

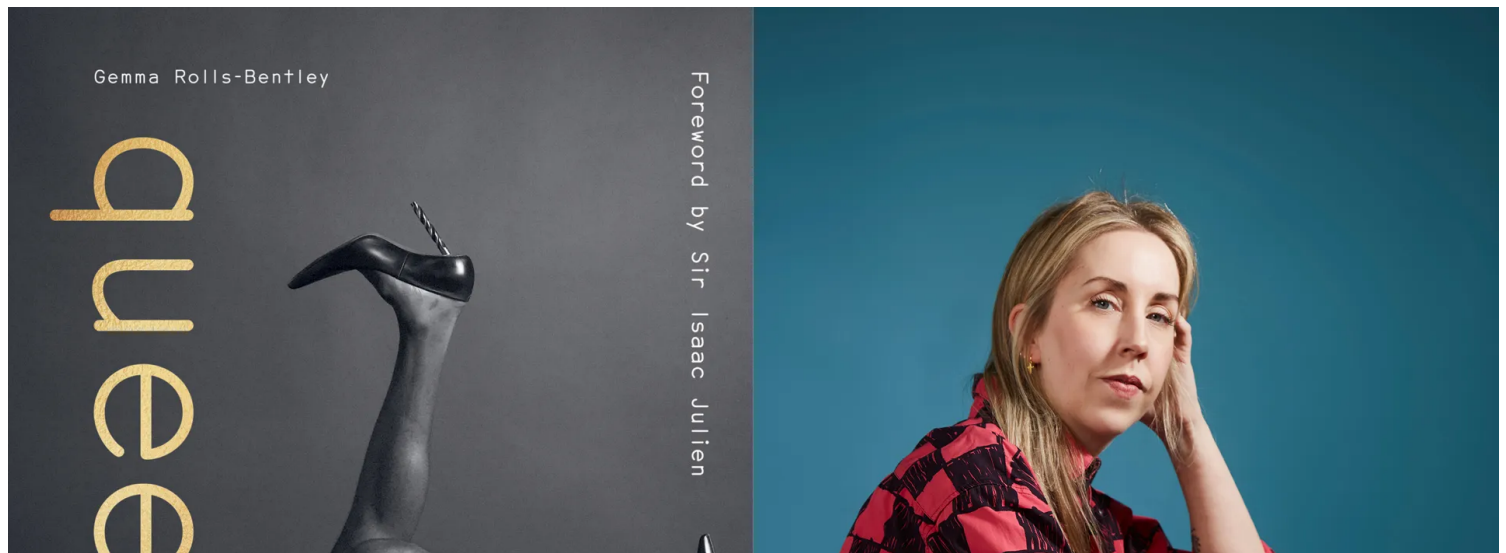
BOOKS

From the Canvas to the Club, This Author Wants Queer Artistry Center Stage

Gemma Rolls-Bentley's *Queer Art: From Canvas to Club, and the Spaces Between* tracks the history of LGBTQ+ artistry from Stonewall to now.

BY SARA YOUNGBLOOD
GREGORY

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The history of queer art has been made and remade across the decades. Think of the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, lesbian-feminist pamphlets of the '70s, ACT UP posters of the '80s, flourishing New Queer Cinema movement of the '90s, and the trend-setting trans stylists that bring us all the way to the 2020s. Queer art is everywhere once you begin to look for it — even the humble, breathtaking messages scrawled on the grimy bathroom wall of a gay bar is testament to queer and trans people's insistence to create and recognize ourselves and one another.

This artistry — in all its breadth and divinity and slipperiness — is the subject of Gemma Rolls-Bentley's debut book *Queer Art: From Canvas to Club, and the Spaces Between*. As a collection, *Queer Art* focuses on the year 1969 (coinciding with the Stonewall Riots, the watershed uprising that catalyzed the gay liberation movement in the U. S.) to our contemporary moment. Across these five decades, the collection offers a vivid portrait of queer artistry, ranging from photography, performance, and painting to textile work and posters, to smut and protest art.

