

The Female Queer Artist: The Underrepresentation, the Fetishization
and the Feminist

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Abstract

An investigation into the female queer artists, how they are portrayed within the media, the fetishization of female queer relationships and the underrepresentation and exclusion of black queer artists within art history. This essay uses statistics about the underrepresentation of women in art to try and understand the position queer female artists in art history. As a queer female myself I wanted to understand and connect with other female queer artists. To understand the struggles and discrimination they have had to face so female queer artists of the present are able to make art about being queer freely. This research is important as a lot of queer women's voices, especially black queer women, have not been heard or just excluded when it comes to queer history. Within this essay you will see artists such as, Harmony Hammond, Zanele Muholi and Judy Chicago why they played such an integral role within the feminist queer movement.

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Introduction

While researching artists for my own personal practice, I wanted to understand how queer women have produced work and how they represented their sexuality within their art. However, when looking through art history books that focus on homosexual art, I was disappointed to find that many of the artists discussed in these books were men. From previous research, I was already aware that there was an imbalance in representation of women in the art world but to see that within a queer context was quite shocking. The term 'Queer' is considered an umbrella term for anyone who identifies within the LGBTQ+ community. 'Queer Women' or 'Queer Female' are two terms I will be using throughout my essay, and they are terms used to describe any female that identifies themselves as LGBTQ+. Within my dissertation, I will examine why there is a lack of representation of queer women, what the societal perception is of queer women, and finally I will consider how queer female artists have created art to challenge the societal standard of being a female queer artist.

Within chapter one, I will first look at the representation of queer women within society and media through recent years. This will involve looking into the portrayal of queer women, primarily lesbians, within television shows and consequently how the opinions generated from that feed into society. Additionally, I will be discussing the fetishization of lesbians and how male perceptions of lesbian relationships are causing harm to a

marginalised group. Contrastingly it is important to also recognise the positive representation of queer women elsewhere, and the standards that should be set to allow queer women to have their say in how they are characterised. I will introduce the work Harmony Hammond and her intriguing piece *Inappropriate Longings* (1992) and how it links to discrimination of queer people. In chapter two, I will start looking into the art world, analysing data on underrepresentation of female artists, which can then be used to inform my writing. I will investigate the statistics behind representation within the Turner Prize and the controversy they faced in 2019 after it emerged that their chosen sponsor of the year had roots within anti-gay organisations. Chapter three is about the uprising of the feminist-lesbian artists and how they paved the way for future artists in terms of inclusivity. With a focus on Harmony Hammond and her devotion to the representation of queer female artists, I will look at her work and how she played a significant role within the feminist art community. Finally in chapter four, I will be looking at the forgotten history of black queer female artists and how their representation has been ignored within art history books. I will investigate the work of Zanele Muholi and how she dedicated her career to preserving and documenting black queer women from South Africa in her project *Faces and Phrases* (2006).

Chapter One – Societal View of the Queer Woman

To understand the underrepresentation of queer women in the art world, we must first look at the representation (or lack of) of queer women in media. In 2019, it was estimated that 1.4 million people in the UK, over the age of 16, identified as either Lesbian, Gay, or Bisexual. This means that 2.7% of the population represent themselves with these labels. While that might seem small, it is an increase of 0.5% from the previous year (Office of National Statistics, 2021). It begs the question what could have caused this increase? A factor of this is the representation that is all around us. This can come from personal experiences such as queer family members and friends, who enable these relationships to be normalised and create an understanding that these relationships exist and are very much valid. Another contribution possibility is media that is consumed, such as how queer people are portrayed in movies and television shows. Queer representation in films been on the rise in the last few years. GLADD, an online media source that challenges the representation of LGBTQ+ to provoke change and acceptance, produced findings showing the percentage of LGB (Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual) characters from major film studios in 2019 that have identified themselves as LGB. From the 118 films that they looked at, 22 of them contained LGBTQ characters. However, within those 22 films, gay men appear in 15 of them, while lesbian characters only appear in 8 films and even less for bisexual characters with only 3 films (GLADD, 2020). These facts show an inequality in lesbian and bisexual representation

that still exists, despite some modernisation and increased inclusivity, it is still in the shadows of gay male representation.

