



Lesbian Art in America

A Contemporary History

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Introduction

There have always been artists who were lesbian, and lesbians who were artists, but the category “lesbian artist” scarcely existed before 1970. In that year, the gay and women’s liberation movements—based, respectively, on sexual orientation and gender—introduced the newly formed identity “lesbian feminist” and her cultural counterpart, the lesbian artist, who was assumed to be feminist.

My aim in *Lesbian Art in America* is to document lesbian visual art since 1970 in the United States, in relationship to gay and women’s liberation, lesbian feminism, mainstream art, feminist art, ethnic-based art movements, queer activism and theory, media attempts to commodify and consume the lesbian (and her art) as chic spectacle, and resistance to this appropriation. Besides describing individual works and examining various artistic strategies, I suggest ways of looking at lesbian art and attempt to initiate a critical and theoretical dialogue around the art, a dialogue situated within feminist discourse and the history of visual production.

This is a history of which girls made and showed what, when, and where. Moving back and forth between the mainstream art world with many alternative spaces situated along its borders, popular dyke culture, and feminist art spaces, I discuss exhibitions, projects, conferences, publications, and art by women who identify themselves as lesbian. To be a lesbian, Martha Gever has written, “means engaging in a complex, often treacherous, system of cultural identities, representations and institutions, and a history of sexual regulation.”¹

What is a lesbian artist? It’s natural to respond that she is one who makes lesbian art. But there is no agreement as to what constitutes lesbian art, though it is generally thought to reflect lesbian identity and to contribute to the development of that identity. However, just as there is no fixed lesbian identity, there is no single aesthetic or sensibility—and we like it that way. Both vary with class, race, age, and geography. Both change with the times. For example, as

lesbian identity shifted from a gender-based definition rooted in the radical lesbian feminism of the '70s to a sexually based definition in the late '80s and '90s, imagery in lesbian art shifted as well, from symbolism and organic abstraction that suggested women's genitalia to in-your-face realistic paintings of cunts or women engaged in explicit lesbian sex. The art moved from a celebration of sameness to a flaunting of difference.

Is the quality "lesbian" embodied in the art object, the sexuality of the artist or the viewer, or the viewing context? This question circulates around all discussions of lesbian art and refuses easy answers. It can be any or all of the above. It assumes and proposes difference, at least in some ways, from art by men and straight feminists. Lesbian art is not a stylistic movement but rather, in its simplest definition, art that comes out of a feminist consciousness and reflects the experience of having lesbian relationships or being lesbian in patriarchal culture. This consciousness may be implicitly or explicitly articulated. It may be expressed through an array of styles, imagery, materials used, concepts, or content, and may be figurative, symbolic, abstract, or conceptual.

But such a definition leaves a lot of questions unanswered. Is lesbian art any and all art made by lesbians regardless of subject matter? Or just that which "looks" lesbian? Who decides what looks lesbian? What role do stereotypes play as visual signifiers of gender, sexuality, and race? Who maintains these stereotypes? What about coded imagery, whose content is apparent only to lesbians? Is any art viewed by lesbians or given a lesbian reading automatically lesbianized? Is work by lesbian artists "lesbian" when it deals with non-lesbian issues and concerns? If work by a lesbian artist with lesbian subject matter is viewed by a straight man who gets off on it, is it still lesbian? Might lesbian sensibility be something entirely separate from lesbian identity or sexual practice? Might it not be characterized by its outlaw status? By a certain dialectic of freedom and imprisonment? Could it be a place of inarticulation, of invention? A place of infinite possibilities? How do gender and sexuality shape visual images and how do visual images construct gender and sexual identification? While they have been articulated differently with each decade, these are the messy questions that will not go away. They are raised over and over by the artwork itself.

