

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?

[00:01:05] OK, let's get stuck in.

[00:01:07] Let's talk about queer joy. If there's one recurrent theme in joyful queer art,

[00:01:13] it's the subversion of stereotypes.

[00:01:15] Let's start by talking about

[00:01:17] the sailor.

[00:01:19] The all-male societies of the sea,

[00:01:20] were an enduring stereotype of gay masculinity,

[00:01:23] the swagger and charm of these figures

[00:01:25] in their dashing uniforms

[00:01:27] can be seen in work from pop artists

[00:01:29] like Tom of Finland

[00:01:30] or the iconic outfits of the Village People,

[00:01:33] to fine artists like Francis Cadell.

[00:01:35] Sort of shirtless sailors wearing hats

[00:01:37] like really, really camp.

[00:01:38] But they both go deeper than stereotype.

[00:01:41] Cadell here also showing a more

[00:01:42] sensitive individual portrait

[00:01:44] of a young sailor in an intimately observed study.

[00:01:48] Meanwhile, Valentine Penrose used subversions of

[00:01:51] gothic settings to explore celebrations of lesbian love.

[00:01:55] Novels with a lot of lesbian themes in them, letters or

[00:01:59] poems or snippets of dialogue

[00:02:01] from one woman to another.

[00:02:03] And they're all like full of love and loss.

[00:02:04] Hiding queer narratives in fantastical settings.

[00:02:10] Even the word queer is itself a subversion,
[00:02:12] a way in which the gay, lesbian,
[00:02:14] bi, trans and intersex communities
[00:02:17] have reclaimed a derogatory phrase.
[00:02:19] These kinds of subversions can be seen
[00:02:21] from the mid-20th century onwards.
[00:02:23] I thought that was a really catalytic moment.
[00:02:26] Where are the artists and where are the activists and
[00:02:29] how are those boundaries fudged there?
[00:02:32] That was about people trying to fight back.
[00:02:33] Queer joy is a form of
[00:02:35] resistance, is an act of resistance.
[00:02:38] So the whole idea of like graphic impact -
[00:02:41] Guerrilla Girls, Lesbian Avengers.
[00:02:43] You're seeing these really playful, really joyful,
[00:02:46] really fantastic interventions
[00:02:49] into almost the frame of
[00:02:51] popular culture, as well as the frame
[00:02:53] of fine art representation.
[00:02:56] So often, queer joy is about self-expression,
[00:02:59] about playing with and taking ownership of
[00:03:01] visuals and identity.
[00:03:03] I guess it is you call it appropriation.
[00:03:04] It is taking things and repurposing them.
[00:03:07] Some of my favourite artists are those who do that,
[00:03:09] people like Duchamp

[00:03:10] or Warhol.

[00:03:11] It's the subtle references that are there in people's

[00:03:13] ways of presenting themselves to the world.

[00:03:16] I think there's an idea that you strip things away.

[00:03:18] You strip away the layers of the onion,

[00:03:20] and you will come to the core of the truth.

[00:03:22] And I don't think that's necessarily

[00:03:24] actually how we speak the truth.

[00:03:27] It's in what we perform,

[00:03:28] about the apparel that we wear

[00:03:30] and the guises that we're going to adopt,

[00:03:31] the masks tell the truth

[00:03:34] as much as anything beneath it.

[00:03:36] Equally, though, queer joy can be found

[00:03:38] in simple representation

[00:03:40] and everyday depictions.

[00:03:42] Feeling accepted is the biggest part of it.

[00:03:44] Being in control of yourself and not

[00:03:46] being under the spotlight in any way.

[00:03:49] Artists like Hockney, for example,

[00:03:51] spoke about their work,

[00:03:52] more about the authenticity,

[00:03:54] having an identity and living an identity,

[00:03:56] and that having elements of joy is part of it.

