



11 Artists Who Helped Pave the Way to Marriage Equality

On June 26, the Supreme Court ruled in a 5-to-4 vote that same-sex marriage is a constitutional right—a victory representing long-sought political recognition and validation of identities that have been largely marginalized and stigmatized. To mark this political milestone, we've highlighted 11 artists whose work demonstrates the power visual culture has to explore, share, and make relateable queer narratives—even if, in the time they were created, politics lagged behind.

ARTSY EDITORIAL

JUL 1ST, 2015 6:31 PM

Nan Goldin

Goldin is well-known for her diaristic, documentary snapshots that chronicled her downtown New York of the 1970s and '80s. The candor and intimacy with which she approached all of her subjects even now remains remarkably striking in its ability to explore the common ground—desire and denial, pleasure and pain—that lies in all humans. Her slideshow *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* (first publicly shown at the Whitney Biennial in 1985) depicts her friends, family, and lovers—cis- and transgender men and women; straight couples, homosexual couples, single subjects—with unflinching equality all around. Her recent work, however, is also particularly poignant in posing the subject matter she is known for (not straight or gay relationships, but rather relationships, as such) in conversation with art historical explorations of a similar topic.

Akira the Hustler

Akira the Hustler's work pulls from the Chinese "Red String" belief that the gods tie an invisible red cord between two people who are destined to marry. His sculptural work is playful and engaging. The sense of equality represented between the straight couple in *Red String "Onion"*

(2010) and the same-sex couple in *Red String "Pillow Talk"* (2012) trumps the potential political undertones of the works. Rather than asking the viewer to reflect on the makeup of each couple, the whimsical complexity of Akira's work (the onion or the content of the pillow talk) demands to be unpacked through the viewer's projection of their own experience.

Zachary Drucker and Rhys Ernst

In the collaborative project, *Relationship* (2008-2013), Drucker and Ernst document their romantic partnership as a transitioning transgender couple—Drucker from male to female, Ernst from female to male. "We are all collectively morphing and transforming together, and this is just one story of an opposite-oriented transgender couple living in Los Angeles," Drucker has said. The artists fairly represent and qualify their own experiences in terms of the gender discourse they provide, and thus the work can produce relatable, understandable narratives in terms of content.



Patricia Cronin

Exploring her own homosexuality as a theoretical concept, Cronin took on her experience as a married lesbian for her tender and bold *Memorial to a Marriage* (2002). The bronze sculpture features her and her wife, artist Deborah Kass, locked in an eternal embrace, memorializing their marriage that occurred the day same-sex marriage was legalized in New York. The title qualifies the monument: opposing those that might argue if this is a marriage at all, this is not a memorial to marriage, itself, but to a marriage; the individualization of Cronin and Kass's lived experience is instrumental to understanding the emotional and potentially political impact of the work.

Zanele Muholi

Striving to push against the notion that homosexuality is mutually exclusive from the African identity, Muholi creates striking black-and-white photographs of the lesbian community in her native country. Although the act of photographing her contemporaries could potentially be stereotype-producing, the beauty and individuality of each image shows the resilience sexual identity has to stereotype. The individualities of each subject precede and constitute their identity, not the other way around. While this speaks to the “equal dignity” that the Supreme Court announced in its majority opinion, it also serves as a reminder that equality is an international issue.

Keith Haring

Renowned for his prolific and iconic output, Haring is often a touchstone for discussions on representations of sexuality and love in visual culture and art—and not without reason. The energy, simplicity, and content of his cartoons emerged from his identity; as a gay street artist in New York’s East Village Art scene of the 1970s and ’80s, Haring explored love, exploitation, drug abuse, and illness in his work, all while deploying an accessible and emotive visual language. His often genderless characters enacted something that was purely social, allowing him to gain access to a nuance of narrative and politics.

Lee Paje

Paje paints creatively constructed tondos that defy stereotypes by naturalizing queer narratives. In *Sunday Afternoon* (2014), in lieu of drawing attention to unconventional parenthood, the artist simply offers a portrait of a family. Similarly, in *When Everything is a Bliss* (2014), instead of exploring the subjects’ defiance of heterosexuality, its depiction of gay affection is natural and casual and the relatability of the situation is alluded to by the title.

Robert Mapplethorpe

With an objective lens and immaculate black-and-white style, Mapplethorpe explored the formal elements of his subjects—like the skin and the texture of the hair in *Embrace* (1982). Where content is concerned, the tenderness of the gesture strikes the viewer, too. In *Leg* (1983), the musculature of the limb makes gender unclear—fishnet stockings notwithstanding—but regardless, the image is undeniably beautiful. Mapplethorpe’s ability to harness the interpretative openness of a beautiful image is both a testament to the political power of his work and his skill as an incredibly talented photographer.

Catherine Opie

Though best known for her portraiture series featuring lesbian, butch, and transgender women, Opie resists an explicitly queer reading of her work. Her portraits depict their subjects as the sum of different, queer, individualized signifiers, from which their identity emerges. Opie explores the idea that while an image itself can be fixed, the identity of its subject can be ever-shifting—and should be embraced. She opens a radical entrance to politics by using these queer identities as a starting point: the viewer explores these images as manifestations of what identity can mean rather than examples of what it is.

David Wojnarowicz

Untitled (One day this kid...) (1990/2012), which exemplifies society's oppression of gay men. The text-based piece lists the torturing public and political personal relationships that "this kid"—depicted in a photograph of a young Wojnarowicz—will experience due to the desire "to place his naked body on the naked body of another boy." Revealing the artistic punchline at the end of the piece, Wojnarowicz draws out the arbitrariness of this treatment; even as a self-referential work, the generality of his writing keeps his identification open, allowing the viewer to empathize in horror.

Robert Gober

Gober is well known for sculptures of faucet-less sinks and legs emerging from walls. In his works on paper, he confronts the relationship of personal identity to public life, as in *September 12* (2005-2009), which reproduces the New York Times Op-Ed section from the day following the Twin Towers attack. Centered on the spread, two male bodies clasping each other are rendered in pastel and graphite, raising questions of sexual identity—but they are second to more overarching themes of love and humanity.

—Jake Brodsky

find this article : https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-11-artists-who-helped-pave-the-way-to?utm_source=Current+Users&utm_campaign=77548e6f15-Weekly+email+249_Editorial39&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_c67eb1f0a4-77548e6f15-412088921