



MARCH 12 TO JUNE 28, 2014

GENERATIONS OF QUEER

ROBERT FLACK | JOHN GREYSON | ELISHA LIM | KILEY MAY

CURATED BY:
LISA DEANNE SMITH

**“My father
died on
September
3, 2012.
He was 74
years old
and a gay
man.”**

Elisha Lim, *The Bee*, 2013

My father died on September 3, 2012. He was 74 years old and a gay man. The following June, my sister and I spent a weekend going through my dad's belongings. As we decided what to do with his leather pants and cap I thought about the queer community and how it has changed since my father came out in the 1970s. Back then, it wasn't easy to be a gay man or a gay father but it was possible — barely. It had only been legal to participate in consensual homosexual acts in Canada since 1969, although George Klippert was arrested in the Northwest Territories just before the law changed as “incurably homosexual” and a dangerous sexual offender for admitting to having consensual homosexual sex with four separate adult men.¹ He was not released from Canadian jail until June 1971. I was six years old at the time and had no idea how brave my father was to publicly be who he was.

Through my father I learned there were alternative lifestyles to explore as the mainstream didn't seem to fit either of us well. We both liked to party and as we discovered when he lived in Vancouver in the early 80s, we made a great team! We would start a night out at the Luv-A-Fair on Seymour Street. I danced to punk music while my dad warmed up with a few drinks. One night a young man tried, unsuccessfully, to hit on me. He turned to my father and asked, “Why is she with you old man?” My father replied slowly with his warm smile, “Because I've got the money, honey!” We both chuckled and left for John Barley's in Gastown. The club was packed to the rafters with sweaty, muscle bound men (and a few women) dancing to loud disco and my father knew most of them. I lost myself on the dance floor, once in a while finding my dad with my eyes and a smile.

The late 80s were a very intense time as many of his friends began to die from AIDS related illnesses. It was scary and heart wrenching and the air was full of fear and lies. My father refused to get tested. He hated illness of any kind and spent hours at the gym to stay in shape and socialize. He remained steadfast in his decision until the late 90s when antiretroviral treatments became available in Canada. One day he called me out of the blue to share his test results. He got lucky and they were negative. Many weren't so fortunate: in 1994 there were 32,995 Canadians living with HIV.²

Pride Toronto became a family event for my dad and me after he returned to Toronto and the Village Green high-rises in the heart of the village. We adored the beer gardens, prancing up a storm. One year his crew did a float for the parade. My father was Cleopatra with a harem of frond waving slaves. I was so proud of him. I didn't know anyone with a gay parent and it empowered me to have a place to openly celebrate us and queer culture. He led by example, teaching me to be kind and accepting to all people, even those with differing morals without giving up my beliefs. It isn't always easy.

One night, returning from a dinner party, my father was brutally gay bashed while walking the pathway between the high-rise buildings

on Maitland and Alexander (the area is now fenced in and locked). He was hospitalized and shaken to his core, often waking suddenly from reoccurring dreams of revenge on the three young men who stole his sense of safety. Soon after his physical recovery, he bought a house in Crystal Beach, Ontario with two of his oldest friends. A small town with an active queer community in which they could retire gracefully — and the YMCA was still only a bike ride away!

As much as I love telling these tales about my dad, my real purpose here is to open the door to your stories.

The queer community was born in resistance to repressive laws, societal norms and institutions. It is extremely diverse with many different histories of struggle, kindness, compassion and celebration. Older generations fought to exist, and in many places worldwide this is still the struggle. Younger generations have benefited from the old and

6



Robert Flack, *Love Mind* (lotus-spiral), 1992

This image reproduced courtesy Robert Flack Estate and Paul Petro Contemporary Art, Toronto

diversified the conversation. Queer liberation needs to include all voices. I hope that also means yours in The Queer Pride Chronicles blog at <http://blog.ocad.ca/wordpress/thepridechronicles/>.

Tell your story of what queer pride means to you. Focus on your experience and let others tell theirs! In this framework, accept the differences — there will be many. Encourage all by sharing the blog far and wide. Gather and post all the stories you can from those too old to type, too poor to have online access or too stressed to do more than tell it to you.

In the gallery at Onsite [at] OCAD U *Generations of Queer* presents vital narratives through the works of Toronto-based artists Robert Flack, John Greyson, Elisha Lim and Kiley May. Influenced by age, background, current context and health, each of these artists has different stories to tell. Inherent in all is the telling. It may sound simple but as these artists know, the right to have a public voice, exactly as you are, while flexible to change, is critical to living fully.

