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BA Design Crafts

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I intend to curate an exhibition called 'queerness and trans identity' that features 5 pieces of work each from a different artist related to said theme. I have chosen to exhibit in The Elysium Gallery in Swansea; I want to create a space where people who relate to the theme can feel safe and accepted, Elysium does this well as it is a very inviting venue that often holds its own LGBT related events and exhibitions. I will be including ceramic, textile, and photographic artworks in this exhibition with a strong underlying theme of cowboys, horses, and the Wild West in the context of queer life. I will be using theories from Jack Halberstam, Judith Butler, and Suzanne Lenon. Recent government changes to ban conversion therapy for everyone except transgender people has created a need to highlight the themes of queerness and trans identity with regards to heteronormativity as the fluidity of gender and sexuality has been bypassed for too long.

My intention with this exhibition is to educate and spread awareness by exposing the public to ambiguous transgender and homosexual imagery, that explores not only homoeroticism but breaks down the binary ideals people have of what homosexual/trans joy and love looks like. Art by John Elliot is featured that depicts gay, trans cowboy love, in a non-erotic and tender light. Something as ever changing as gender identity and sexual orientation cannot be watered down to simple attraction and certainly cannot be considered a permanent label. Theories surrounding sexuality and gender fluidity argue that labels a person identifies with aren't fixed and are ever changing. "... I would emphasise that 'orientations' themselves are rarely, if ever, fixed. Obviously, they can shift through time and are open to cultural reformations that are in no sense univocal" (Butler, 1990, p. 218-219). Ceramics by Nicki Green are also exhibited with these themes of the trans body and shifting gender identity.

Another underlying theme I am analysing in this exhibition is 'The West' and Cowboys. Homosexuality and gender nonconformity were a surprisingly large part of the cowboy lifestyle in the 1800s to 1900s. Wesley Harvey's bright, fun and 'camp' ceramic work is a fitting choice for this exhibition with themes of cowboys, homoeroticism and phallic imagery being an eye-catching addition to this installation. Peter Boag, a historian at the Washington State University, states "my theory is that people who were transgender... saw the west as a place where they could live and get jobs and carry on a life that they couldn't in the east" (Imbler 2019). This is still a relevant statement today with many countries still outlawing homosexuality and transgender people. The erotic image of the gay cowboy is fascinating so including Jim French and his homoerotic photography was essential in this exhibition. Gay men were extremely common in the west and would often have secret relationships like the one depicted in 'Brokeback Mountain' (2005). However, it was also a time for trans men to pursue their true identity as this era was a time where lots of 'women' would dress as men to avoid unwanted harassment and gain a better income. Transgender was not a term

used during this period so they were often misrepresented despite using male names, growing facial hair, and living purely as men. These 'trans' men were often rabble rousers, horse thieves and gunslingers and were not liked by the community or seen as equal citizens. As the fight for social revolution continued through the decade's gays and lesbians in the 1960-1970s became less radical and abrasive and more digestible. Suzanne Lenon states "...gay and lesbian politics...came to be more about equality than the assertion of difference... this was often achieved by assuring straight people that at least some gays and lesbians are normal, law-abiding citizens..." (Taylor, 2017, p.175). Despite the radical protest and refusal to conform that the LGBT community showed in its history, the community (mainly white middle-class gays and lesbians) began to become compliant and instead of change wanted to fit in to heteronormative society. This was the time when gender roles and the oppression of women and minorities was a rampant issue implemented by society to promote conformity and capitalism. "Sex more generally- is not a bio-logical given but a political fiction and construct of the patriarchy" (Taylor, 2017, pg. 179).

The purpose of this exhibition is to strip back commonly held assumptions regarding queer culture, with provocative and heart-warming imagery from people of varying sexualities and gender identities. The message behind the exhibition is intended for beyond the walls of a gallery and to evoke a conversation; reassessing hyper masculine tropes and stereotypes, allowing society to understand and evolve into something less concerned with the binary, and more concerned with a person's love for another and their true joy.