The over sexualisation of WLW (Women Loving Women) relationships has become a problem that many WLW relationships have to deal with, on not just one occasion.

Remarks made by heterosexual men, such as 'you haven't met the right man yet' or 'can I watch?', feeds into the stigma that WLW relationships are only there for the male sexual pleasure. This narrowminded viewpoint is imbedded into society and is not a new concept.

Firstly, when looking at the very popular show *Friends*, on many occasions you can see the over excitement of the male characters at the possibility of watching two women kissing and the addition of a 'lesbian' punchline to many of their jokes (Hiller, R. 2021). An example of these types of jokes can be seen when characters Joey and Ross were arguing over a woman, they were both dating at the time. During the argument Joey says to Ross, "Just seems like Ross is the kind of guy who'd marry a woman on the verge of being a lesbian and then push her over the edge." (Fida, B. 2020). This is in reference to Ross's ex-wife Carol who realised her sexuality later in life, the insinuation that Ross was the reason for Carol's sexuality is very ignorant and incorrect. A person's sexuality is something you are born with (Fida, B. 2020), this kind of behaviour and way of thinking is severely damaging for WLW relationships. With such a popular show normalising these remarks, people will then not question when seeing this behaviour in everyday life (Hill, R. 2021).

Television shows are not the only harmful media about WLW relationships. In 2008, Katy Perry released her very popular single *I Kissed a Girl*. Robyn Hill, in her article called *Why are lesbians still getting sexualised?* for The New Feminist, explains how a song like can be damaging for many queer women. Hill explains how the song describes the experience of kissing a woman and hoping their boyfriend will not disapprove, feeding back into the idea that WLW relationships only develop to appease male sexual desire (Hill, R. 2021). The song devalues the relationships of WLW, making them less valid than a heterosexual relationship while also implying that lesbian intimacy is only for fun. It is important to recognise that although this song is from 2008, a different time period, we only need to look back a couple of years to 2018 for another song that Hill mentions within her article that shows the same level of ignorance that *I Kissed a Girl* did. Rita Ora, along with three other big names in the music industry, released a song titled *Girls*. The intentions behind the song were to represent bisexuality; however, it highlights harmful bisexual stereotypes. The lyrics of the song connect to the stereotype that bisexuality is a 'phase' and devalues it to experimental curiosity and a show for the pleasure of men. Therefore, these are just two examples of the misunderstanding of WLW within the music industry. Men finding WLW inherently sexual has led to the term 'Lesbian' being the most searched term on the Porn site Pornhub in 2016, with it also being its most popular category of all time (Hill, R. 2021). All these contributing factors have made WLW relationships harder to express in a public setting

because showing the most basic affection to their partner is seen as a display for male sexual gratification, which causes these women to second guess their choices, while inviting men to approach them and make inappropriate sexual remarks. This is markedly different to heterosexual couples as their privilege allows them to display affection publicly without worry about repercussions.

However, not all the WLW representation in the media has been negative. In 2004, the television show *The L Word* changed the narrative of how lesbian relationships were being portrayed. It is a massive part of lesbian culture due to its honest and raw storytelling. The show portrayed the lives of a group of women who identified as LGBTQ+, exploring issues of LGBTQ+ such as censorship in the workplace, same sex parenting, 'coming out' as lesbian to family, as well as gender identity and confusion. They presented WLW relationships in a more intimate setting than just a hypersexual one. During the time and after the show aired there has been more shows created that included lesbian and bisexual women characters, for example Netflix's *Orange is the New Black* (2013) which was likely the result of the success of *The L Word*. *The L Word* was the only show in the early 2000s that had a community of queer women which is why viewers of the show saw it as good representation of different WLW relationships (Gilchrist, T. 2019). However, the show was not perfect in all its representation, particularly with transgender characters and the terms used while talking about this topic. An example of this can be found with the character Max,

a trans man, fell pregnant in the show. His friends in the show would often refer to him as 'mom' which caused the character to experience gender dysphoria (Leaving Los Angeles, 2009). However, it was ahead of its time in some aspects as it still gave access to a community that was out of reach for many people, helping them understand their sexuality and the lives of queer people (Gilchrist, T. 2019).



