

MARTOS GALLERY

Martos Gallery is pleased to announce

CHUCK NANNEY + JOEL OTTERSON

curated by ugo rondinone

introduction and event program by jarrett earnest

May 5 – July 2, 2021

Opening reception: May 5, 10AM – 6PM

WHAT *ISN'T* QUEER ART?

A conversation between Jarrett Earnest, Chuck Nanney, and Joel Otterson

JARRETT EARNEST: As Lady Miss Kier once asked "What is Love? (I think I know)"—or, rather: What is the most unlikely thing—film, album, artwork or object, etc.—that embodies a "queer aesthetic" to you? How and when did it first enter your life?

CHUCK NANNEY: Oddly enough, the first thing that comes to mind is my first G.I. JOE doll—11.5 inches tall and fully poseable. My brother and I were avid cartoon and comic book fans, obsessed with superheroes. Superheroes were drawn with form fitting costumes that were perceived by me as a child to be basically naked with loud graphics covering their bodies. So, my brother and I immediately disposed of our G.I. Joe's clothes exposing their naked molded plastic bodies, which looked just like the drawings in comic books. We would then spend time formulating imaginary graphic costumes for each of them, giving them names, secret identities, superpowers, whole histories.

One of my G.I. Joe's was named George. George's superpower was that he could change into Gloria. I stole a few Barbie wigs from Sue Loveland who lived down the street and crammed them onto George's head (a blond poof was his favorite). I fashioned dresses out of handkerchiefs and bits of fabric I found around the house. I cut up a rubber band into short lengths to make non-cancer-causing cigarettes for Gloria. I thought smoking was glamorous, but I didn't want to endanger Gloria's life. I was six years old. I had no real idea about sex or homosexuality, and certainly no concept of being trans, but all of that seems to have been functioning intuitively.

My father had already begun berating me and beating me for acting queer (the very word he used). The only way I understood that was that I was queer as in strange, and certainly going to hell. The idea of living safely through my imagination using George/Gloria/G.I. Joe as a conduit for an early unconscious expression of queerness is very dear to me.

JOEL OTTERSON: For me it was a pair of underwear. It was kindergarten, or before (I entered kindergarten at the age of 4). These were "tighty-whitie" underwear, but they had a Bulldog's face printed on the crotch, across my dick and balls. I wanted to wear them every day because they excited me and gave me pleasure. My Mother would say, "You can't wear those again! They're dirty!" I didn't understand, because to me the more I wore them the better they got. Raunchy Bulldog Underwear at the age of 4 ... the die was cast very young for me.

I have a G.I Joe story in response to Chuck's ... In 1992, I wanted to cast my G.I. Joe in iron and make him into a candelabra. My Mom sent me the footlocker that Joe lived in and when I opened the footlocker Joe was not alone! He was with a Ken and they had traded outfits. Joe was wearing Ken's beach outfit and Ken was wearing Joe's Army outfit. I'm sure that was the way I left them the last time that I played with them—maybe 7 or 8 years old. They were "good" friends that traded clothes and lived in the same box together ...

EARNEST: Aside from the G.I. Joe connection, you both identified these childhood experiences of clothing—how do you think your relationship with clothing, both as a physical experience and as an outer appearance, shifted with your sexuality over the years?

OTTERSON: Clothes were always a way to say I'm different. My Grandmother one weekend took me shopping at Bullocks Wilshire (the Saks of LA) to buy a cowboy outfit. I had spotted a baby blue suit with short pants and once I saw that suit, I wanted nothing to do with the cowboy clothes. I screamed, I cried, and I refused to leave without that little blue suit. My mother came to pick me up and said, "What happened to the cowboy outfit?" I remember my Grandma shrugged her shoulders and said "He didn't want it! He wanted this instead!" *Thank God* I had a family that didn't force me into a preconceived idea of what

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a boy should be. I felt so elegant and dandyish in that suit. I was around 4 years old also. That blue suit and the bulldog underwear made me feel really special.