Historically women have been denied permission to take themselves and their work seriously, denied permission to produce, distribute, and consume their own images. When I began writing this book in 1994, I was immediately confronted with the problem of how to describe and discuss art by women in the era before the rise of contemporary feminism and the Stonewall Riots of 1969 that mark the beginning of the gay liberation movement, women who were in so-called "romantic friendships," which today we would call lesbian relationships.² Except for a few wealthy and privileged white artists, such as Romaine Brooks (1874–1970) and Gluck (1895–1978), the identity "lesbian

artist” did not gain currency until the gay and women’s liberation movements; in fact, the category lesbian, like the categories homosexual and heterosexual, did not even exist until the turn of the century.³

To discuss visual art by pre-Stonewall and prefeminist artists, I had to widen the category to include those who might not call themselves lesbian but who had major and often long-term intimate or sexual relationships with other women, I needed to ask how these relationships might have affected their lives and creative work.⁴ This wider definition also needed to embrace Native American women, many of whom do not identify themselves as gay or lesbian but as “two spirited,” a term that includes both a sexual and Native racial or cultural identity. A more open definition also dovetailed nicely with contemporary queer theories that consider gender and sexuality to be socially constructed.

In questioning the language of cultural representation, identity, and difference, Vietnamese American filmmaker and writer Trinh T. Minh-ha has eloquently called for distinctions between the alienating notion of “otherness” (the other of man, the other of the West) and an empowering notion of “difference.” She asks, “How do you inscribe difference without bursting into a series of euphoric narcissistic accounts of yourself and your own kind? Without indulging in a marketable romanticism or in a naive whining about your condition? . . . How do you forget without annihilating? Between the twin chasms of navel gazing and navel erasing, the ground is narrow and slippery and none of us can pride ourselves on being sure-footed there.”⁵

Initially I had planned to write about lesbian self-representation in visual art, but the scope of the project shifted to becoming a history of contemporary lesbian art in the United States—the missing history. Self-representation, suggesting figuration of some sort, is only one part of a much larger queer field that I am calling “lesbian art” and that includes not only representations of lesbians by lesbians, but any art created from a lesbian subject position. The field includes artists like myself who “always sometimes” make art about lesbian experience; artists whose work does not overtly reflect lesbian concerns but who are important because of their conscious decision to participate in lesbian and queer exhibitions and be public about their sexuality; and artists who cannot or choose not to be out. If artists and their work are “out there” in the dialogue that circulates around lesbian art, I feel a responsibility to examine how their images, objects, and persons participate in the discourse.

This is how I see the field. It has shifting, permeable borders and migratory populations. People change their sexuality, or rename it. Some radical lesbians from the ’70s now identify themselves as straight. At the same time, more and more women continue to come out as lesbian or are willing to call themselves bisexual. The social and political boundaries of the field are nevertheless very evident. Recall the anti-human-rights referendums and initiatives in Oregon and Colorado, the ongoing attempts to censor NEA-funded artists and institu-

tions that exhibited gay and lesbian art, the homophobic panic about gays in the military, and the rise in hate crimes and culturally sanctioned gay bashing to get a feeling for the field's culturally imposed and sanctioned boundaries.

I like to think of lesbian art as a braid with three strands, gender, sexuality, and art, though from time to time other strands, such as history or identity, are woven in and out. Each strand touches the others as it weaves back and forth across the center line, giving it dimension, fullness, and presence, a flexible rope of incredible strength and beauty. Each strand is composed of many fibers, and occasionally there are knots and tangles.

I am not interested in locating or defining an essential lesbian identity, sensibility, or aesthetic, but in looking at art by self-identified lesbians to see what forms it has taken, what issues it addresses, what it tells us about lesbian lives, and how it relates to larger social, political, and cultural concerns. The very range of work disrupts stereotypes of lesbian art and reveals a fluid field in which assumptions about gender, sexuality, and representation are continuously called into question.

When I talk about lesbian identification, I am not talking about a fixed, closed, preexisting identity, and when I talk about lesbian art, I am not talking about a reductive, essentialist, static imagery, style, sensibility, or aesthetic. I am not talking about a movement. As one can tell by the range of the work and the nature and insistence of the questions that it continues to raise, the queer field resists structure, containment, and closure. It is full of appearances, disappearances, occupations, dislocations, multiplicities, contradictions, transgressions, and border negotiations.

