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Education in the South

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Redefining Controversy and Outness: Honest Queer Art Education in the South

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In this paper, I discuss my experience as an out lesbian art professor and offer my view into the future of queer art education. After a year of teaching at a southeastern private Christian university, I've developed strategies for integrating queer art history even in the least accepting of institutions. Throughout the narrative, I use three of my own pieces to illustrate the intersection of my art practice, my pedagogy, and my experience as a queer womxn. Ultimately, by framing queer art history as a crucial component of art history, I argue that it is our job as educators to teach our students rich, complicated histories of art so they are able to place themselves as artists but also as human beings within that history.

KEYWORDS: Lesbian, queer art education, queer history

I came out in graduate school. During a critique, one of my openly gay colleagues exclaimed, “Honestly—I’m done talking about your work until you admit it and you are gay. This is all SO GAY.” *Way harsh, Tai*, I thought—realizing my internal monologue quoting *Clueless* was truly the queerest possible response I could have.

It was harsh, but I needed to hear it. My work needed to hear it. I grew comfortable talking and writing about my work as queer. I became comfortable referring to myself as a lesbian. I felt comfortable being out in art school because, well, it was *art school*.

The first half of graduate school was clunky because, well, it was the first half of an MFA, but also because the feedback never seemed “right.” None of my advisors were queer; none of the faculty in the art department were queer. One



Figure 1. Madison Manning, 2016, *My Coming Out Piece* [Synthetic hair, synthetic feathers, sewing pins, ladder, chair, house paint, lipstick, air filters, found fabric]. <https://www.madison-manning.com/>.

time I hung a vintage floral couch sideways on a wall, tightly in a corner because I could not stop thinking about how annoying it was that there were so many memes comparing pregnant Kim Kardashian in her 2013 Met Ball Givenchy dress to a couch. Around the couch, with brick wallpaper and tape and cardboard on the inside, I created look-alike three-dimensional bricks coming off of the brick wall that they were taped to. I mean, if florals on a pregnant woman make her a couch, wallpaper on brick makes the wallpaper bricks, right? I cut a flowerpot at an off-angle and put that under the couch. I lay under the couch on the floor for a picture. Every day I was asked by strangers if they could sit on the couch. “I mean, I guess! It’ll probably topple over but you can try it,” I’d answer every time.

Despite not having the words at the time of construction, I knew that I *had* to get *that exact* couch sideways on the wall. I knew my work was not *just* about the domestic or *just* a feminist critique, but that is the feedback I received constantly. It was halfway through my MFA when I finally connected with queer womxn advisors who told me exactly what I was missing—Susan Sontag’s 1964 essay “Notes on Camp.” For the first time in my life, not just my academic life, I was around queer people who were not cis White gay men. I was exposed to a whole new way of seeing the world and my work, a whole new way of re-



Figure 2. Madison Manning, 2016, *Kim K Met Ball 2013* [Vintage couch, wallpaper, cardboard, tape, light, saddle stand, steel]. <https://www.madison-manning.com>.

searching and reading. To put it simply, I did not feel like I or my work had to hide anymore.

My first job straight out of graduate school was at a private Christian university in the southeastern United States. I was hired as an adjunct to teach 3-D Design and Sculpture I—a breeze! My wheelhouse! I thought I would need a few adjustments in my slideshows to update with newer artists, taking out the metal working section since this school did not have a setup. I did not think I would be told to keep things “non-controversial.” See, at this university in the recent past, my newly assigned mentor told me my first week that Andres Serrano’s photograph *Piss Christ* (1987) had caused a bit of a “fuss.” I found myself stuck in a very Carrie Bradshaw moment, pondering over my syllabus wondering how I, an out lesbian, could teach Sculpture I in a way that would never offend anyone—including the parents of students who pay the steep tuition. “*Isn’t censoring out art out of the curriculum even more controversial?*”

I worried about my students going out into the Art World without a clue of Carolee Schneemann’s performance *Interior Scroll* (1975), Vito Acconci’s performance *Seedbed* (1972), or Renée Cox’s photograph *Hottentot Venus* (1995). Did any of my students even understand Kim Kardashian’s “Break the Internet” cover of *Paper* magazine (2014) if they had never learned Renée Cox?! It felt irresponsible to me to censor my student’s education for the reasons that had been given to me, so I did not. That and being openly gay cost me a full time, tenure-track position.

