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SPEAKERS

Vince Lee, Nick Vaughn, Jake Margolin



Vince Lee 00:00

Today is June 9 2021, Wednesday. My name is Vince Lee, and I'm the archivist for the LGBT History Research Collection at the University of Houston Libraries Special Collections. I'm pleased to be joined today by artists, Jake Margolin and Nick Vaughn. I want to thank you both for joining me and make-- clearing your schedule and being a part of this opportunity to talk about your story and your history and your work. So and I know this is a little bit I maybe redundant or, but for our audience, could you reintroduce yourself, so they know who is who's Jake, who's Nick, and just kind of talk about who you are and what you do. So that our audience have-- has a sense in terms who are trying to learn more about you.



Jake Margolin 01:00

Of course, thanks so much for having us. This is a real pleasure for me--



Vince Lee 01:03

Of course.



Jake Margolin 01:05

My name is Jake Margolin.



Nick Vaughn 01:08

And I'm Nick Vaughn.

J Jake Margolin 01:09

And we are married to each other. And then also, we are interdisciplinary artists. And we do all of our work together as equal partners. And our main body of work is an ongoing series of what will be 50 installations that are made in response to little known LGBT histories from each state. And so we call this our 50 states project. And we are at this point, I think seven states in and so we've got another 43 to go. Unless during that time Puerto Rico becomes a state and that would be great. And then we'd have more to do.

J Jake Margolin 01:53

And DC

J Jake Margolin 01:54

And DC could become a state. I mean, this could really just expand. And this 50 states project brought us to Texas in 2014, we were living in New York, we'd been in New York for about a decade before that. And we moved to Houston to research and develop what would become our 50 states Texas piece. And we fell in love with Houston, with the arts community here, with the queer world here. And realized very quickly that this is where we wanted to be based, we wanted to be part of this world.

N Nick Vaughn 02:29

And ostensibly, we were coming for nine months just to sort of research and complete that first 50 states, not the first but the 50 states Texas project. And being down here, in addition to just sort of loving the arts and queer ecosystem, and community in Houston, it rapidly became apparent that the difference of doing a country wide project from here, versus trying to do it from New York was pretty vast, in terms of the perspective that we had on the ground here became so rapidly clear that we had no idea what was going on in the rest of the country. You sort of have this sense when you're in New York that you're like, at the crossroads of the world, and you understand everything and you know what's going on everywhere. And we got to Texas and realized that we had no idea what was going on in Texas, and that what we had imagined we would arrive here and do a project about cowboy culture and border towns that just like, that wasn't what was going on in the queer world here and at what wasn't what people were interested in, in the queer world here. And it became a really clear point that like, oh, actually, it's probably much better if we engage in this project, not in New York. And it's changed the way that we approach other states. And it's a great base it also the difference of showing up and starting to talk to people about their local queer histories as artists from Texas, versus artists from New York is also a very vast difference. I think there's a very justified fear for the reasons I was just talking about that artists come in from New York and engage in these sort of extractive projects of getting people's stories, and then they go make their work and they make a bunch of money. And they show it at their New York gallery. And I think the difference of showing up as a pair of Texas based artists who, you know, moved here for this project, even when we're in Oklahoma or Arkansas or Louisiana. It is a very different level of trust that we get from the people we work with. Because I think there's a sense that we aren't just gonna like take their stories and run.

v

Vince Lee 04:58

As an archivist I can --

j

Jake Margolin 04:59

[? get them back ?]

v

Vince Lee 05:00

I'm sorry, I'm sorry.

j

Jake Margolin 05:01

No please, please.

v

Vince Lee 05:03

I was saying, as an archivist, I can completely understand that because working with donors and community, just that relationship and trust, and there's also that other aspect of are you going to appropriate materials? So

o

05:16

[? INAUDIBLE ?]

j

Jake Margolin 05:20

I'm sorry. Either we are you froze for a moment.

v

Vince Lee 05:23

Oh, okay.

n

Nick Vaughn 05:26

We finished with relationship of trust is where we --

v

Vince Lee 05:29

Right, I was saying that, as an archivist, I completely understand that working with the community, because it's really it's relationship building. And also, there has been aspects of mistrust, where certain folks may have come in to appropriate certain histories and not given back or not providing credit where credit's due. So, yeah, that's a very important component of that.

