

How LGBTQ+ Artists Use Abstraction to Move Past Labels

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Carrie Moyer, *Brainiac*, 2017, DC Moore Gallery



Harmony Hammond, *Red Stack*, 2015, Alexander Gray Associates

Figurative art has been hot for quite a few years now, but it's always been widely popular. That's partly because, for most people, art acts as a mirror in which they expect to see themselves and their world reflected back at them. Even when it represents unfamiliar subjects or experiences, figurative art facilitates this process of self-affirmation. It's by differentiation that we come to know ourselves.

Putting that difference on display, however, can often be tokenistic. Recognizably Black or queer bodies in figurative painting, for instance, give collectors, galleries, and museums an opportunity to claim progressive politics at the expense of artists whose works may be intended to communicate far more than the external fact of their sexuality or skin color. This flattening of artists' identities has been a troubling trend of the past couple of decades, and one which many artists are actively pushing against. The market has tended to classify art as "queer," for instance, because it represents sex between bodies of the same gender, even though queerness encompasses more than sex.

What, then, is "queer abstraction"? The term is slippery. Abstraction, like queerness, derives its force from a lack of fixity. Unlike the standard markers we use to categorize identity, it refuses to coherently represent anyone or anything. LGBTQ+ artists, or artists whose sexualities are non-normative, have been making abstract art as long as abstract art has existed. Calling their work "queer" is much more difficult when that work doesn't involve representation at all. Artist biography is of limited usefulness, and in some cases can even become a trap. And yet, the increasing popularity of unabashedly queer figuration in art, especially painting, has made it clear that some LGBTQ+ artists are thinking about sexuality and desire in new and oblique ways. In the face of a culture that seeks to label everything, queer abstraction turns its back.

The precedents for this kind of work are hard to pin down, partly due to the difficulty in labeling artists who, by the conventions of their time, did not self-identify as queer. In many cases, including overt sexual content in their work would have left them vulnerable to harassment, discrimination, and death. Sometimes we can proceed with certainty: For instance, we know from letters that the artist Forrest Bess wrote that he intended his abstract paintings, with their Jungian symbolism, to signify his own desire for what he called "hermaphroditism," and which today we might consider an intersex or nonbinary identity. The Brazilian Neo-Concrete artist Hélio Oiticica similarly wrote in his journals of a desire for "hermaphroditopotesis" in his art, which he sought to achieve through wearable or inhabitable sculptures that could both disguise the gender and scramble the sexuality of anyone who interacted with them.

The queerness of such works, which do not clearly declare their sexual politics, lies in their spatial dynamic: the intimate, sensual encounters they engender within their soft folds or dark walls. A similar dynamic was explored by many of Oiticica's feminist contemporaries, such as Faith Wilding, whose Crocheted Environment for the 1974 "Womanhouse" exhibition was meant to evoke a womb. More recently, in Harmony Hammond's paintings, red-daubed grommets are at once arch-modernist features—recalling Lucio Fontana's famous cuts—and orifices that menstruate. K8 Hardy's March (2020) applies the dyed-canvas technique of Helen Frankenthaler to a canvas shaped like an enormous maxi pad.

Other artists have rejected sensual forms in favor of a hard-edged minimalism that evokes the architectures which control, and are sometimes subverted by, queer intimacy. For instance, Scott Burton designed his geometric granite benches, which vaguely resemble nesting bodies, for public spaces where men might cruise each other. The nipple lamps and circular copse of Garden Court (1993), a public artwork in a Toronto plaza, create an environment for such encounters, even though its location in a business district is a site of corporate surveillance.

Meanwhile, Tom Burr's wooden and steel partitions recall the walls of bathroom stalls or the darkroom infrastructure of gay sex clubs. Such works link the spatial dynamics of cruising with minimalist art, by emphasizing the ways that sculpture creates relationships between bodies in space. Nonetheless, such works still make reference to queer motifs, however obliquely, through some degree of resemblance. They may not be fully abstract. In his 2013 essay "Object Lessons," artist Gordon Hall complained that: "Often, artwork is described as queer when it depicts LGBT subjects or figures, is produced by a self-identified LGBT person, or references gay culture through recognizable motifs, references, or aesthetics. I call this the glitter problem. Or the leather problem. Or the pink-yarn, 1970s-crafts, iconic-diva, glory-hole, pre-AIDS-sexuality, post-AIDS-sexuality, bodies and body-parts, blood-and-bodily-fluids problem."

In that essay, Hall described "sculpture as occupying a unique place to learn about and transform our experiences of the gendered body, not primarily because of what we see in the sculptures, but because of how they might enable us to see *everything else*." Hall's own sculptures, which sometimes recall uneven stools, walls, doors, or ladders pitched against gallery walls, could only be described as "queer" for the way they make one feel strange—or askew—in an exhibition space. Their queerness, while deeply rooted in the body, is unconnected to any kind of sexual encounter.