Figure 1: Inappropriate Longings, 1992

An artwork that I feel really links well with the conversation of queer women's representation within society is Harmony Hammond's exhibition *Inappropriate Longings* (1992). Hammond's work centred around the underrepresentation of lesbian artists and was deeply involved within the feminist movements of the 1970's (Haynes, C. 2019).

Inappropriate Longings (1992) consists of a variety of large-scale mix media pieces, that tell the story of desire, violence, and death. The exhibition features a triptych of panels on the wall of the gallery and carved into one of the panels are the words, "GODDAMN DYKE". The piece was to show the violent thoughts and threat queer people face when in rural America. Looking at the middle panel of the piece with a bullet hole and blood dripping down you can feel the gravity of the situation Hammond is trying to convey (Busch, M. 2018). The representation of queer women and Hammond's piece are connected because it shows how queer women are seen within our society. Hammond highlights the violence experienced by queer people in rural areas and negative feelings of their own sexuality and brings that into the art setting.

Chapter 2 – Underrepresentation

"If she exhibited 'as a lesbian,' she could say good-bye to the gallery exhibition and representation of her work (she didn't show)" (Reeds, C. 2011, p. 194)

Women within art have been experienced inequality for many years. Helen Gorrill's book *Women Can't Paint* is an in-depth look into the male bias the art world has, supporting this argument. The book uses statistical analysis to examine the artworld and challenge the role women play within art (Gorrill. H, 2020). In Gorrill's chapter *Gender Parity and Arts Prizes* she discusses the inequalities within art awards in the United States, the UK, Europe,

and Middle East. An award disused within this chapter is, The Turner Prize, established in 1984, the award is given to a British artist that has shown outstanding work that year. Four independent judges appointed by the Tate select a winner by looking at eligible artists and the exhibitions that have happened that year, they then select four artists to be shortlisted while also taking into consideration the artists selected by the public (Gorrill, H. 2020 p. 105-106). Looking at the data presented by Gorrill, since 1984 to 2018, “Only 36 per cent of shortlisted artists have been female, with the majority of shortlisted artists (64 per cent) being male.” (Gorrill. H, 2020, p. 106), and for artists that have won the prize from 1984 to 2018, “Only 26 per cent of prizewinning artists have been female, with the majority of prize-winning artists (74 per cent) being male.” (Gorrill. H, 2020, p. 106). There was an obvious inequality within the Turner prize against women, during the time these statistics were recorded.

In 1997 the first all-women’s Turner Prize shortlist was announced (Gorrill, H. 2020, p. 105-106), which was the first time for such a prestigious British award to do this. Twenty-five years later, the artists shortlisted for the Turner Prize 2022 were three women and one non-binary artist, Heather Phillipson, Ingrid Pollard, Veronica Ryan, and Sin Wai Kin. This is quite a significant improvement within the art world and for the Turner Prize, as with such a diverse group of artists are tackling issues of race and gender, which are important issues

within our society and is important for representation of marginalised groups (Chow, V. 2022).



Figure 2: *BRIDGIT*, 2016

It is important to look at the Turner Prize from a queer perspective. In 2018, artist Charlotte Prodger won the Turner Prize, her piece was comprised of a film that explored the queer identity in the form of natural landscape (Pes, J. 2018). A queer woman winning this prestigious award can have great positive effect for representation of queer artists and the community. It gives other artists like Prodger hope that this is something they could achieve one day. However, the sponsor of the award in 2019 was Stagecoach, which is chaired by Sir Brian Souter. The sponsorship did not last long after the news came forward of homophobic discrimination from Souter. Questions must be asked on why they did not investigate the background of this company beforehand (Brown, M. 2019). It was found that in 2000,