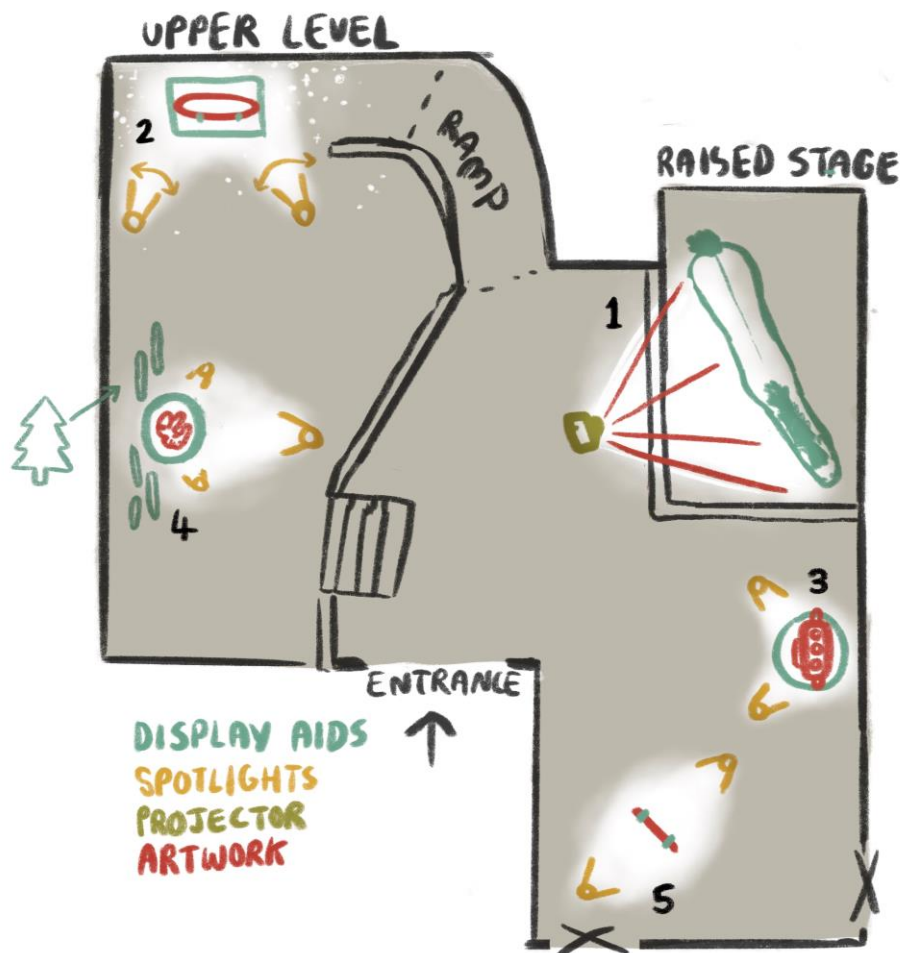




Fig: 1



Lifesize horse mannequin example

As viewers enter the gallery in dominant position in direct eyeline diagonally across into the corner of the room will be displayed Photography by Jim French. This photograph simply called "*untitled (cowboys)*" is a vintage polaroid print and will be projected onto the surface of a three-dimensional full-size horse. This will set the tone and help kickstart the exhibition and its themes of the wild west and queerness. The large standing horse will create a 3-dimensional surface and allows the image to wrap itself around the surface thus giving this artist's work a new dynamic. Instead of being a flat photograph the piece will become a moveable object and take on a new form feeding back into the idea of ever fluid and changing gender and sexuality. Taken between 1967-9 the piece also has historical significance and is a reminder that homosexuality and queerness is not a new concept and has been practiced for centuries.



Fig: 2

This piece by Wesley Harvey will be displayed in the back of the upper level. It will be placed on a white Rectangle plinth just below eye level. Two warm white ceiling spotlights will slowly be moving left and right over the piece allowing the glitter to catch the light and shine onto the walls around it. This kinetic movement helps represent fluid identity and the ever-shifting beauty of queerness. The piece is called *"double drips platter"* and was created in 2017, a time where society had become "more accepting of what need be a scarlet letter worn only in shadows of back alleys and dimly lit rooms" (artistsaday.com). By allowing to the pieces lustre and glitter to shine in the light it reaches its full potential and can tell it's story more clearly. It is made of Earthenware clay, slip, glaze, iron decals, commercial decals, lustre, glitter, resin.



