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Gay Pride (and Anguish) Around the Galleries

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The 25th anniversary of gay liberation this week has been ignored by New York's major art museums, but a few other public institutions and art galleries have picked up the slack with exhibitions on gay and lesbian themes.

Some of the shows are solo exhibitions; most are large, ad hoc group gatherings that would have profited from judicious nips and tucks. Yet even when overcrowded and wildly uneven in quality, the shows' wealth of individual voices demonstrates why the gay presence has so long been a catalytic force in this city's visual culture.

White Columns

All of those factors, often leavened with humor and a willingness to push acceptable bounds of taste to the limits, characterize the gallery shows on view. Humor is especially evident in the chaotic jumble titled "Stonewall 25: Imaginings of the Gay Past, Celebrating the Gay Present," organized by Bill Arning at White Columns, just a few blocks from the original Stonewall Inn. As is often the case in this pioneering alternative space, the primary curatorial aim seems to be to hang as much art, of as great a variety, as possible. As a result, paintings, sculptures and photographs are crammed together chockablock, and separating the wheat from the chaff is an important part of the visit.

The chaff is pretty dismal in this case, but fortunately there are good, funny contributions from Cary S. Leibowitz and Rupert Goldsworthy, and some of the noncomedic work really shines: Patricia Cronin's startling, delicate watercolors of female genitalia, for example, and Steve Wolf's painstaking re-creations of the covers of paperback editions of the work of gay artists including Jean Genet and Allen Ginsberg. Also noteworthy is Stuart Netsky's installation of mirrors, cosmetics and vials of AIDS medications with a video of Bette Davis in "Dark Victory." Together they constitute a walk-in meditation on beauty and illness.

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