

Friendship as a way of life

20 May 2020 | Dr Joseph Brennan

SHARE



This 'exhibition looks at networks of exchange and forms of being together that LGBTQI+ communities have created and forged over time,' I am told by its curators, José Da Silva and Kelly Doley. 'Artist works and archival material included in the exhibition speak to these experiences born out of a necessity to feel safe, be seen and express forms of care and community.'

'Friendship as a way of life' is a major, multi-faceted exhibition that includes more than 20 individual works from 16 artists. It draws its name from a 1981 interview with Michel Foucault, a powerhouse of queer philosophy. In this interview, Foucault 'explored the radical possibilities and politics of friendship in LGBTQI+ activism,' the curators explain. The exhibition also draws inspiration for its naming from New York-based writer and activist ALOK, whose work *Friendship is romance* (2017) is featured. ALOK's 'work makes the demand for a world where friendship in its many manifestations is seen as a form of intimacy equivalent to marriage, challenging the dominant culture of valuing romantic love above all other affiliations,' Da Silva and Doley relay.



Dani Marti, *Notes for Bob*, 2012–2016, video still, eight-channel video installation, 2:1 5k UHD video. Courtesy the artist, GAGPROJECTS | Greenaway Art Gallery, South Australia, ARC ONE GALLERY, Melbourne, Dominik Mersch Gallery, Sydney and UNSW Galleries, Sydney

Themes of public relations, living arrangement and intergenerational kinship were decided upon as a means to organise the 'different ways of thinking through aspects of community, partnerships and radical intimacy.' Da Silva and Doley illustrate each of these themes for me by reference to particular works in the exhibition. 'Public relations' relates to the public expression of private lives and forms of communicating identities and desires in space'. These spatial desires are conveyed in works by artists such as Nikos Pantazopoulos, who delves into the significance of public sexual meeting places, or 'beats', and sex-on-premises locations in Sydney and Melbourne – including a particularly striking sex-venue-fantasy-space interior shot in *Untitled (man on horse)* (2013), juxtaposing sex-functional interiors with kitsch-decorative stimuli.

In 'living arrangements', works exploring 'spaces and approaches to establishing 'chosen families' can be found. Artists with works related to this theme include Helen Grace, who explores the founding of an all-female community in the 1970s; as well as the video performances of Parallel Park, which are evocative of, in the curators' words: 'blurring of collaborative processes and partnership'. In the third theme – intergenerational kinship – 'the importance of learning, sharing and support across generations and chosen kin' is explored, through works such as Ella Sutherland's prints, which reworks typography from an out-of-print lesbian porn publication, *Wicked Women*.





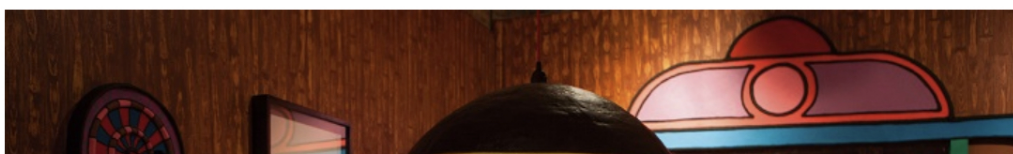
Shannon Michael Cane, *Everlasting Secret Family*, 2015, bootleg t-shirts. Courtesy the Estate of Shannon Michael Cane, M/M, Paris and UNSW Galleries, Sydney

When I asked whether there was a single theoretical framework or connective idea running through all of the works of the exhibition, the curators nominated 'a strong DIY resourcefulness and interest in the everyday' as central to much of the art on show. Works by Mark Aguhar, Shannon Michael Cane and Elmgreen & Dragset help to demonstrate this tradition of do-it-yourself resourcefulness, and the profound implications of the everyday for those of us in search of more 'radical' possibilities and politics of friendship, this author included.

