

photosmith

Throughout time and across countless cultures, queer people have existed for as long as people have existed. What we today would refer to as homosexuality—the attraction to and sexual interest in one’s own gender—has been a fixture in the Western world since the ancient past, though scholars have long been reluctant to acknowledge our place in history. Embraced in antiquity, condemned and tolerated in equal measure by the medieval Church, and even tacitly accepted during the classical revivals of the Renaissance, it wasn’t until the Age of Enlightenment that “sodomy” fell fully into the realm of criminality and witch hunts. Only at the height of the Victorian era, nearly two centuries later, did attitudes begin to change, ushered along by the prominence (sometimes willing, sometimes not) of such still-famous figures as Anne Lister and Oscar Wilde.

So much of what we know of history—of civilization and culture and the forces, both aristocratic and religious, that shaped them—comes from art. Western artists have produced hundreds of what we now consider to be homoerotic works, yet the oft-speculated about homosexual tendencies of the artists themselves have never properly entered the academic discourse. Take, for example, acclaimed portrait painter John Singer Sargent. Despite a documented affinity for painting the male nude in traditionally feminine poses and reports of multiple male lovers, his homosexual attraction—or so many Sargent scholars maintain—cannot be known, and therefore should not even be surmised. Caravaggio, another frequent painter of the male nude, often arranged his subjects in sensual and seductive depictions of religious allegory. Surviving contemporaneous reports claim that he too had male lovers. And yet, as with Sargent, his implicit sexuality remains largely unacknowledged.

This series, an exclusive and emphatic celebration of queer bodies, aims to pull back the curtain of heterocentrism that shrouds the scholarship of Western art. By examining their use of composition, figure placement, color, light, shadow, scenery, and style, my goal is to create explicitly queer works that honor Caravaggio, Sargent, and the myriad other artists whose own works—and lives—continue to be straightwashed in the historical record. It is my hope that by inviting a more open discussion of homoeroticism and queerness in art, we may find our way to a broader acceptance of queerness in life. If this series is about anything, it is about the truth: that queerness is an enduring, intrinsic aspect of the human condition. It is neither a fad nor a phase, and it will not go away.

“Love him and let him love you. Do you think anything else under heaven really matters?”
– James Baldwin, *Giovanni’s Room*