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Interview

ART

HISTORIES WITHIN HISTORY

By EMILY MCDERMOTT

At only 22 years old, New York-based curator, writer, and Ph.D candidate William J. Simmons has knowledge beyond his years. One minute Simmons is diverting a phone call from his dad ("He gets anxious if I don't answer"), but the next he is passionately speaking about the expression of queer and gender equality within art history. He explores this topic through his latest research and curatorial endeavor, resulting in the group exhibition "Queen Fantasy." Opening on Saturday at OHWOW Gallery in Los Angeles, the show addresses the marginalization gayness and queerness within art history.

"Firstly, I want this show to be an opportunity to celebrate, revel in, and learn more about the diversity of queer experience," Simmons says, clad in a simple plaid blue shirt and matching Toms. "Secondly, especially given the recent ruling [to legalize same-sex marriage], I also want it to be a space where visitors can reflect on what's left to be done. I want it to be an educational space to see how far we've come, but also to find inspiration for what comes next."

In the show, Simmons (who notes he's not "the other William J. Simmons who founded the KKK") highlights 31 pieces made by 10 artists who have worked with various mediums throughout recent decades—from photographs and films by Jimmy DeSana, David Benjamin Sherry, John Waters, and Jack Smith to Celeste Dupuy-Spencer's subversive paintings, Jacolby Satterwhite's experiential sculpture, and Mariah Garnett, A.K. Burns, and A.L. Steiner's exploratory installations. And although Leidy Churchman is commonly known as a painter with aesthetically simple yet emotionally complex compositions, he will instead exhibit a ceramic sculpture that has been kept in his personal collection and never before displayed in public.

As a whole, "Queen Fantasy" asks viewers to consider plausible histories within the established histories; what is the evidence of queerness in contemporary art, how else could it be seen, and where is it going? We met Simmons in SoHo for coffee, where he seemed like a glass-half-full type of guy. Working on the show, he says, "gave me a lot of faith in the art world, which I needed, because it's intensely depressing otherwise."

EMILY MCDERMOTT: How did this show come about?

WILLIAM J. SIMMONS: I had been thinking a lot about these issues ever since David Benjamin Sherry's show about how queerness can be manifested in many different ways besides explicitly clear subject matter. So I approached OHWOW, pitched this idea, and they thought it would be a lot of fun. I started out with a list of 50 artists. I was a little over-ambitious, but we whittled it down to 10.

MCDERMOTT: How did you settle on the 10 artists? It's interesting that only three of them are women.

SIMMONS: You're right, and it sort of happened naturally. When I start thinking about it, you have the photographers—Jimmy DeSana, David Benjamin Sherry, and Jack Smith—and they all have this common sensibility. The painters, when you look at their work, it really coheres. Then you have the video artists—A.L. Steiner, A.K. Burns, and Mariah Garnett—who are exploring very similar themes.

Your point about women artists is incredibly important because one of our goals was to make this as diverse a show as possible. The thing is that queer art history—actually queer everything, gay bars even—generally tends to focus on gay men, and I'm a big believer in what the Guerrilla Girls want: complete equity in all institutions. There's going to be multiple permutations of this show, so I hope in future iterations that'll be something that can be addressed and talked about, because you're right; in order to have a truly diverse show we need that level of parity. I think the way the show is now, it's working in that direction. We have lots of different voices and that was really important.

MCDERMOTT: How did you first become interested in this topic within art history?

SIMMONS: I did my degree in art history and queer theory at Harvard. I wrote my thesis on Jimmy DeSana, who died of AIDS in 1990. He was very much a part of the Pictures Generation—he was good friends with Cindy Sherman, Laurie Simmons, Robert Mapplethorpe, all those guys—and I kept thinking about how gay men's voices within that particular dialogue either focused on AIDS or gay men as curators and friends, not really anything about gay men as complex creators. If you think about photography from the '80s, and you want to talk about anything gay-related, you have Robert Mapplethorpe and then you're done.

So I started thinking about how those canonical readings contain so many unsung voices. It really reached ahead for me when I got to know David [Benjamin Sherry]'s work because he's working within this lineage of modernist photography, but he is pointing out the possibilities of revising that narrative. I don't really think you can "queer things"—I think that's too much of a silly buzz word—but what he's doing is pointing to new possibilities within that very sort of staid, stagnant lineage.

I also did a lot of work on Amy Sillman and Nicole Eisenman. I did an interview with them and an article, thinking about how queerness can be manifested in other ways beside pure subject matter, called "Notes on Queer Formalism." It's about how gender, sexuality, and identity politics can be interpreted, experienced, and integrated through looking at art formally, and the qualities of paint perhaps having some sort of queer sensibility.

MCDERMOTT: How do you think those sensibilities have changed from somebody like Jimmy DeSana, who died in 1990, to somebody like Jacolby Satterwhite, who is very much an artist of now?

SIMMONS: It's interesting researching Jimmy and Jack Smith's time, when gay men had a very different way of thinking about themselves in relationship to the art world, in relationship with the world in general. I've done a lot of interviews with people who knew Jimmy and were around in that time and were active [artists]. I think it's a more narrowly defined vision of what gayness means, because there was this community and everyone knew each other. There wasn't this availability of information that we have now; there were certain ideas about what gayness means as an artistic or personal principle. A lot of artists of that period didn't want to be really associated with sexuality in a way. Some did, but on the whole, most people didn't really see that as a factor—at least in my research, that's what I've come to understand.

Now we have such a different climate. There isn't this centrality of the art world. There's more access to information. There's different ways of creating networks. I think people like Jacolby and David are really putting their identities on the line in a very provocative and revolutionary way. People were certainly doing [that] in the '60s and '70s, but I think that now it takes on a different tenure. Thinking of Jacolby, especially his sculptures based on drawings that his mother made—that is such a powerful, revolutionary statement about a of variety of things. There is definitely a respect for the past, as there should be, an awareness of AIDS, of this Lower East Side community in New York, and all those various struggles, but there's also an urge to translate that experience in different ways. I see all of these artists as really paying homage to what came before them, but at the same time looking for new ways to translate those ideas.

For instance, David is completely analog, like Sally Mann, but at the same time he has such a freshness; he's this combination of old and new. The same goes with Liedy Churchman, who is an exceptionally skilled painter and you can see resonance of the surrealists, but he's infused it with this personal flair. There's this really interesting oscillation between present and past.

MCDERMOTT: Breaking away from the show, how did you become interested in art?

SIMMONS: I grew up on a farm in Northern California where I went to an art museum once. I remember we had a fabulous time and we were all so intrigued, because there was a big Matthew Barney installation and it was called Anal Sadistic Warrior. We were all, how old, I don't know, but we thought it was hysterical. It was a body-building machine covered with Vaseline. We had a delightful time with that. It wasn't until I went to Harvard that I started studying art.

THERE WILL BE AN OPENING RECEPTION FOR "QUEER FANTASY" ON SATURDAY, JULY 11 FROM 6-8 PM AT OHWOW GALLERY IN LOS ANGELES. FOR MORE ON SIMMONS, FOLLOW HIM ON TWITTER.