she said. A burned diary, she adds, reflects her own fears and desires about being out, while renderings of trans friends via paper or ceramics “represent some of the most vulnerable members of our community.” She's taken up activism, particularly as it relates to Uganda's 2021 presidential election, and she said, “How I live as an out lesbian in the fight for the rights of my community reverberates from New York, through social media, back to Uganda, and all over the world.”

Cheyne Gallarde

Illustrator / Honolulu



Image: Cheyne Gallarde. Courtesy of Cheyne Gallarde

“I love to transform queer people into the superheroes I see them as,” Cheyne Gallarde said, “powerful and dynamic but with a touch of whimsy and camp.” Aided by a background in offset printing, Gallarde uses “digital methods to achieve analog results,” and his vintage-style renderings of everyone from Marsha P. Johnson to the cast of “Pose” have become so

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popular, MTV tapped him to make comic-book covers for all six Video of the Year nominees for this year's VMAs. "I focus on creating cover art because I want the viewer to imagine the rest of the story in their minds," said Gallarde, who, when recreating all manner of queer icons, dives into a great wealth of research. In addition to "engaging the viewer's imagination in this tap-tap-technology era," Gallarde said he is motivated to shake up who is depicted. "One look at my art makes it clear that I love drawing fierce females," he said, "but I also love showing trans men and bears represented alongside the muscled Adonises we've grown up seeing."

Max Colby

Visual Artist / Brooklyn, NY



Image: Max Colby. Courtesy of Max Colby

A casual passerby might say that Max Colby makes decorative pillows, or elaborate embroidery, but that would be wildly simplifying the cerebral complexity behind Colby's work, which is alternately floral, phallic, voluptuous and literally fringing. "A primary interest in the work is to reframe conversations on domesticity, power and gender through a queer and nonbinary lens," said Colby, who's deeply interested in the histories of materials, and limits theirs to "opulent Western European, American Colonial and contemporary American fabrics." With every bead, thread and sequin, Colby has a higher agenda, weaving those historical obsessions with big ideas like colonialism and toppling establishments. "I'm interested in subverting the aesthetics of violent, patriarchal systems through camp," Colby adds.

Gio Black Peter

Painter / New York, NY



Image: Gio Black Peter. Courtesy of Gio Black Peter

"A true artist is never not working," said Gio Black Peter, a world-renowned, Guatemalan-born painter. "When I'm not painting, I'm thinking about what I want to paint." Known for his unique style of figure drawing — a touch exaggerated, endearing and provocative — Peter has pulled inspiration from his days in carpentry and gardening, which prompted plants to enter his art. He paints alone in his studio from 9 p.m. until morning, "when New York is the most peaceful," he said. He admires artists like David Wojnarowicz, who presented fierce commentaries on AIDS before succumbing to complications from it. "It takes guts to put everything out there for public consumption," Peter said, adding, "If you want to know how I see the world, just look at my work."

Cassils

Visual Artist / Los Angeles

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Image: Cassils. Courtesy of Robyn Beck

Cassils has used clay, fire, photography, urine and the musculature of their own body as mediums to provoke, challenge and excite whoever experiences their singular creations. The internationally known artist strives to “hijack” the viewers' experiences, so that anyone present “doesn't remain on the outside, but becomes accountable in witnessing and watching.” One of Cassils' most-discussed works was 2017's “Pissed,” a response to the Trump administration's rollback of the trans bathroom bill, for which the artist collected their own urine

for 200 days straight, and presented the results in an exhibition, showing “the physical burden placed on an individual body when bathroom access is restricted.” Inspired by the words of Emory Douglas, whose graphic design became emblematic of the Black Panther Party, Cassils said, “I believe that art can inspire a culture of change, and I hope that my work [within] the LGBTQ community can do that.”

Lex Barberio

Photographer / New York, NY



Image: Lex Barberio. Courtesy of Lex Barberio

Miami-born photographer Lex Barberio likens her artistic process to cooking. “Once you've put in all the prep work,” she said (in this case, concept development, test shots and more), “the execution becomes easier.” Barberio said she hopes “to expand people's definitions of gender, sexuality and self,” and one way she's doing that is with her project “The Ambisextrous,” wherein each of her subjects were shot while presenting as masculine, androgynous and feminine, and the resulting triptychs were

merged via printing on holographic paper, allowing the viewer to watch the subjects transform in real time. The novel technique is a show-don't-tell contribution to the ever-complex conversation around gender identity. “It visually articulates something that's very hard to put in words,” she explains.

Colleen Coover

Comic Artist, Writer / Portland, Ore.