Why write a book solely devoted to lesbian art, whatever its definitions? Because images of lesbians by lesbians remain almost completely absent from the dominant history of Western art. The social and cultural forces that have worked to silence gender, class, and ethnic difference have also silenced difference based on sexual preference. Art by lesbians has been erased from the historical canons, or minimized, marginalized, and "straightened" in what Arlene Raven has called an "academic douche," a kind of heterosexual cleansing.⁶ This lack of accessible history is a form of oppression, for those who are denied a history of culture do not exist. As Adrienne Rich has written, "Whatever is unnamed, undepicted in images, whatever is omitted from biography, censored in collections of letters, whatever is misnamed as something else, made difficult-to-come-by, whatever is buried in the memory by the collapse of meaning under inadequate or lying language—this will become, not merely unspoken but unspeakable."⁷

Despite the emergence of queer theory and recent writing on feminist, lesbian, and queer image making, lesbians still lack a historical context for their work. In the heterosexist feminist art histories being written today, lesbian art, if mentioned, is rarely described in any detail and never addressed in terms of

its unique content or contribution to feminist art; in writing about queer cultural projects, it's detached from its feminist roots. To resist this erasure and insist on the history of lesbian art is the project of this book. My intention is not to separate lesbian art and artists from mainstream, feminist, or ethnic-based art movements, nor to conflate sexuality, gender, and race, but rather to acknowledge the existence and range of an extensive body of visual work from diverse lesbian subject positions.

A word on the parameters and methodology: *Lesbian Art in America* focuses on the visual production of artists living and working in the United States. The few exceptions are mostly Canadian artists whose work has been influential and widely circulated in the United States. It focuses on object-based work, including photography. Time-based arts have played a crucial role in the development of lesbian subject matter and lesbian self-representation; however, because a body of writing exists on lesbian video, film, and performance, works in these mediums are not included in my discussion unless they were one of several components in an installation. While there is also a considerable amount of writing on the subject of photography, I include it because of its importance to lesbian visual history and the representation of difference, and because it functions as an important link between time-based and object-based art forms.

I have drawn on exhibitions, studio visits, interviews, correspondence with over three hundred artists, and an extensive personal archive and slide collection of contemporary lesbian art compiled over the last thirty years. Fliers describing this project were handed out at exhibitions, and announcements of the book were placed in newsletters and journals. The response was truly amazing. Especially notable, and in marked contrast to similar projects of the '70s and early '80s, is the significant response by artists of color.

I have been able to build on the groundbreaking histories of radical feminism and lesbianism by Alice Echols, Lillian Faderman, and Arlene Stein.⁸ It is my intent to add the history of lesbian visual art and artists to the history they have documented. Additionally, in a spirit of dialogue—what Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano calls a “citational community”⁹—I have referred to those lesbian writers who have, over the years, significantly contributed to this contemporary history of lesbian art: Deborah Bright, Tee A. Corinne, Laura Cottingham, Linda Dittmar, Cecilia Dougherty, Martha Gever, Jan Zita Grover, Faye Hirsch, Jill Johnston, Liz Kotz, Cassandra Langer, Audre Lorde, Catherine Lord, Mary Patten, Erica Rand, Flavia Rando, Arlene Raven, Adrienne Rich, B. Ruby Rich, Collier Schorr, Cherry Smyth, Erin Valentino, Monique Wittig, and Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano.

This book unfolds by decade. The parts devoted to each decade are supplemented by profiles on artists whose work reflects or contributes to the issues of that particular time. Obviously, artists and artistic concerns, as well as

social, political and cultural issues, extend from one decade into another; most artists working in the '70s and '80s remain artists in the '90s, so the inclusion of an artist in one section should not be taken as a statement about her relevance to subsequent years.

Part One traces the development of lesbian feminism in the 1970s and examines how its gender-based ideology was reflected in the art of that period. The search for a lesbian aesthetic or sensibility is considered as an extension of the feminist belief in an essential female imagery based in and on the female body.

Part Two deals with the '80s backlash directed at '70s feminism and feminist art, postmodern feminist theory, the sex debates and porn wars, issues of censorship, the shift towards sex-based representation of lesbians, as well as the possibilities and limitations of figuration and abstraction. It also examines the role of photography in the representation of difference and the construction of the sexual and gendered subject, the creation of erotic lesbian work, and the development of queer art.

Part Three focuses on lesbian articulation, presence, and influence within queer cultural projects, lesbian incursions into male-dominated fields such as painting, and the hybrid possibilities of installation art. Work of the '90s is compared with that of the '70s. This section also examines activist art, lesbian chic, art world commodification of lesbians and lesbian resistance to this cultural colonization, and the social role of lesbian art as we enter the next century.