 Nick Vaughn 05:57

And this is all a very slow project. We, when we first after completing our first state, we had this grand plan that we would somehow complete the other 49, over--

 Jake Margolin 06:11

15 years, or

 Nick Vaughn 06:12

Ten years, I think, was our original plan. And it became very rapidly apparent that that was never gonna happen. And that -- and we, we actually keep slowing down more. There's a there's this term that are a question in many socially engaged granting organizations. That is, what is your exit strategy, your ethical exit strategy for working with communities? Meaning like, how do you not come in and like make a project and get all this infrastructure set up, and then just jet, leaving this void. And we often joke and have honestly replied to some of those, that we don't have an exit strategy because we don't exit. We continued to build the on the communities that we've and the people we've met in Colorado and, and Oklahoma and Arkansas and Louisiana, and we just keep looping the same people back into other projects. And we keep diving into tangential bodies of work. And it becomes this sort of like growing network of a like cross national community. And we just, we just keep not leaving. So what it means is that we also keep slowing down because even after we officially complete one of the state projects, There ended up being secondary projects, and tertiary projects and, and hyper local city based projects, and we just sort of they it keeps kind of growing and snowballing. And so who knows, maybe at the end of 50 years, we will have done 16 of them, and we will hand the project off to somebody else.

 Jake Margolin 07:47

I mean, a good example is that the piece that we have included in the show at the Cushing and is part of our 50 states Texas piece, which we've been working on since 2014. And

 Nick Vaughn 08:05

But it was just published this last year in 2020. So it's, you know --



JAKE MARGOLIN 08:10

So that is, so far, it's a six year long project.



VINCE LEE 08:14

Could you, for our audience that may not be privy, could you what is the title of the piece that you're intending to include with the Cushing exhibition or our collaborative exhibit together? And maybe describe a little bit about what it's about going to be about?



JAKE MARGOLIN 08:31

Of course. So the piece that we're intending to include in the in a collaborative exhibition is called Norma tryst or pure carbon, a story of the inversion of the sexes, and it's a limited edition artist book and it's a particular kind of artists book called A lever their taste that is defined by being a strong collaboration between an artist and an author. And in this case, the author is deceased and was a man named John Wesley Carhart, who in 1895, in LaGrange, Texas, wrote a novel called normal trust or pure carbon that features arguably the first unambiguously lesbian heroine in American fiction, and radically progressive defenses of homosexuality. And we took that text, and we made a large time based installation in which we stencilled all of the text from the book onto 100 linear feet of paper in unfixed graphite powder. And this very delicate piece over the course of being installed would degrade. Bugs would go through it and make tracks. Viewers who didn't quite understand what it was might sneeze and blow away some of the graphite and it slowly disappeared. And from that installation, we wound up with these gorgeous what felt like prints that showed This texts slowly disappearing. And we then last year as a co publication with flatbed press in Austin, an astounding Fine Arts press made this limited edition artists book inspired by that. And that piece is what's on view.



NICK VAUGHN 10:20

And so that's it's a series The book itself is a it's a case that includes six etchings that are made the original image images which were made in a essentially the same way that the original installation was. So they were stencil graphite, that was then we introduced some insects that intervened in it and sort of degraded the images, and then photograph those to make the etchings and then the complete text is also included from the original publication. And that is, as far as well, no, not as far as we know, it is the first republication of the book since 1895, albeit in a very limited edition.



JAKE MARGOLIN 11:09

And the book is illustrated as well. And it's illustrated each chapter we've illustrated with a image that's based on a photograph that we took of what's now standing where there used to be a gay or lesbian bar in cities all across Texas. And so we went and by going through archives, looking in publications, such as this week in Texas, or in the damn wrong guides, which were this wonderful set of guides that for many, many years, left people from all over the country no, where there were queer friendly or overtly queer spaces in every city, we identified where there used to be gay and lesbian bars in Galveston, Houston, Dallas, Fort Worth, San

Antonio Austin, and we went and we found what was now there, the vacant lots, or the strip malls or the office buildings, or ironically that Chick fil A, or Chick fil A. And we would photograph what was there now. And we included, we made stencils out of those images and did graphite powder prints with those as well. So those are part of the book as well. And part of that was when we moved to Texas, one of the things that we kept on hearing from people was this morning for the loss of the queer spaces that had defined the queer community. And for many reasons these bars are closing, and that what was so a revelation to us was how important these bars were not just as social spaces, but as spaces for political organizing, as truly the places that the community could get together and make it a cohesive community. And so we wanted to honor these places and honor the way that they're the way that they are ephemeral in the same way, as many of these other histories are ephemeral.