Aguhar's *Litanies to my heavenly brown body* (2012), for example, originally circulated across a social media platform – Tumblr – as a form of collective resistance and trans representation, and now stands as evidence of the power of online spaces for the exploration and assertion of identity. Another example is a series of 'bootleg' t-shirts – 16 in total, from the Estate of Shannon Michael Cane; through the appropriation of logos and known phrases, Cane captures the importance of symbolism and coding, qualities at the core of the concept of 'DIY resourcefulness' and queer culture. And finally, Elmgreen & Dragset contribute a particularly personal example. In their major installation – *The incidental self, fig. 3* (2007) – 300 framed photographs document the duo's lived experience; childhood images share space with private glimpses of ex-lovers, cityscapes from their travels, and snapshots of intimate nightclub life.

Another connective idea that runs through this exhibition, and queer thought more broadly, is the 'rethinking and revisiting' of LGBTQI+ aesthetic genealogies, experiences, social histories and subcultural traditions. Macon Reed's *Eulogy for the dyke bar* (2016) is a good demonstration of this idea, and is also the largest work in the exhibition. Reed's installation 'functions as a sculptural environment mimicking the interior of a lesbian bar and community space activated by performances, conversations and socialising,' the curators explain. Reed allows us to revisit, remember or discover the legacy of dyke bars, which are increasingly disappearing from the LGBTQI+ city scene.

'The act of relooking and revisiting in projects such as Macon Reed's is crucial to documenting LGBTQI+ histories,' Da Silva and Doley told me. 'Like most minority histories, stories of LGBTQI+ leaders, activism and important events are often lost.' Relooking and revisiting, therefore, serves as a powerful way of remembering that, and in the curators' words, can also 'give younger audiences entry points to understanding this past'. Of course, in art – as in life – conditions of our present can often rub against, and occasionally disrupt, intentions of meaningful events; as is the case here and across the art world currently.





Macon Reed, Eulogy For The Dyke Bar, 2016, installation and public programs series. Courtesy the artist and UNSW Galleries, Sydney

Meeting the need for social isolation and restrictions on physical gatherings, UNSW Galleries closed its doors on 23 March. Yet, in recognition of the importance of this project, and of the need we all have for connection, even in isolation, 'Friendship as a way of life' still launched on 8 May with a series of digital initiatives. 'During times of change, disruption and uncertainty, we rely on artists to reflect our experience,' I am told by the curators, with respect to the need for the project to continue in a modified way.

The digital dimensions of this project include a virtual tour of the works in the exhibition – including the dyke bar – together with an online series of live lectures, artist talks and performative actions that explore the themes of the show. 'Friendship as a way of life', as a project that, the curators' elucidate, pivots 'around works that offer perspectives on partnerships, collaboration, visibility, sex, intimacy and knowledge', is clearly one that was collaboratively curated to support its creative contributors and the stories of the communities it represents.

And once the physical spaces of the gallery open up to visitors once more, the artworks, including Reed's installation, will be there. The dyke bar will open, and it will 'host a program of events celebrating LGBTQI+ communities of the past, present and future,' the curators told me. The bar will also include live performances by DJ Gemma, a pioneer of the underground queer dance scene and a fixture of the Sydney LGBTQI+ community since the late 1970s.

The longing to visit a space like Reed's bar today, to have it reopened and available for physical connection with others within a community, itself mirrors – admittedly in a limited sense – the LGBTQI+ experience, and its history of resilience and kinship in the face of shutdowns, persecution and scapegoating. In my personal viewing of the works of this exhibition, I found an anachronistic symbolism emerging. I felt this through works such as *Leather pride* (1992), a quilt made collaboratively by Gavin Kirkness and members of the leather community throughout Australia to acknowledge those who lost their lives to AIDS. 'It is an incredible record of community resourcefulness, activism and grief in response to HIV/AIDS in Australia,' Da Silva and Doley said about the work.

If nothing else, the conditions of our present affirm the power of art and the ways in which our own viewing of it is shaped by the world in which we live and our own lived experiences. Such conditions also offer us, the contemporary art traveller, insight into the world as it was, including aspects with continuing lived significance for some.

The perspectives and histories this exhibition expresses – in spaces physical, digital, and otherwise imagined – have a visceral resonance for many of us seeking community, friendship and intimacy in this historical moment, those marginalised among us especially.

Dr Joseph Brennan is an art critic, magazine editor and media scholar based in Far North Queensland.

UNSW Galleries
Until 21 November 2020
 Sydney (and online)