I am writing from the point of view of an artist who grew up, as the oldest of five children, on Main Street in Hometown, a postwar lower-middle-class housing project on the South Side of Chicago. The people who lived there were mostly white and Protestants or Catholics. I had a Jewish girlfriend who was considered "different." Our high school played "black teams," but I did not personally know any black people until I got to Girl Scout camp. Nor was I aware of knowing any gay people, but of course, looking back, the teachers and camp counselors that I and the other girls passionately loved were clearly big old dykes. I went to college in Decatur, Illinois, for two years—they had a three-man art department—got married at age nineteen to an artist, a gay man; moved to Minneapolis where we lived for seven years; got my bachelor's degree; had my first exhibition there in 1964; and arrived in New York City in 1969, the August after Stonewall. We got divorced. I had our child and continued to make art. I was lucky to be in the right place at the right time. It was a period of civil rights and antiwar activism in the art world. It was the beginning of the second wave of the women's movement and the birth of the feminist art movement. I was influenced by and contributed to early feminist and lesbian art projects. After coming out in 1973 I became increasingly politicized, primarily through the women I met and worked with at Sagaris and *Heresies*.

After my first solo exhibition in New York in 1973 at AIR, the feminist co-op gallery that I helped found, I was invited to lecture as a visiting artist at

universities and art schools. I talked with lesbian artists, saw their work and collected slides, names, and friendships as I went. In a sense, this book started back then. I supported myself and my daughter as a storyteller in day care centers in the Bedford Stuyvesant and Williamsburg sections of Brooklyn. Later, I worked for a small press that designed and printed graphics for grassroots political groups and arts organizations and then as office manager for *Heresies: A Feminist Publication on Art and Politics*, which I cofounded with nineteen other women in 1976. Let there be no bones about it, this is a highly subjective history of, to paraphrase the late Audre Lorde, living, loving, and making art in the trenches.

In 1984 I moved with my partner and daughter to northern New Mexico. In 1988 I got my first “real” teaching job, at the University of Arizona. While I live in the Southwest, I continue to travel extensively throughout the country to exhibit, lecture, teach, and organize exhibitions, and my views on lesbians, feminism, and art are strongly influenced by those early days in New York. So you see, I am still telling stories.

So, What's the Difference?

At first glance, some of the work created today seems remarkably indebted to feminist art making of the '70s. Indeed, much '90s work can be seen and discussed as an extension of work by feminists and lesbian feminists of the first generation. A closer look, however, reveals subtle and interesting differences, as the strategies of representation are not necessarily the same. Because the artistic, social, political, and economic climate have changed, the work is created, presented, and discussed within a different context and theoretical framework that, in turn, becomes part of the meaning.

A comparison of visual art from the '90s to work by artists from the '70s is not meant to suggest that certain works are better or more authentic than others, but rather that a feminist, historical framework enriches the discourse around lesbian art. In the 1970s Joan Semmel presented close-up views of her own unidealized body, which became a sensuous landscape of folds, creases, swellings, wrinkles, freckles, and stretch marks filling the pictorial space. What we see is framed by the canvas edge, as if to reveal to us an intimate secret. Semmel painted not just the female body but *her* female body, from her own viewpoint—the subject's—and therefore painted the woman painter's body literally from the object's eye, the object and subject becoming one.²²⁹

In the '90s, Patricia Cronin appropriated Semmel's vantage point and lesbianized it.²³⁰ Cronin's small, lady-like watercolors of a woman with her fingers or hand up another's vagina, inserting a dildo or going down on a second woman are, like Semmel's paintings, depicted from the subject's point of view (Cronin switches from top to bottom in different paintings), with the subject's field of vision and erotic space marked by the painting edge—however, the visual indication of a second woman's presence lesbianizes the narrative (fig. 63).

Early feminist paintings with cunt/vulvar (exterior) and vaginal (interior) imagery were usually abstract, symbolic, and generic.²³¹ Early feminist photography, on the other hand, realistically documented female genitalia, proving that there was no such thing as “a cunt”



Above: 63—Patricia Cronin
Untitled #16 1993

watercolor on paper, 14 x 10"

collection United Yarn Products Co., Inc./Arthur Rosen

(meaning that all cunts do not physically look the same, therefore all women are not the same, much less reducible to the designation of or representation by her sexual parts). In the '90s, Mary Patten, Zoe Leonard, Judith Bamber, and Marlene McCarty used cunt imagery to critique pornographic paintings of women sanctioned as fine art, reclaiming painting, photography, woman's body, and the gaze for lesbians.