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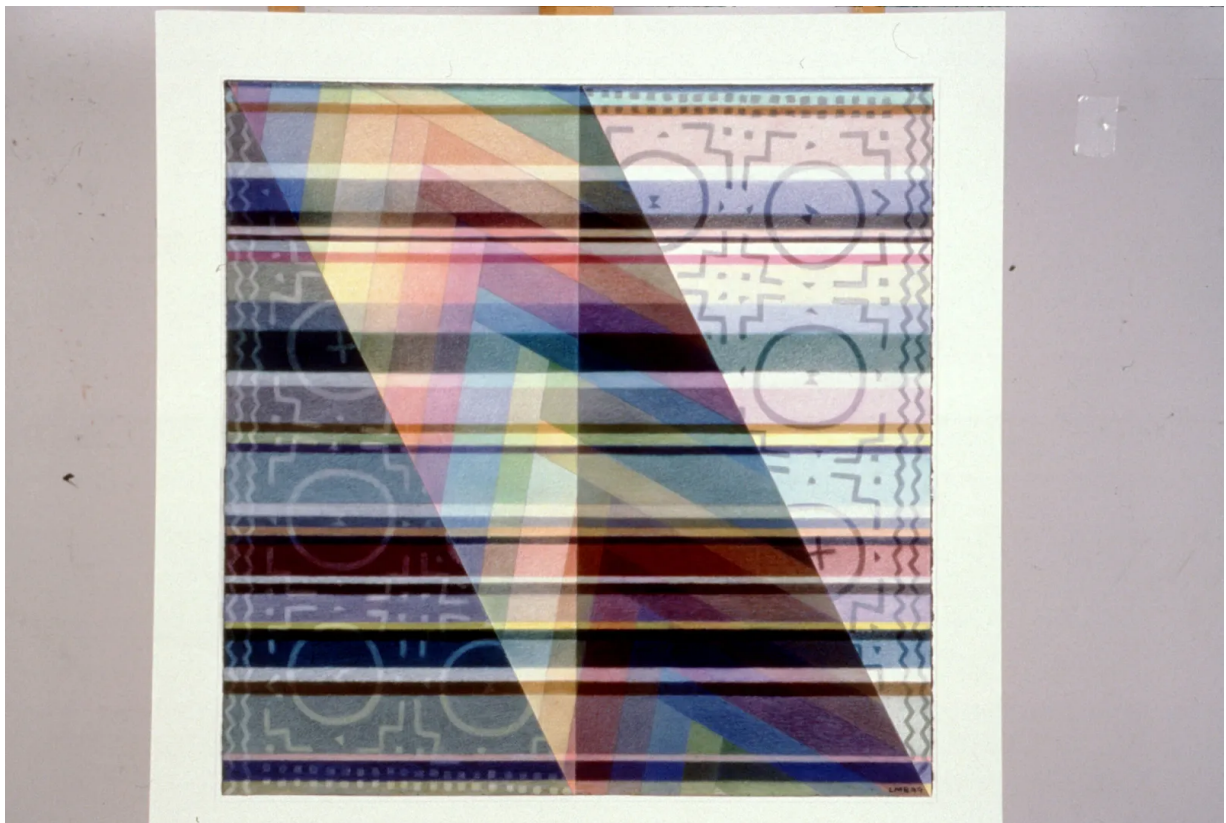


For author Rolls-Bentley, a London-based curator with nearly two decades of experience, it was critical the book took seriously the artistry that happens beyond more traditional mediums.

“So much of the art I wanted to include [in this book] wasn’t necessarily found in a museum or a gallery,” Rolls-Bentley tells *Them*. “There were looks from the runway, the experience of being together on a sweaty dance floor, it was the activist art being made in the streets.”

As a result, *Queer Art* takes readers on a lush journey from the canvas to the club and everywhere in between and beyond. Part historical deep-dive and part eye candy, the retrospective offers readers a joyful opportunity to more deeply consider the incredible impact queer people have had — and will always have — on culture, politics, art, fashion and so much more.

Below, Rolls-Bentley discusses seven artists featured in *Queer Art* and the impact and beauty of their work.



coloured pencil on rag paper, 76.2 x 76.2 cm (30 x 30 in)

***Rainbowmalicongo 1 (top) and Rainbowmalicongo 2 (bottom),
Lula Mae Blocton; 1999***

"I connected with these images as soon as I saw them. Lula Mae Blocton made these in the 90s and she used elements of the pride flag and incorporated Ghanaian textile patterns and some design elements from kente cloth. The medium is colored pencil on paper and there is a textural, fabric-like quality to them because of these patterns.

Lula Mae is tapping into a kind of visual language that is recognized particularly by African Americans and then blending it with a visual language that is recognized by queer people as well. This work speaks to her experiences as a queer Black woman, and I think these pieces are joyful, abstract, and not figurative. This is the kind of work that is important to share because they explore where feminist art history intersects with queer art history."

Archival pigment print, 101.6 x 76.2 cm (40 x 30 in)

SueZie, 51, and Cheryl, 55, Valrico, FL from *To Survive on This Shore: Photographs and Interviews with Transgender and Gender Nonconforming Older Adults*, Jess T. Dugan; 2015

"For this project, Jess T. Dugan photographed older transgender and gender nonconforming adults across America. They worked really closely with the social worker and academic Vanessa Fabbre on this project. Together, they traveled coast to coast over a five year period and spent time interviewing their subjects and taking photos, so it's also a social history project as much as it is a photography project.