When I was 13, I read an article in *Rolling Stone* about where the rock stars got their shoes. It was a place in West Hollywood called Fred Slatten Shoes. I asked my brother "Could you drive me there?" he said "Of course!" I went there two times. The first time I bought a pair of platform high heeled cream pumps (which I customized with gold studs on the platform). The second time I bought a huge pair of "wedgie" platforms (which I also customized by dyeing the fake wood grain black). The next week I saw Elton John on the *Cher* TV show with the same shoes! (But not customized ... ha!)

Just one more quick story ... I would get into my Mom's make-up because all the rock stars were wearing it from Mick Jagger to Elvis Presley! My Mom said, "Have you been in my make-up again?" —She was mad! "If you want to wear make-up get your own and stay out of mine!" She drove me to the store so I could buy my own.

NANNEY: As a very young boy I adored Twiggy and everything *Mod*. I envied the great looks available to girls. I started to think that if I could just turn into a girl all my problems would be solved (my parents wouldn't hate me), everything would be just fine. When I said my prayers at night, I started asking god if he would turn me into a girl. I was told he had great powers so I figured this would be a cinch. After I was finished praying, I would lie in bed imagining all the new outfits I could wear when I woke up the next day a girl. The world would be right, and I would be right in my own skin.

Fast forward to early junior high and my first wet dream. In my dream I was sitting naked in a chair. Just sitting there doing nothing, looking out through the bars of my cage. I was a specimen in a zoo. There were crowds of people, whole families, etc., strolling by fully dressed, stopping and gawking at me, some with interest and curiosity, some seemingly bored. I was awakened by the pulsing of my penis and rather alarmed and confused by the little puddle of semen in my underwear. I went from feeling whole in a red vinyl mini skirt to feeling erotically charged and weirdly in control by being without any clothes in public.

But the experience of clothing and the significance of presentation carries such a loaded question of class as well. Projecting desire, aspirations, hiding or revealing aspects of oneself. I grew up in a white, blue collar, Southern Baptist family in Memphis, Tennessee. We didn't have money for clothes or much else and I was keenly aware of what that meant as far as our social standing in the world. Years later as a young adult I found myself in New York in the late '70s. There was sex in every nook and cranny of the city landscape. I had sex everywhere at any time—subway platforms, subway tunnels and cars, doorways, parks, cars, buses, dept. store dressing rooms, restrooms—you get the picture. I found I was turned on by blue collar men, just like all the men in my family. I became obsessed with collecting and wearing work uniforms. The feel of the 65% cotton 35% polyester was like leather on my skin. It felt the same for me as someone wearing leather chaps and a harness. Only it was a green and orange NY sanitation uniform for me. I met other men turned on by the same fetish, would attend sex parties revolving around blue collar get ups. There was a whole underground network dedicated to working class sex fantasy fulfillment. The military and police uniform people had their own scene. I didn't get into that authoritarian scene; it was a drag of a drag.

—It just dawned on me that Joel and I both moved to NYC to attend school studying fashion design. Joel went to Parsons, later changing his major to fine art. I went to FIT. I dropped out and found my way to drugs.

EARNEST: What was the process of figuring out how to make something that might be "queer art"—not just at the level of subject matter, but of form? How has your sense of queerness in your work changed over your life as an artist?

OTTERSON: I don't think that my goal was ever to make "queer art". My goal was to make it from a *homosexual* perspective. So early on my subject matter was often the male figure (of Greek reference). Works were titled *Man on the Top* or *Male Venus* (1982).

It is hard for me to escape my childhood (and I don't really want to). Most work I do honors my parents. My Mom collected American Brilliant Cut Crystal and my Dad was a plumber and a builder. Every pipe I ever solder is in honor of my Father. Every piece of cut glass I might have appropriated for use in an artwork is a memory of my mother. It is using the best of both worlds, the male and the female. The sewing, quilting, embroidery and crochet is always in honor of my Grandmother and my Mother (that is where I initially learned). This is where the queerness does come in, these techniques are traditional "women's" work. I wanted to break the stereotype. The only men that quilted in the past were damaged, either mentally or physically from war. Guys just didn't do that kind of thing, much less make lace, crochet or tatting. Tailoring is a different thing, that was done by men.