Image: Colleen Coover. Courtesy of Colleen Coover

Colleen Coover started her career with a queer-themed erotic comic called “Small Favors,” and said she then “jumped into the deep end of that pool.” The bisexual artist is married to a cis-hetero man but says she's always identified as queer, and instilled her predominantly feminist, 1960s-inspired comics with “a very queer vibe, translated through an early 21st century perspective.” Coover has watched comics evolve from Marvel's first openly gay character, Northstar (who came out in an “X-Men” comic in 2012), to a vast increase in LGBTQ visibility and alternatives within the medium, which she believes is “influenced by young queer people across the spectrum.” Coover is particularly grateful for her comic-book artist

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community in Portland, which she describes as a “very queer bunch,” and largely female. “There are about 25 of us in this amazing shared space,” said Coover, whose main ambition with her work is to help people have fun, an aim she started with “Small Favors” more than 20 years ago.

Marcos Chin

Illustrator / Brooklyn, NY



Image: Marcos Chin. Courtesy of Marcos Chin

Marcos Chin used to do silk-screening and sewing alongside his illustration, which required more space. But since this past spring, he's been working from home, creating his artworks — which bring his queer sexuality to the foreground whenever possible — with a mix of digital and traditional techniques, printing and scanning while adding charcoal or airbrush by hand. “For me, the computer is just another art tool,” Chin said. Oscillating between personal work and

commercial illustrations, Chin strives to instil a personal, unspoken narrative into everything he creates, and he hopes the viewer takes some part of that with them. “As a gay, Asian male, I feel underrepresented, and sometimes unseen, in today’s art and media landscape,” he said. “I’m always seeking ways to present parts of me through my experience and through my art.”

Nao Bustamante

Multimedia Artist / Los Angeles



Image: Nao Bustamante. Courtesy of Eleanor Goldsmith

Nao Bustamante has been showing her performance art, sculpture, installation and video work across the globe for more than 25 years, and she still loves the rush of being in production, in a studio or in a performance. “I’m always making,” she said. “The trick is to find space in your mind to allow for ideas to unfold, and there's a lot of procrastination involved. I always say, 'If you're not procrastinating, you haven't started yet.'” Known for her bold explorations of race, class and gender, Bustamante said she doesn't so much make art for the LGBTQ community, but that the community holds and supports her so that she's able to make her art (including works like

“America, the beautiful,” in which she sculpted her body in packing tape to “create the perfect feminine form, which in turn becomes grotesque”). She remains motivated to build a more just and loving world, and more reflective of her own lived experience. “I stand at the intersection of many communities: queer, feminist, Latinx, artist and educator,” she said. “I live all those identities at the same time.”

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Marco DaSilva

Painter / New York, NY



Image: Marco DaSilva. Courtesy of Marco DaSilva

This past summer, at New York's Manny Cantor Center, DaSilva exhibited a series of paintings with combined canvases — each painting created the shape of the Empire State Building, and each bore the colors of a different flag representing a past lover. “It was inspired by unrequited desire,” DaSilva said. “I’m influenced by navigating queer love in my work but coding it in a way that only I can fully understand. The viewer is left to pick up the pieces.”

Motivated by fellow queer artists and prone to embedding inexpensive baubles in his work (he’s made intricate textures with plastic gemstones, only to cover them with house paint), DaSilva is constantly using his art to negotiate his Brazilian roots with his life and upbringing in New York City. “Through this work I explore the idea of home and sense of belonging that is not rooted in one place,” he said, “but often floating between many.”

Jae Lin

Designer, Hand-Lettering Artist / Austin, Texas



Image: Jae Lin. Julie Wilhite Photography

With buoyant artwork and typography, nonbinary artist Jae Lin is acting as a beacon of positivity and progress. “My work focuses on trans liberation, loving affirmations and acknowledging the possibility for post-traumatic growth and healing within all of us,” they say. “I also draw cute bunnies sometimes.” Lin said they’ve become part of “an amazing queer trans art community in Austin,” which has only bolstered the fact that, for them, making art is “a

lifeline.” Lin creates all of their lettering with ink, marker and brush pens on paper before incorporating digital design and illustration, and all of it feeds their mission to uplift. “I hope I can play a small part in subverting narratives around trans and queer stories, which often focus on how much we suffer and hate ourselves and our bodies,” Lin said. “We also have so much growing, blossoming and flourishing in our stories.”

Austin James Smith

Designer / New York, NY



Image: Austin James Smith. Austin James Smith. Courtesy of Austin James Smith

“Some people have trouble thinking that things outside of drawing, painting and sculpture can be considered in a fine art context,” said Austin James Smith, whose face is typically the canvas for his “dark but whimsical” adornment work. “I enjoy being outside that bubble.” Smith — who recently launched an accessories line, Empty Jewels — said he needs to be fast and consistent when applying makeup, jewelry and more to his face, because he “can’t pause covered in fake tattoos and just pick it back up the next day.” Smith’s Instagram presence has boosted his popularity, and he’s

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grateful to live in New York, where he can express himself freely — a privilege underlined by his recent collaboration with a Russian artist on an Instagram filter. “He expressed how hard it is for him there,” Smith said, “and that seeing artists like me helps him escape daily negativity. I’m motivated to be my true self while also reaching people.”