[00:04:01] Hockney describes his work as

[00:04:03] "propaganda for queer love",

[00:04:04] but often his paintings take the form of
[00:04:07] more domestic everyday scenes,
[00:04:09] like his portrait of Christopher Isherwood and Don Bachardy
[00:04:12] simmering with sexual tension and allusions.
[00:04:15] At other times, queer love can be shown
[00:04:17] in even less direct ways.
[00:04:20] I wouldn't normally be stopped in my tracks by
[00:04:24] a portrait of a vase of flowers,
[00:04:26] but Gluck's flower paintings and
[00:04:28] the story behind those of her relationship
[00:04:31] with the florist, Constance Spry,
[00:04:34] draws me towards those paintings.
[00:04:36] Gluck was a pipe smoking, gender rejecting painter
[00:04:39] from the early 1900s who painted coded still lifes
[00:04:43] to express the joy of her four year relationship
[00:04:46] with a female florist.
[00:04:47] I remember going to an exhibition of Gluck's work,
[00:04:49] and I couldn't get enough.
[00:04:51] I didn't want to leave that room just for the reason that
[00:04:54] that art for me had so many stories and layers to it.
[00:04:58] Of course, today's artists can afford to be more overt
[00:05:01] in depictions of queerness.
[00:05:04] Front and centre of the Scottish National Portrait Gallery
[00:05:07] is Roxana Hall's Portrait of Horse McDonald,
[00:05:09] a truly collaborative piece.
[00:05:12] This is the part of me I never see.

[00:05:14] This is what other people see when I sing.

[00:05:16] She felt that something of her,

[00:05:19] her intimate self was there embedded in the work.

[00:05:22] It's the joy, the excitement, the passion

[00:05:25] that comes from inside me, and I've never seen it.

[00:05:27] When do we see an image of an older woman

[00:05:29] looking like that?

[00:05:31] Someone who is absolutely alive, vital

[00:05:34] and saturated and rich.

[00:05:36] Again queer joy here comes from a place

[00:05:39] of defiance, of darkness.

[00:05:41] Starting off, it all comes from me

[00:05:43] voicing stuff from inside,

[00:05:45] which comes from years and years ago of growing up

[00:05:49] and being chased by people,

[00:05:50] being shouted, being spat on for being gay.

[00:05:53] I was kind of demonstrating my insides, my emotions.

[00:05:59] So many of us know what it is to have to try to find joy

[00:06:03] when we know that we are still considered to be

[00:06:07] aberrant.

[00:06:08] We still live in those times, that's still the case.

[00:06:11] In contemporary art, joyful defiance often comes

[00:06:14] from increasing visibility of and

[00:06:16] celebrating marginalised subcultures and people.

[00:06:19] Anything that is not

[00:06:20] societal norm worthy heteronormative,

[00:06:23] that's what I would say is the queer
[00:06:25] In looking at the work of Tessa Boffin,
[00:06:27] seeing the work of somebody like Olivia Plender,
[00:06:29] whose work you can see, there's a beautiful,
[00:06:32] joyful sense there of people surviving, people thriving.
[00:06:38] Like a queer reading of Raqib Shaw's
[00:06:39] erotically charged work,
[00:06:41] which depicts fantastical, hedonistic worlds
[00:06:44] often populated by mythical creatures.
[00:06:48] Increasing the amount of joyous, outwardly queer art
[00:06:51] on gallery walls
[00:06:52] has a huge effect on individuals, audiences and artists,
[00:06:56] because representing queer joy
[00:06:58] in the world of art is one step
[00:07:00] in increasing queer joy in the world that we live in.
[00:07:03] For any minority to see yourself depicted in culture
[00:07:06] is so important and it makes you feel like you exist
[00:07:09] and that you matter.
[00:07:10] It's imperative that we see people like ourselves
[00:07:15] because those things sustain us.
[00:07:16] I think it's showing like a full range of emotion.
[00:07:19] A broader range of artists and sitters
[00:07:22] gives us a broader range of stories to tell.
[00:07:25] So to find joy and to speak and to laugh
[00:07:28] and be able to be together,
[00:07:31] well it's critical.