Robert Flack's surreal photographs capture the hope, spirit and beauty in his journey to move beyond the body to concentrate on non-physical energy and other states of being. He was diagnosed with HIV in 1988 before antiretroviral treatment was readily available in Canada. His *Love Mind Series*, created in 1992 the year before he died, remains charged with energy today. Flack's process was pre-digital. He photographed a background image, often a body part or an abstract pattern of light. On some, after this image was printed, he laid clear acetate over the print and painted spirals, swords, rings of fire and other symbols on it. He then re-photographed and painting to create the final image as a photograph. I never met Robert Flack but I certainly feel his energy through these photographs — hope, power, beauty.

John Greyson has produced approximately 50 works over the past 33 years. From short videos to feature length films, his passion, concern and care for the world is clear. The works included in *Generations of Queer* are *Perils of Pedagogy*, (1984), *You Taste American* (1986), *A Moffie Called Simon* (1986), *Letter to Ray Navarro* (1992), *Nunca* (2001), *Motet for Zackie* (2003), *Covered* (2009), and *Green Laser* (2012), covering a wide range of concerns from youthful exploration to AIDS discrimination to Israeli apartheid and more. Greyson knew that these stories needed to be told and often those most affected were unable to do the telling. The issues are urgent to their time. They are fleshed out in their complexity and made alluring through a layered, often playful, style. Following the evolution of Greyson's concerns over the years it is important to note that he is always aware of the relevant political issues of the time and those are what he tackles — making his work historically significant both to the queer and activist communities.

Elisha Lim and Kiley May situate themselves between genders, both using the pronouns they, them and their to define themselves rather than she or he. Exploring the grey areas between gender opposites

7

Kiley May, *Homo Noeticus* (video still), 2012

opens up exciting possibilities as to who we can be, allowing for a much wider range of options for all of us. These brave artists stay true to who they are rather than trying to change themselves to fit into a mold or classification that doesn't work. Lim successfully advocated for Canadian gay media to adopt the gender-neutral pronoun they.

Lim is an artist and storyteller. They often create projects through which people that inspire them are given voice in text alongside sensitive, perceptive portraits. Their writing and drawings came into the public sphere in 2008 with their comic series *100 Butches*. In 2013 they created *The Comfort of Queer Family Wisdom*, a calendar diary of their role models including, among others: Native American activist and writer Barbara May Cameron; singer-songwriter Rae Spoon; and video artist Richard Fung. They consistently broaden the conversation to highlight gender neutral, transgender, non-white and activist voices. Being butch or sissy or trans or queer is explored in Lim's sexy, complex artwork. From their *Sissies and the Femmes that Inspire Them* series one of Lim's drawings of Sze-Yang is accompanied by the subject's text, "Sissy means everything you grow up fearing to be, from childhood into adulthood, encompassing words such as pansy, faggot, flamboyant, girlie, gay. It is often put on the opposite spectrum of what is considered 'good', 'strong', and 'masculine'..."³ Lim often works collaboratively curating exhibitions as well as producing drawings, video, comics and graphic novels as a collective voice is important to them.

Kiley May is a young Mohawk storyteller, artist, creator and shaman. In the spring of 2013 they graduated from the School of Journalism at Ryerson University. For an artist that has just begun their practice I

am moved by the depth of their exploration and how inspired I feel to dislodge my sense of self in its comfortable female role and take on a shift in perspective to look anew at gender, feminism as well as other concerns. In *Homo Noeticus*, Kiley May bravely tells the story of how they never performed their assigned gender appropriately challenging "the moral war on sexuality"⁴ and "the forced conforming of our bodies... Have you ever wanted to be something more than you were allowed to be?"⁵ In this video their narrative, body language, ritual and visuals open up a space beyond binary opposition — the gender various existing between categories. "We are so much more than sexuality, gender or even the body."⁶

Storytelling becomes a political action in the work of all of the artists in *Generations of Queer*. It is important to hear these stories, understand and celebrate how they affect our lives of both within and outside of the queer community. Years ago all the sidewalks in Toronto had curbs and did not slope down onto the roads at crossings as they do now. Disability activists lobbied for sloping curbs, or curb cuts, and now we all take these for granted, enjoying easier movement through the city. Looking back through generations of queer activism, all of us have a lot to be thankful for. Thank you. I am grateful the conversation continues.

