NGS - Queer Art Series - Queer Joy.mp4

[00:00:00] We good to go?
[00:00:01] Fabulous.
[00:00:03] There's this illustrator called George Quaintance, who
[00:00:09] in the mid 1900s was churning out this
[00:00:10] amazingly homoerotic work
[00:00:12] for pulp magazines like Stolen Sweets
[00:00:14] to Tempting Tales.
[00:00:15] Playing with and subverting stereotypes
[00:00:18] like gay cowboys
[00:00:19] and idyllic classical figures.
[00:00:21] Looking through this, by contrast,
[00:00:23] you realise how rare it is to see such
[00:00:26] expressions of queer joy in historical fine art.
[00:00:28] Too often we dwell on the negatives
[00:00:31] of history's LGBTQ+ artists,
[00:00:34] dark stories, pain and repression.
[00:00:36] We have like Keith Haring, who sadly died of AIDS,
[00:00:40] Basquiat, who died of drug abuse.
[00:00:43] Not just in the visual arts
[00:00:44] but across different art forms.
[00:00:47] But look closer and queer joy can be found,
[00:00:50] sometimes explicit, but sometimes in the abstract.
[00:00:53] Flowers, landscapes, colours and domestic scenes.
[00:00:56] So how do we find and illuminate this work?
[00:00:59] And why is it so important that we do?
OK, let's get stuck in.

Let's talk about queer joy. If there's one recurrent theme in joyful queer art, it's the subversion of stereotypes.

Let's start by talking about the sailor.

The all-male societies of the sea, were an enduring stereotype of gay masculinity, the swagger and charm of these figures in their dashing uniforms can be seen in work from pop artists like Tom of Finland or the iconic outfits of the Village People, to fine artists like Francis Cadell.

Sort of shirtless sailors wearing hats like really, really camp. But they both go deeper than stereotype.

Cadell here also showing a more sensitive individual portrait of a young sailor in an intimately observed study. Meanwhile, Valentine Penrose used subversions of gothic settings to explore celebrations of lesbian love.

Novels with a lot of lesbian themes in them, letters or poems or snippets of dialogue from one woman to another. And they're all like full of love and loss.

Hiding queer narratives in fantastical settings.
Even the word queer is itself a subversion, a way in which the gay, lesbian, bi, trans and intersex communities have reclaimed a derogatory phrase. These kinds of subversions can be seen from the mid-20th century onwards. I thought that was a really catalytic moment. Where are the artists and where are the activists and how are those boundaries fudged there? That was about people trying to fight back. Queer joy is a form of resistance, is an act of resistance. So the whole idea of like graphic impact - Guerrilla Girls, Lesbian Avengers. You're seeing these really playful, really joyful, really fantastic interventions into almost the frame of popular culture, as well as the frame of fine art representation. So often, queer joy is about self-expression, about playing with and taking ownership of visuals and identity. I guess it is you call it appropriation. It is taking things and repurposing them. Some of my favourite artists are those who do that, people like Duchamp
or Warhol.

I think there's an idea that you strip things away.

You strip away the layers of the onion, and you will come to the core of the truth.

And I don't think that's necessarily actually how we speak the truth.

It's in what we perform, about the apparel that we wear and the guises that we're going to adopt, the masks tell the truth as much as anything beneath it.

Equally, though, queer joy can be found in simple representation and everyday depictions.

Feeling accepted is the biggest part of it.

Being in control of yourself and not being under the spotlight in any way.

Artists like Hockney, for example, spoke about their work, more about the authenticity, having an identity and living an identity, and that having elements of joy is part of it.

Hockney describes his work as "propaganda for queer love"
but often his paintings take the form of more domestic everyday scenes, like his portrait of Christopher Isherwood and Don Bachardy simmering with sexual tension and allusions.

At other times, queer love can be shown in even less direct ways. I wouldn't normally be stopped in my tracks by a portrait of a vase of flowers, but Gluck's flower paintings and the story behind those of her relationship with the florist, Constance Spry, draws me towards those paintings.

Gluck was a pipe smoking, gender rejecting painter from the early 1900s who painted coded still lifes to express the joy of her four year relationship with a female florist.

I remember going to an exhibition of Gluck's work, and I couldn't get enough. I didn't want to leave that room just for the reason that that art for me had so many stories and layers to it. Of course, today's artists can afford to be more overt in depictions of queerness. Front and centre of the Scottish National Portrait Gallery is Roxana Hall's Portrait of Horse McDonald, a truly collaborative piece.

This is the part of me I never see.
This is what other people see when I sing.

She felt that something of her, her intimate self was there embedded in the work.

It's the joy, the excitement, the passion that comes from inside me, and I've never seen it.

When do we see an image of an older woman looking like that?

Someone who is absolutely alive, vital and saturated and rich.

Again queer joy here comes from a place of defiance, of darkness.

Starting off, it all comes from me voicing stuff from inside,

which comes from years and years ago of growing up and being chased by people,

being shouted, being spat on for being gay.

I was kind of demonstrating my insides, my emotions.

So many of us know what it is to have to try to find joy when we know that we are still considered to be aberrant.

We still live in those times, that's still the case.

In contemporary art, joyful defiance often comes from increasing visibility of and celebrating marginalised subcultures and people.

Anything that is not societal norm worthy heteronormative,
that's what I would say is the queer

In looking at the work of Tessa Boffin,

seeing the work of somebody like Olivia Plender,

whose work you can see, there's a beautiful,

joyful sense there of people surviving, people thriving.

Like a queer reading of Raqib Shaw's

erotically charged work,

which depicts fantastical, hedonistic worlds

often populated by mythical creatures.

Increasing the amount of joyous, outwardly queer art

on gallery walls

has a huge effect on individuals, audiences and artists,

because representing queer joy

in the world of art is one step

in increasing queer joy in the world that we live in.

For any minority to see yourself depicted in culture

is so important and it makes you feel like you exist

and that you matter.

It's imperative that we see people like ourselves

because those things sustain us.

I think it's showing like a full range of emotion.

A broader range of of artists and sitters

gives us a broader range of stories to tell.

So to find joy and to speak and to laugh

and be able to be together,

well it's critical.