The administration did not flat out tell me I was denied the job because of my sexuality. However, in 2010, the university fired a lesbian coach after she shared the news that she and her partner were expecting a child. I went back and forth a lot—maybe if I had stayed in the closet I would have the job and I could have helped from the inside. Then I would bounce back to thinking I would not want to work at a university that did not hire openly gay women. (*The university does employ a handful of openly gay cis White men.) When I stepped outside myself, my main concerns centered back to these questions: What is the future for queer art education when the university makes claims of controversy where there is none? What is the future of queer art education if queer women are not allowed as educators?

I felt as if my work and I had to hide again. I personally was already so exposed, but in the weeks following the rejection, my work felt like this monster looming on the internet that I could not reel in. I placed the blame on all of my overly long and overly personal titles. I mean, my work had kind of “passed” before—maybe it was just the titles, and I could change those! No matter how straight I played it, I was angry at my work for outing me. I forced myself into my studio, despite the one-sided argument I was having with my work. Sometimes I would just sit in there for hours and whimper, staring at boxes of vintage fabrics

and glitter. Finally, though, I began to work again. I began to heal my relationship with my work, and ultimately myself, by remembering every conversation I have had with a queer person about the impact my work had on them. I remembered whom I was making my work for—and it most certainly was not at all made from elderly Trump-supporting millionaires who run a private university. My work, my research, and my pedagogy were devoted to sharing my experience to aid, educate, and promote queer positivity and prosperity. My work is a protest.

It is not our job as queer people, or any minority, to educate the ignorant about our lives or experiences, but it is our job as educators to teach anybody to the best of our ability. As educators, especially studio art educators, we are used to personalized teaching strategies. Some students understand the assignment before you have even finished explaining it; some need a little more one-on-one time with you to talk through their ideas. For the future of queer art education to include honest history taught by openly queer professors, we need to re-examine how and why “controversial” and “out” are defined as words that should be kept out of art education, and then recontextualize them so they are not only welcomed, but celebrated.

From my experience at this specific university, I learned “controversial” to mean anything that was anti-Christian, pro-minority empowerment, non-biblically grounded nudity, liberal-leaning, and so on. The first step toward the future of queer art education starts with an agreed-upon definition of the word “controversy.” Controversy is something that is likely to give rise to public disagreement. Controversy is whether or not you think Rose could have made room on that piece of wood for Jack, or whether or not you think a hot dog is technically a sandwich, or your opinions on the Kardashians’ influence on feminism. Controversy is based in argument, on debate and opinions. Controversy is not the rejection or censorship of history. Queer history is not controversial; it is history.

Ultimately, we—educators and administrators—should trust that our students can handle challenging or new content in the classroom, as they will likely be expected to once they are outside of it. It is our job to teach our students rich, complicated histories of art so they are able to place themselves as artists but also as human beings within that history. Furthermore, when educators are out in the classroom and when histories that center queer experiences are included in the curriculum, students are able to see themselves in history and to see themselves, queer people, in their futures.

Similarly to reframing controversial, for the future of queer art education to thrive, we need to recontextualize for those who fear what it means to be out in the classroom. I didn’t have my first openly gay professor until graduate school. Seeing a gay woman command a classroom and being exposed to writings and media by, for, and about the queer community—outside of cis White gay men—

was the first time I ever felt included in the LGBTQIA+ family. My actual family, specifically my mother, often asks me why it is so important that I share my sexuality with my students. “Why would you want them to know details of your private, bedroom life?” she asks. Being out in the classroom does not mean sitting around the table with your students “spilling the tea” or “pushing the gay agenda” or forcing your students to listen to Madonna remixes—because that is not what being out is. I am open about my identity as a lesbian to my students because I want them to feel comfortable being open with their own identity. I know I am the example I needed to see when I was 18. I know I am the living, breathing example that not only *It Gets Better* but *You Get Better, Stronger, Smarter*, and so on. I am the example of the outcome of the history I am teaching. I am fortunate enough to have survived long enough to share my experiences. I know it is not my responsibility as a queer person to always be the embodiment of a rainbow flag and, yes, being out in the classroom has presented me with a new set of challenges of my own. But, I know that by simply seeing a person who is “like” you who has survived inspires hope that cannot be taught.

To not allow queer educators to teach “controversial” subject matter is to rob our students of their fullest education. The future of queer art education is education *by example*, whether that example be the history we teach and/or sharing our own identities. The future of queer art education requires us as queer educators to continue teaching queer history, no matter if you are an adjunct or tenured. I believe, like the great Serena Williams, we have to be *so good they can't ignore us*. We have to show up. We have to teach our students to honor queer history so they know when they show up, they won't be ignored either.

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