Lisa Deanne Smith, curator, *Generations of Queer*
Acting curator, ONSITE [at] OCAD U

1. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Klippert / 2. <http://www.cdnaids.ca/canadianaidsociety/milestones/>
3. <http://elishalim.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/sissy-sze-yang.jpeg> / 4. Kiley May in *Homo Noeticus* / 5. Kiley May in *Homo Noeticus* / 6. Kiley May in *Homo Noeticus*

Robert Flack (1957-1993) was born in Guelph, ON, and moved to Toronto to study at York University (BFA 1980). He began employment at Art Metropole in 1980 and assisted on General Idea projects. From 1981 his work was shown nationally and then internationally. Public collections include the National Gallery of Canada and the Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography. Paul Petro Contemporary Art represents the Estate of Robert Flack. www.paulpetro.com

John Greyson is a Toronto based film and video maker who has been politically active in the Toronto queer community for the past 33 years. With short videos and feature films he explores topics ranging from anti-censorship battles, AIDS discrimination, same sex marriage, militarism, the tar sands, Israeli apartheid and the fight for AIDS treatment drugs in Africa and the world. He is recognized for his documentary interviews, historical narratives, opera, found footage and camp. His work reflects many of the legal and political struggles for queers in the 1980s as well as world politics with a strong queer voice.

Elisha Lim exhibits illustrations and animated shorts internationally, and has advocated against transphobia and racism on United Nations panels and as the director of Montreal's first Racialized Pride Week. Their comic strips *Favourite Dating Tales*, *Sissy*, *The Illustrated Gentleman* and *100 Butches* are acclaimed by *Autostraddle*, *Bitch Magazine* and *New York Times* bestselling author Alison Bechdel, and their debut graphic novel *100 Crushes* will be published in June 2014 by Koyama Press and launched at Onsite [at] OCAD U. www.elishalim.com

Kiley May is a young Mohawk storyteller, artist, creator and shaman. Kiley is also a two-spirit, trans, queer and genderqueer human being. Their gender pronouns are they/their/them. They work in film, photography, writing, journalism, fashion, dance and performance art.

Lisa Deanne Smith is engaged in a cultural practice that moves between mediums — art, curating, writing and community events — exploring issues of voice, experience and power. She has exhibited internationally including *White Columns*, *The New Museum* and *Mercer Union*. Currently, she is Acting Curator at Onsite [at] OCAD University. Recent curatorial projects include *Biological Urbanism: Terreform ONE*; *No Dull Affairs: Karen Lofgren, Vanessa Maltese and Jillian McDonald*; and *I Wonder: Marian Bantjes*.

OPENING EVENTS

Wednesday, March 12

6:30 p.m.

A Conversation with John Greyson, Elisha Lim and Kiley May
OCAD University Auditorium, 100 McCaul St.

8 p.m. to 10 p.m.

Opening, Onsite [at] OCAD U, 230 Richmond St. West

MORE EVENTS

Wednesday, March 26, 6:30 p.m.

Insite Exhibition Tour with Spencer Harrison, artist, activist, and educator who works with gender and sexuality minority youth to discover and build resiliencies

Wednesday, April 2, 6:30 p.m.

Insite Exhibition Tour with Paul Petro, Paul Petro Contemporary Art

Wednesday, April 30, 6:30 p.m.

Insite Exhibition Tour with Richard Fung, Associate Professor, OCAD U

Wednesday, May 14, 6:30 p.m.

Insite Exhibition Tour with Wendy Coburn, Associate Professor, OCAD U

Wednesday, May 28, 6:30 p.m.

Insite Exhibition Tour with Andrea Fatona, Assistant Professor, OCAD U

Wednesday, June 11, 7 p.m.

The Queer Pride Chronicles Story Slam

Sunday, June 15, 2 p.m. to 5 p.m.

Elisha Lim launches their debut graphic novel, *100 Crushes*, published by Koyama Press

Monday, June 23, 7 p.m.

Clocked, Don Pyle and Martin Sorrondeguy look at queer content in their punk photographs

Wednesday, June 25, 8 p.m.

DUORAMA, a performance by Paul Couillard + Ed Johnson co-presented by Fado Performance Art Centre



Kiley May, *Homo Noeticus* (video still), 2012

Thanks to: the Onsite Advisory Board; Chrystal Dean, TK and Trevor Hampden at WorldPride; the Office of the Vice President Academic; Paul Petro and the Estate of Robert Flack; Shannon Cochrane at FADO; Vtape; Koyama Press; b.h. Yael; Lewis Nicholson; Gord Peteran; Ju-Hye Ahn; Rouzbeh Akhbari; Pallavi Thampi; Sabrina De Bellefeuille; Jeff Crews; and especially the artists Robert Flack, John Greyson, Elisha Lim and Kiley May.

LOCATION

Onsite [at] OCAD University
230 Richmond Street West,
Toronto, ON
416-977-6000 Ext.2208
onsite@ocadu.ca
www.ocadu.ca/onsite

GALLERY HOURS

Tuesdays to Fridays 11 a.m. to 7 p.m.
Saturdays 12 p.m. to 6 p.m.

Free and open to the
general public