In her installation *My Courbet . . . or, a Beaver's Tale* (fig. 64), Mary Patten hung nine framed color photographic portraits of women posed spread-legged in the manner of Courbet's famous 1866 painting *L'Origine du monde* (*The Origin of the World*) on walls covered with beaver-patterned wallpaper. Patten's installation questioned the distinction between art and pornography in that she titled the images with the subjects' names. The art world legitimized the Courbet, originally commissioned for a Turkish ambassador who was a well-known collector of erotica. Patten's critique was reinforced by a humorous video, modeled on PBS documentaries, about lesbian representation throughout history. Combining fine-art images (including those by Courbet, Tee A. Corinne, and Judy Chicago) with ones from sex magazines and agit-prop posters, the documentary focused on how we have been represented and how we are representing ourselves. It consisted of information, critical commentary, and "a few lies or half-truths about the sexual orientation of a number of well-know women artists."²³²

Gender, fucked

"Gender, fucked" of 1996, the first major all-lesbian exhibition since "All But the Obvious" in 1990, included work that explored and interrogated gender.²⁵⁷ In the exhibition catalog, Catherine Lord wrote "Everybody's 'doing' gender these days. . . . Indeed, the 1990s may well be remembered as the decade when gender was discovered: altering it, revising it, reading it, crossing it, signifying it, performing it, inventing it, proliferating it, coloring it, erasing it, multiplying it, demolishing it. This, however, is a lesbian exhibition, hardly because we're the only people with a stake in gender, but because of our particular situation in relation to the uses of gender."²⁵⁸

In the LIFE (1995), a self-published book by the Canadians Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan, is a brilliant takeoff on the journalistic pseudo-anthropology of *Life* magazine—the “sexual other” presented for the titillation of mainstream American readers. The feature “Portrait of a Modern Sex-Deviant” takes us into an exotic world as we follow “a day in the life of a bulldyke.” She gets up, has that first cigarette, goes to work, hangs out in the “homosexual ghetto,” deals with routine police harassment and homophobic gangs, has a sexual encounter, and passes as a man. (In the end of course, our gal Sal gets her girl.)

Historically, heterosexual society has been able to accept women who cross-dress (recognizable as a woman dressing and acting like a man), but a woman passing as a man (not recognizable as a woman performing masculinity as well as a man, thereby reaping male privilege) was and still is not allowable. Passing is a transgression with severe repercussions, a crime against patriarchy that must be punished. Mary Klein’s installation *Gender Outlaws* of 1994 (detail, fig. 80) deals with the severe and sometimes deadly punishment for such transgression. *Gender Outlaws* is about two resourceful and courageous lesbians, Lucy Ann Lobdell from the nineteenth century and Teena Brandon from the twentieth, who for survival reasons chose to cross-dress and pass as men. When the transgression was discovered, they were severely punished. Lobdell was committed to the Willard Asylum for the Insane in upstate New York where she spent thirty-two years, eventually dying at the age of eighty-two. Brandon moved to a small town in Nebraska, changed her name to Brandon Teena, passed as a man, dated, and eventually was engaged to marry a young woman. When the town learned he was a woman, she was raped and murdered by two of the local boys.