We already don't see any older people reflected in our mainstream culture enough, but particularly queer and trans elders. This photograph is featured under a chapter called "Survival", which felt like an important topic when exploring the queer experience. AIDS was a big consideration and a lot of

the artists in the book are no longer here because they died during the AIDS crisis. I really wanted to use art to explore the many different issues impacting the chances of survival for LGBTQ+ people, from the risk of violence, threats to safety or criminalization, to addiction and mental health challenges stemming from societal rejection. Jess's poignant series is a celebration of the resilience of older trans people who have defied the odds by finding ways to thrive."

digital photo, dimensions vary

Jean and Xener from the series *How They Love*, Charmaine Poh; 2018

"Charmaine Poh is a Singaporean artist and this image is from an absolutely beautiful series called 'How They Love.' Although Charmain is from Singapore, she's based in Berlin because she doesn't feel she can live openly and freely in her native country.

Charmaine staged these photographs in a studio, where she brought together queer couples and individuals and projected images of their parents' wedding photos on top of them. The photographs are shot through a soft focus lens which adds a romantic atmosphere, and in some images the subjects are surrounded by rose petals or bouquets. In doing this work, Charmaine is drawing attention to the limited rights of queer people compared to their heteronormative parents who were able to marry and enjoy other social and legal freedoms their children can't access. I learned a lot about the current state of affairs for LGBTQ+ people in Singapore through Charmaine's work."

digital, 4400 x 3400 pixels

Becoming Sochukwuma, Osinachi; 2019

“Osinachi is based in Nigeria and he’s really well known in the NFT [non-fungible token] and crypto world. He released ‘Becoming Sochukwuma’ in 2019 as an NFT and a digital print, and the piece was inspired by an essay by Chimamanda Adichie, which was written in response to an anti-gay law that was rolled out in Nigeria in 2014. The essay was called ‘Why Can’t He Just Be Like Everyone Else?’ and it was about a boy’s experience of being othered for his sexuality. In Osinachi’s piece, the boy is now a joyful adult, wearing a dress and dancing across the page. I find it really powerful that Osinachi has remained living in his native country, where it is not necessarily safe to live openly and freely, and that he uses his art to challenge the conditions for queer people. By making digital work, he’s able to spread the message of his

beautiful work around the world.”

digital photograph, dimensions variable

Bedroom Candles from the series *Puberty*, Laurence Philomene; 2020

"Laurence Philomene works in photography and their work is often autobiographical and very much about their experiences as a trans, non-binary person.

This image is absolutely beautiful and it's part of a series of photographs called *Puberty*, where Laurence photographed themselves going through hormone replacement therapy (HRT). It is a very close-up and personal look at the experiences of a trans, non-binary person. They use distinct, vivid hues in their photographs, and each in the series has this kind of wildly,

almost-neon palette. A lot of the images are just what should be mundane rituals of daily life, but they are imbued with these glowing colors which gives them this amazing spirituality and magic. The queer magic really shines through in Laurence's work."

35mm photograph, 121.9 x 81.3 cm (48 x 32 in)

Safe Space, Clifford Prince King; 2020

"Clifford Prince King is an amazing photographer and the piece included in the book is a beautiful group photograph of Clifford and two of his friends. They're smoking together, doing each other's hair, lounging around with shirts off. The piece is called 'Safe Space,' which tells you so much, I think, about this image and about the experience of young, queer Black men. Clifford is in the image himself, having his hair braided, and he's reading a copy of James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* (1956). The book is mostly set in one room, where things unfold [for the characters], so it's interesting that these three have also found safety altogether in this one room.

Clifford tends to photograph himself, his friends, his lovers. He's really exploring the kinds of mutual respect and love that is shared between queer people. I feel it is almost our superpower [as queer people], the way we love each other, care for each other, and respect each other."

pastel and gouache on toned paper, 60.9 x 45.7 cm (24 x 18 in)

Hari Sea, TM Davy; 2021

"TM Davy is just the most gorgeous, beautiful soul. 'Hari Sea' is a beautiful pastel portrait of [the American actress and trans icon] Hari Nef in the waves on Fire Island. You don't see that many artists working in pastel, actually, and I think it's what makes his work so recognizable. The way he handles the pastel on the paper, it gives the figures an almost luminescent quality, as if they're glowing. It's very captivating.

Davy lives between New York City and Fire Island and his husband runs a gardening business on Fire Island, which specializes in reintegrating native plants to the island. Davy and his husband are both very much a key part of the community in Fire Island. It was partly Davy and his images that made me want to spend time on Fire Island — and it is the closest I've ever come to finding a real life queertopia."

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