My goal has been to break down stereotypes of what a man and what a woman is supposed to be. My work is a conscious blending of the masculine and feminine. For example, sewing lace trim onto a Steel I-Beam that is the base for a Teacart,

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1990. I make sculpture also because it is physical, it takes my whole body and every muscle to produce it. People would often say to me "You must work out a lot!" my answer was always "No, I just work!" There was a moment early in the '80s I made "totems" of baseball bats and Nehi soda. I forget the complete conversation, but I remember Ashley Bickerton's sentence that finished it: "Oh Joel, You're a lover and not a fighter! Look at those tall phallic sculptures you make! They are about love!"

NANNEY: I just made my work—it just happened to turn out queer. The process of making I've always likened to a sort of excavation of the self. Intuition. So, I had no choice in the matter. I'm a fag. It's a fag. It's not always obvious, like the tree branch paintings—people don't always get that they're basically non-sites often based in and extracted from roadside rest area cruising landscapes. The sense of queerness in my work? It has waxed and waned through the years and the different bodies of work I guess, but it is always present. The work grows from biographical details, memory, the self-excitation I mentioned above.

I think for a lot of queer artists from my generation, the AIDS epidemic having severely laid waste to innumerable friends, lovers, tricks, and acquaintances, there became a necessity to try and carry on a gay cultural legacy that we feared might disappear. Something for future generations of homos to get fired up about.

I think it's working.

OTTERSON: AIDS was a turning point in making art for me. I sat across from a friend that had full blown AIDS, we were eating carp soup his macrobiotic chef had prepared (it was supposed to rejuvenate the brain) he killed the live fish over the pot, made soup and we ate it. Stephen looked at me from across the table and said "Goddamnit! While I'm alive I refuse to be dead!" Inspiring to say the least. I knew I couldn't make tall thin sculptures that stood in the corner and were quiet anymore. It was a moment I decided that I needed to be loud and scream. I decided I didn't want to make monuments to dead people (the job of sculptors for centuries) I wanted to make work about living and what it meant to be alive. At that moment I started working my way through the house. I started making everything in relation to human beings. The objects that make us human and make us comfortable as human beings. Tables, chairs, beds, rugs, dinnerware ... For over 30 years I have worked my way through the house and remade everything in it. I encourage engagement with the work, that is when it comes alive.

I also see that objects can have their own DNA inside, either historical DNA (style, era, a medium that comes with borrowed prestige) or the actual DNA of the person that owned it and treasured it. It is also curious to me how an inanimate object can be the trigger of emotion. I use things that were my Mother's and Grandmother's ... it triggers feelings in me. Being HIV positive myself, given a death sentence at the age of 25 was quite shocking. Live fast die young. It has made me give life to forgotten objects. It made me question what makes something have value and that misplaced value was rampant. I never dreamed I would be alive today ... but here we are!

I could go on and on ...

CHUCK NANNEY lives and works in Oakland, California. Recent solo exhibitions include Studio Rondinone, New York; Bill Arning, Houston (2021); Fierman Gallery, New York (2018, 2017); Jenny's, Los Angeles (2016, 2014); and Debs and Co., New York (2003, 2001, 1999). Significant group exhibitions include White Columns, New York (2015); Martos Gallery, New York (2014); MoMA PS1, New York (2006); Le Consortium, Dijon; (2004, 1998); and Centre Pompidou, Paris (1998, 1995). Nanney was the recipient of the Pollock Krasner Award in 2000; and the Joan Mitchell Foundation Grant in 1996.

JOEL OTTERSON lives and works in Los Angeles, California. Recent solo exhibitions include Royale Projects, Los Angeles (2019); Jason Jacques Gallery, New York (2018); and a 2014 survey at Elizabeth Dee, New York. Significant group exhibitions include the 2014 Whitney Biennial; The Hammer Museum, Los Angeles (2012); The Kitchen, New York (1994, 1985); and the 45th Venice Biennale (1993). Otterson's work is included in the permanent collections of the Broad Foundation, Los Angeles; The Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; the Cincinnati Art Museum, Cincinnati; the Yokohama Museum of Art, Yokohama; and the Israel Museum, Jerusalem.

For more information, please visit www.martosgallery.com