Scouter donated one million pounds to the campaign that was trying to keep an anti-gay law *Section 28* in Scotland, which was in place to stop homosexuality being taught in schools (Green, J. 2011). Souter had also made comments on gay marriage saying that “Society may implode if ‘traditional’ marriage fails.” (Brown, M. 2019). This came as a huge disappointment when just the year before Charlotte Prodger had won the award because of her piece about queer identity (Pes, J. 2018). Now looking at the information presented about the Turner Prize we can understand that there is going to be a significant lack of representation of queer women when it comes to awards, such as the Turner Prize, because there is still a huge lack of representation for women alone. If women’s voices were being heard and their art being seen, then we would also be hearing and seeing the representation of queer women too. With such a prestigious award there is a massive amount of planning that would go into such a big British art event, so it is suspicious that they could overlook such significant information of a sponsor. Due to the chairman being involved with homophobic campaigns, it is obvious that the progression of queer artists and the LGBTQ+ community visibility within society still has a long way to go.

Chapter Three – The Feminist-Lesbian Rebellion



Figure 3: *Presence VI*, 1972

Female queer artists have always been present within the art world, but many have gone undocumented, many female queer artists voices were not heard until the gay and women's liberation movement (Haynes, C. 2019). With social changes happening in the 1960s, the feminist movement really began in the 1970s, creating a vibrant feminist art scene. The feminists from this movement changed the art world, the relationship art has with sex and challenged patriarchal standards around gender. It was then in the 1980s when

the movement changed around queer artists. An artist that played a significant part for the inclusivity of female queer artists is Harmony Hammond (Reed, C. 2011, p. 192-194). The 1970s was when Hammond started creating art, her *Presence VI* (1972) piece explains the climate very well, trying to challenge the sexism female artists were facing. The six sculptures hung from the ceiling of the museum and were constructed from scrap and donated fabrics that were given to her by fellow feminists, artists, and lesbians. The title of the piece played an important part of the work too, she chose the name *Presence* because, “They speak to the history and power of creative women, as well as feminist collectively. They are about occupying space.” (Haynes, C. 2019).

Hammond was paving a way for a future where feminists, lesbians, trans and non-binary artists are represented within art, and do not have to fight to be seen (Haynes, C. 2019). In 1978 Hammond curated exhibition *The Lesbian Show* which was opened in Manhattan. The exhibition included performances, discussions and talks about crimes against women. Hammonds aim for the show was to create context of lesbian art to, “Counter the heterosexualization and erasure of works by lesbian artists in both mainstream and feminist art communities” (Reed, C. 2011, p.193). The show was creating a political statement about lesbian visibility, and although the artists risked discrimination, they were making real change with this exhibition. David J Getsy’s *Queer* includes an essay by Hammond from 2011, within this essay she discusses the experience of being a lesbian

artist, how your work may be placed into two categories, 'Camp' or 'Erotic Art' and how their work is seen as less serious compared to the male artist. Hammond also discusses the class inequality. Historically well-known female queer artists such as Rosa Bonheur, who were already wealthy people, did not face the same setbacks as working-class female queer artists did with openly being queer. The problem that arises out of this issue is, if only wealthy upper-class female queer artists can have their voices heard then there is not an honest conversation being had about the experience of female queer artists. (Getsy, D & Hammond, H. 2016, p.41-45)

Many feminist artists of the 1970s rejected traditional painting because of its links to toxic masculinity, including Hammond. Materials used within Hammond's piece *Presence VI* (1972), have links to women's domestic and creative practices. Coining the phrase 'expanded painting', Hammond challenged the traditional roles of painting and sculpture. After moving to Mexico in 1984, Hammond still noticed a lack of representation of lesbian artists, this inspired her to write her book *Lesbian Art in America: A Contemporary History*. The book was published in 2000, taking Hammond a whole decade to write. It includes an examination of her own work and the work of other female queer artists (Haynes, C. 2019). A quote from Hammond that explains her intentions behind the book is,