Desired light refraction effect



Fig: 3

This piece titled *"it's almost as if we've existed"* was created in 2015 a time where the LGBT community was being recognised in mainstream media. This meant that many trans people were becoming a target more often. With that came the onslaught of bigots claiming "trans people didn't exist in my day" or claiming it was a new phenomenon. The history of trans people dates back thousands of years, this is what Green is trying to highlight with this piece and show that trans people have always existed. The style of the vase is like that of the 19th Chinese decorative style being made simply of glazed earthenware and standing at 15.5 inches tall. The vessel will be displayed on a large white plinth in the shape of a penis. This will compliment the piece and its matching genitalia pictured on the top of the vase. The ceiling spotlights in warm white will be situated in front of the piece lighting it up from each side.



Fig: 4

Here is a piece by Julian Miholics simply titled "*trans-masculine werewolf*" from 2021 is a piece about how many gender expansive/trans people are enamoured with mythical beasts. The connection is easy to understand as being demonised for being visibly different or transforming into something people fear out of lack of understanding. Importantly, seeing the strength in yourself, ability to defend oneself and celebrate one's identity. The 1934 Hollywood Hays Code, over 3 decades of strict censorship that halted LGBT portrayal on screen, meant that Queer coding was used to make characters queer without stating it outright. These roles would often be villains or monsters; feared for existing and guilted by their identity, directly correlating with the trans struggle. The piece will be displayed on a white cylindrical plinth with spotlights light up the piece and the immediate surroundings. Around the plinth will be large white cut outs of pine trees to give the impression that the werewolf is laying in a forest, complimenting the earthy tones and simple glazed stoneware that the piece is made from.



Fig.5

John Elliott piece "*maybe this town is big enough for the both of us*" is a knitted wall hanging made from Yarn and displayed using a wooden dowel, for this reason the design is inverted on the back of the piece. To allow this artwork to shine to its full potential it will be displayed hanging from the ceiling at eye level using two wires. This will allow visitors to walk around the object and admire both sides of the work. Created in quarantine 2020, the art expresses the desire that Queer people had for physical contact and love during that period of isolation, but also to bring awareness to the pushback against queer identities (in the US specifically). The piece is deeply linked to the Queer history of The West and cowboys and is a modern day celebration of queer people inhabiting spaces that were considered to be incredibly macho and straight. This work addresses not only live in general but also love where one might not expect it.

Bibliography (alphabetical order)

Surname, initial. (date) *title of page/ book*.

Butler, J. (1990) *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. United states: Routledge

Impler, S. (2019) 'The Forgotten Trans History of the Wild West', *Atlas Obscura*, 21st June. Available at: <https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/trans-history-wild-west>

Taylor, C. (2017) 'Foucault's *The History of Sexuality*'. Oxon: Routledge

List of Illustrations

Figure 1: French, J. (1967-9) *Untitled (cowboys)* [vintage polaroid print] available at: <https://flashbak.com/damn-good-interview-pioneering-illustrator-jim-french-394922/>

Figure 2: Harvey, W. (2017) *Double drips Platter* [earthenware, slip, glaze, iron decals, commercial decals, lustre, glitter, resin] available at: <https://wesleyharvey.com/section/448765-2017-Artwork.html>

Figure 3: Green, N. (2015) *It's almost as if we've existed* [earthenware, glaze] available at: <https://nicki-green-txrx.squarespace.com/existed>

Figure 4: Miholics, J. (2021) *Trans-Masculine Werewolf* [Stoneware, underglaze, glaze] available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CRuBQIUp2Gx/>

Figure 5: Elliot, J. (2020) *Maybe this town is big enough for the both of us* [Yarn, Wood dowel] available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/Cbu3KlhL-Qi/>