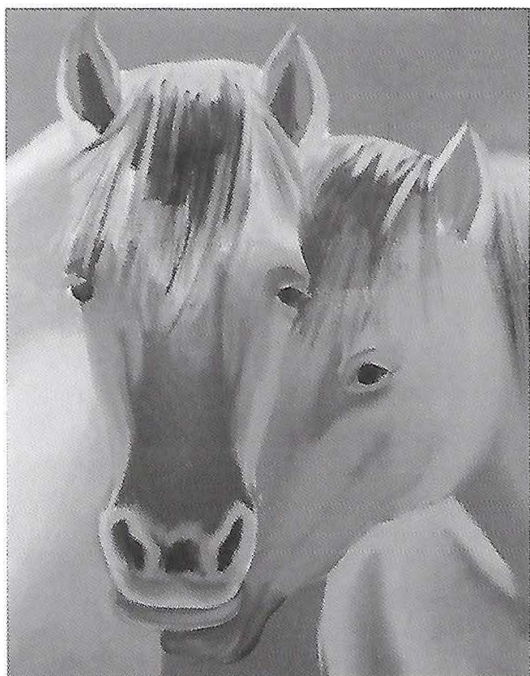
Lucy wore a black stovepipe hat and Brandon’s favorite was a black Stetson. Avoiding any figurative representation, Klein paid homage to these two gender outlaws by re-creating each of their hats out of fragments of text painted on copper. The words on Lucy’s hat come from newspaper stories printed in the mid-1800s medical records from the Willard Asylum for the

Insane and texts written by Klein. Brandon’s hat is composed of quotes from interviews Klein conducted with Brandon’s girlfriends, friends, and acquaintances. A fiction of masculinity, the hat tells a story of community projections and the homophobia and rage that result when gender boundaries are crossed.

In “Being and Riding,” a series of large, sensual color photographs, Deborah Bright explores adolescent girls’ obsession with horses, erotic horse-play, and the roles they assume in the formation of sexual fantasy in childhood. After doing a queer read on a model horse she bought at a flea market, Bright, a former horse-crazy girl who collected model horses in her youth, became interested in their subtext of girlhood desire. Bright says she wanted to think about girlhood fantasy when playing with horses, not about riding itself. Why do young girls have such a passion and hunger for horses, even if they don’t own a horse or ride? And what do adult dykes think their girlhood horse-play was about? Bright believes that “horse-play” for girls is entirely psychic/fantasy-based, a significant stage in the formation of their sense of sexual agency and a reaction to the pressures of socialization to a world where both erotic desire and women’s power are strictly regulated.”²⁶¹

For this series of photographs, Bright carefully selected her horse models; only a certain kind of horse would do. It had to be anatomically accurate, and had to have been used or played with. Often part of the horse was spray painted to emphasize a muscle, hoof, or braided tail. When shooting, she looked for camera angles that made the horses vulnerable and lighting that created a mood of sadness, sexual intensity, or theatricality (fig. 81). Bright puts herself into two of the images—a key to the whole series—a booted foot in a stirrup in one image and her arm caressing an English saddle in another. Emphasizing the aesthetics of roping configurations taken from a book on bondage, these images suggest a connection between girlhood horse-play and adult sexual fantasy.²⁶²

Also calling up that “girl-horse thing,” Patricia Cronin paints sentimental, almost paint-by-number-type portraits of horses, using horse magazines as her source material (fig. 82). *Horse Illustrated*, she explains, has a



82—Patricia Cronin
Duchess and Rainbow 1996
 oil on canvas, 24 x 20"
 collection Bill Bartman
 courtesy Wooster Gardens/Brent Sikkema
 photo: Liz Deschenes

(children in this culture are not supposed to have sexual feelings, much less same-sex sexual feelings). Dealing with childhood formation of sexual identity, Moyer undermines the image of the innocent heterosexual child as blank slate. Why assume, she asks, that children are born heterosexual? Moyer's little lesbian is all femme, an active sexual being, out to seduce mom, her teacher, and the other little girls. The childlike painting and drawing style suggests the voice of the daughter, brought up to be the feminist and lesbian her mom could not be.

centerfold poster every month. In the back of every issue is a page called "The Gallery." Girls take pictures of their horses and send them in to be published. As a kind of displacement of sexual desire, the horses become the objects of the girls' affection. Cronin's portraits are based on the "Gallery" page, horse collectables (post cards, calendars), and pictures of horses she has ridden in Brooklyn or Long Island. For a 1998 installation at White Columns in New York, Cronin reconstructed a tack room filled with riding gear. Focusing on the relationship of the girl and her horse through grooming, *Tack Room* encouraged erotic readings of equestrian life, where gender, class, race, and sex are encoded in the leisure activity of riding. Cronin has said that *Tack Room* is "about a kind of class longing" and that she "is reliving the adolescence she never had."²⁶³

In her paintings, drawings, and monotypes, Carrie Moyer tackles the taboo subject of children's sexuality