“We cannot afford to be silent or to let others decide what kind of art we may or may not make, nor let our creative work be ignored, ‘straightened’, dehistoricized, decontextualized, or erased.” (Haynes, C. 2019)

Has much changed since Hammonds release of ‘Lesbian Art in America’? When interviewer Charity Haynes told Hammond, for her 2019 article *Going Beneath the Surface: For 50 Years, Harmony Hamond’s Art and Activism Has Championed Queer Women*, that she has is still seeing queer female artists fighting for representation of their work, Hammond replied instantly with, “That’s why I wrote ‘Lesbian art in America’” (Haynes, C. 2019)

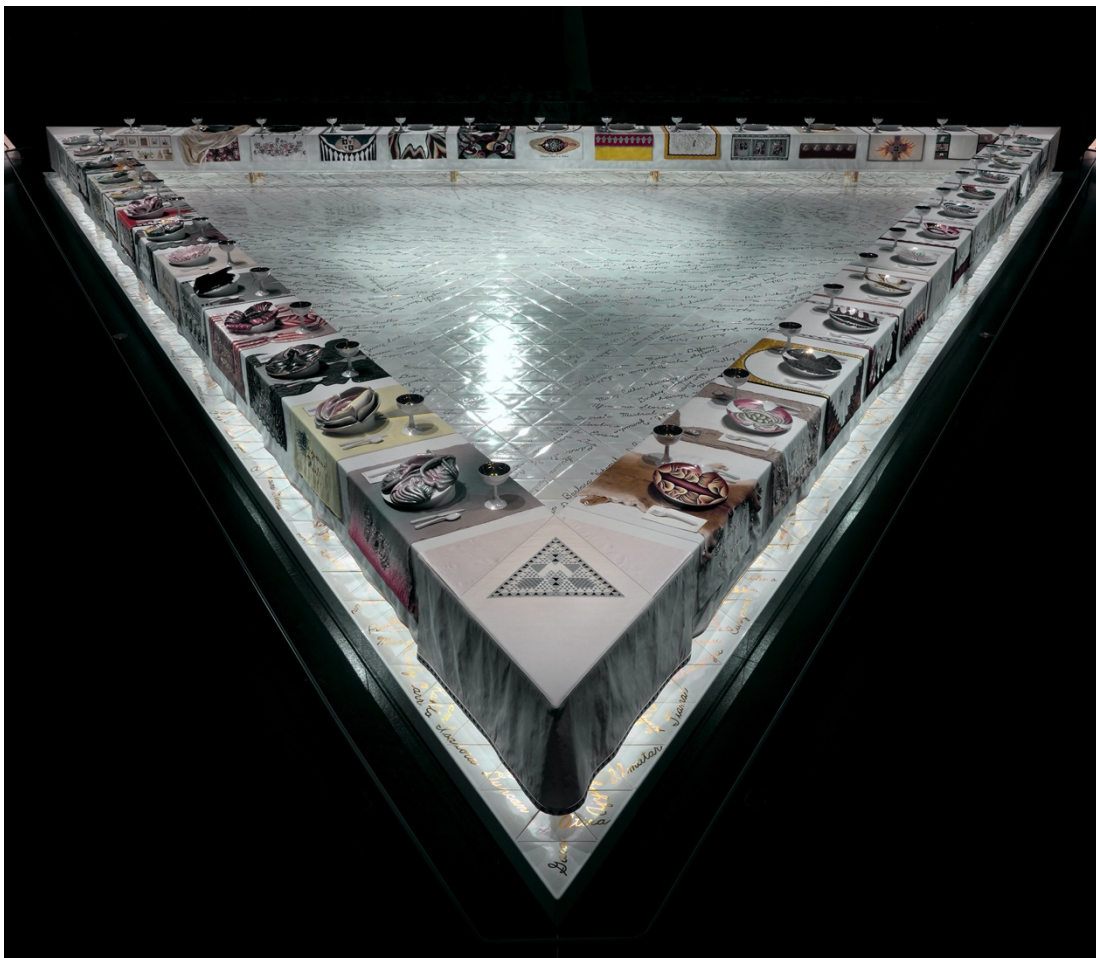


Figure 4: *The Dinner Party*, 1979

An artist that provoked controversy is Judy Chicago with her piece *The Dinner Party* (1979), first debuting in the Museum of Modern Art in San Francisco in 1979, the piece features a triangular table and thirty-nine dinner plates dedicated to significant women within history, some of the women included were Goddesses from different cultures, as well as artists Artemisia Gentileschi and Georgia O'Keeffe (Levin, G. 2007). On the plates are sculptures that are representations of the female vagina, however the lack of female bodies is noticed there is still a sense of female present within this piece. It took 400 people to help construct the piece, from the plates to the embordered names of the cloths (Snider, A. 2018), with a total of five years until the piece was completed. Chicago's aim from this piece was to celebrate femininity, in the context of feminism and the politics of the time, with women struggling for liberation and representation in the 1970s (Allthorpe-Guyton, M. 2019).

However, the lack of representation of minorities within the piece is very much present, in 2017 the work was criticised by artist Esther Allen due to its lack of Latin American women featured within the piece. Chicago felt like that Allen had not understand the time in with she had made this work, she is quoted saying in a letter to The New York Review of Book that (Snider, A 2018),

“At the time I was working on ‘The Dinner Party’ in the mid-1970s, there was little to no knowledge about any of these women. The prevailing point of view was that

women had no history. It is important to remember that our research was done before the advent of computers, the internet, or Google search” (Snider, A 2018)

Within this quote Chicago explains why there is a lack of female minorities her piece, while there is truth to her statement that there was significantly less information on Latin American women there still would have female figures within the Latin community that have provoked positive change which Chicago could have included. There is a level of ignorance that Chicago had at the time of the piece, while her piece is all about women’s place at the table, to not think that these women from marginalised groups voices do not deserve a place at her table.

The author of the book, *The Colour Purple*, Alice Walker, had also criticised the piece since the only women that did not feature a vaginal sculpture on their plate, were the three black women featured in this piece (Weber, J. 2018). Walker explains her view by saying,

“I was gratified ... to learn that the “Dinner Party” there was a place “set” as it were, for black women. The illumination came when I stood in front of it. All the other plates are creatively imagined vaginas ... The Sojourner Truth plates is the only one in the collection that shows – instead of a vagina – a face. In fact, three faces. ... It occurred to be that perhaps white women feminists, no less than white women generally, cannot imagine that black women have vaginas.” (Weber, J. 2018)

Chapter Four – The Forgotten Black Queer Female Artists

A group that seems to have been excluded when it comes to queer history in art and art history books is black female queer artists. *Art and Homosexuality: A History of Ideas* by Christopher Reed is a look into the role queer artists have played through art history, in Reed's book he talks about feminist-lesbian artists and sexuality and race however not once when talking about these topics did Reed include a black female queer artist (Reed, C. 2011). During the women's liberation movement, a group called The Heresies Collective published their first feminist art journal titled *Lesbian Art and Artists*. However, within the journal published, not one woman of colour was included. Outraged by this finding, a black feminist organisation called The Combahee River Collective, gathered in New Jersey to collaborate on a letter for The Heresies Collective, they wrote, "A hundred years from now it will be possible for women to conclude that in 1977 there were no practicing Black and other Third World lesbian artists." (Keller, Y. 2017). The Combahee River Collective started an important conversation that needed to be had about the underrepresentation of black feminist and black female queer artists. It had also brought to light the strained relationship black women had with the feminist movement of the time, black women were feeling excluded from something that also involved them and this strained relationship can still be found today (Keller, Y. 2017). The history of female queer artists cannot be told if it means to exclude black female queer artists from the history. When a group that is already fighting

for representation excludes another, they then become a part of the problem instead of the solution.



Figure 5: *Faces and Phases 13*

A key artist that looks at primarily black queer women is photographer Zanele Muholi. Muholi involved herself very deeply within the queer community and women's organisations in South Africa. She co-founded the Forum for the Empowerment of Women (FEW) in 2002, a non-profit organisation that provided spaces and services, such as

counselling to black lesbians within marginalised communities. The women that were using these services were victims of anti-gay violence and abuse. She later went on to provide workshops on photography for black queer people, that would give them the skills and training to produce work, by doing this Muholi was creating safe spaces for queer people to come to (Corley, I. 2016). Muholi's project *Faces and Phases* began in 2006, due to the lack of representation for black queer South Africans within art and art history, she wanted to give visibility, respect, and validation to marginalised groups. Muholi found that there was not much of a visual documentation of black queer people in South Africa, and especially work made by women. Her ability to document black queer women allowed their lived experiences in South Africa to gain recognition and a place within art history (Willis, D. 2015).

Life as a black queer person within South Africa was not easy. Although they were protected under law against discrimination and violent acts, they were very much still experiencing this. South Africa's strict heterosexual ideologies, where evidence of this can be found in the years of colonialism, played a role in the treatment of queer people. Sexual representation provoked change that the conservative government in South Africa could not accept (James, B. 2021). Evidence of this can be seen when South African Minister of Culture, Lulu Xingwana, walked out an exhibition that featured Muholi and other female artists, Xingwana labelled the exhibition as 'immoral' and 'offensive' (Corley, I. 2016).

Looking now at the photographs taken by Muholi, the themes of sexuality, race, and class can be seen as a part of her work. Due to the themes, there is an element of risk in showcasing this art, however that didn't stop her.

“This work needs to be shown, people need to be educated, people need to feel that there are possibilities. I always think to myself, if you don't see your community, you have to create it. I can't be dependent on other people to do it for us. Because we cannot be denied existence. This is about our lives, and if queer history, trans history, if politics of blackness and self-representation are key in our lives, we just cannot sit down and not document and bring it forth.” (Saner, E. 2017)

This quote by Muholi is very impactful and really shows her emotional connection she has with her work and also the participants of her work.

Muholi had to take this into consideration when photographing the participating people. She collaborated with the people she included letting them be photographed in the way they want to be prevised (James, B. 2021), becoming a collaborative project with these black queer women. *Faces and Phrases* (2006) memorialised the black queer women that had passed away since photographing them for the project. The conversation being had between the living and the deceased is an important element to Muholi's work too, with the deceased highlighting the violent acts inflicted onto black queer women and the living remembering everyone that has been lost within the black queer community. Muholi's work

provokes the viewer to question themselves, what they think they will see when shown images of queer black women and the heteronormative society that is considered the standard in South Africa. Muholi made the possibility of black queer women spaces to become a reality (James, B. 2021)

Conclusion

To conclude, the evidence found within my investigation into the representation of queer women within art and media, informed my understanding that there has been progression there still is a lot more work to be done. Within chapter one, I discussed the representation of queer women within the media. It is important to understand the context of people's perceptions and the discriminations that are present for queer women before looking into the art. One thing I wasn't surprised about within my investigation is the over sexualisation of WLW relationships, these over sexualisations are what is feeding into how queer women are being portrayed. If queer women are only seen through the male sexual lens, then they are not able to have a voice of their own. Therefore, I feel that portrayals of queer women, within in film and television, are not as often shown because the majority of the straight male demographic are not interested in the dynamics of a WLW relationship, they are only interested in the sexual part of their relationship, and my research confirms this.

My investigation brought to light for me, an area that I didn't know about beforehand, and that was the underrepresentation of female black queer artists from art history. For a movement that is striving for equality in all aspects of life for women, excluding black feminists and black queer women from the conversation undermines the work they did throughout the 1970s. I felt that this topic was important to discuss because for progression to happen and changes to be made within how queer art history is documented, we must understand the mistakes made within the second-wave feminist movement to make a more inclusive environment for all queer female artists. My aim for this essay was to understand why there is an underrepresentation of female queer artists and how artists have made work to challenge this through their work and I feel that I have presented that throughout this essay, however I do feel that I have also opened new avenues of research to explore.

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