V

Vince Lee 13:07

You've kind of read my mind, because one of the questions I had was, since many of your works been tied to the LGBT community, what's been the response and feedback from the community? And from I guess, what are your responses, some of it evokes a bit of nostalgia for them because of what what once was any other feedback or reactions you've gotten back from the community and in response to your works? Yeah, we

N

Nick Vaughn 13:39

it's been interesting over the last several years, we, as the project has gained more traction and notoriety. You know, we started exhibiting pieces at museums and large institutions. And we've done some of the sort of secondary projects like the contemporary art museum in Houston, where we did a sort of secondary project or Oklahoma piece. And that's all been really great. But in some ways, the most exciting exhibitions that we've had in the last several years have been in community spaces. So that piece that was at the contemporary art museum, which was great, we were very happy it was there. We were happy, lots of people saw it. We made that piece we made it's a it's a five channel video piece that involved a number of drag queens from rural Oklahoma, North Eastern Oklahoma lip syncing seminal queer rights speeches, mostly from the 1979 march on Washington, and then performing some overtly political drag numbers. And we took that piece back to Tahlequah, Oklahoma, where a number of those performers were from and screened to set it up as part of their 28 teen Pride festival. And it was in a little tiny room no More than six people could fit in at a time. And the whole thing was very DIY and guerrilla. And it's one of the most meaningful showings of our work that we've ever had. Because it felt like we had brought it back to the community we made it for we brought it back to the Queens we had made it for. And they brought their families and their friends. And I think the the degree to which they felt seen and lionized and celebrated for being on the literal front lines of, you know, we live in such a bubble in, you know, whether it was in New York, or now in Houston. In terms of where queer rights struggles exist, we're really, we live in a pretty cushy bubble in many ways. And these queens are out there in the frontlines in the trenches of like, where the cultural wars are currently being fought. And so I think like, those connections, or, or a series of performance lectures that we often create, to go as part of the work, you know, we present them in galleries, we've presented them in theaters, and that's all great, but then presenting one of them in the bar that is sort of like the spiritual inheritor of Mary's Naturally, in Houston. That --

J Jake Margolin 16:25

For those who don't know, was the center of political activism and community organizing in the queer community in Houston for a very long time.

N Nick Vaughn 16:35

Doing a lecture there for that, for those patrons, and for that bar, was really like, as good as it gets in our practice. And I think that was like, I think,

J Jake Margolin 16:50

I think part of it is that like, it feels like this whole project is, in a sense, very inward facing to the queer community, that the many other outlets that we have for it, we we appreciate, and we really love. But well who it's for, is the people who are making the work with and about, and I would say that what we have typically found from people after seeing it is, sometimes there's like a, you know, an aspect of these histories that people didn't know, and they find them as delightful as we did and as edifying as we did. And when you find out that there was a band of most likely gay, hundred most likely gay man who went from St. Louis to a rural lake in Wyoming in 1843. And through a two week long bacchanal by a river. And you know, the story itself is wonderful and delicious, but often it feels like what people find particularly moving is the the amount of sort of reverence that's given to an individual, local experience. And to really like that, I think that people are finding that what they love in our work, or what they're telling us that they love in our work, is how much we are slowing down and really taking the time and the energy and putting all of our passion and focus into under understanding what this experience actually was. That makes it totally unique and makes it so that it's like this unique thread in the American fabric.

N Nick Vaughn 18:30

I think people also respond to the assertion that these histories are absolutely interwoven with American identity and American history that like we're not playing what I think is a relatively common game of like out the historical figure, right of like, oh, Lincoln was probably gay and Buchanan was probably get like, that's great. I am glad that we have forebears. But I think what we tried to do in our work is really grant not grant claim agency and presence and relevance to broader threads in American history and Queer Presence in those threads. And so, I think there's a weight to that, that feel that people respond to have like, right, this is all our history to the good, the bad, the otherwise. You know, the work is, I think, for the most part, I think we try to really lean into ambiguous narratives and ambiguous in like, are things celebratory are they tragic? Are these people heroes? You know, the, the ship captain who was busted for sleeping with this cabin boy who's at the core of our Louisiana peace, there's indication that after the whole scandal and his triumphant sailing into the distance with his cabin boy and running off somewhere that he, which was in 1620 1624, that he went and started a plantation. So like this, like, they're all such complicated histories, and I think part of what we're doing is just asserting that like, these narratives are utterly and in inseparably linked to our American identity.

V

Vince Lee 20:42

And then that trivialize thing --

J

Jake Margolin 20:44

There was a word that you --

V

Vince Lee 20:45

Kind of, it's always been with us, as I guess, as individuals and human beings. I guess that's the best way I can describe or think about that. And I guess, folks that each individual is each individual that interacts with your work is going to, I guess, bring their own personal perspective to that. And that's part of leaving it open and ambiguous, because there's, there's so much more to kind of ferret out or dig for them personally.

J

Jake Margolin 21:26

Yeah, well, I think that it's what we as artists have two, to contribute to the sort of field of queer history and queer anthropology is that we, while our work is research based, we are as rigorous as we are able to be in our research, we do not have the same responsibility that say a historian has or that an anthropologist has, to certain things, but we have a deep responsibility to understanding the poetry behind these narratives. And to bringing that poetry forward and to as we're trying to understand, what is our human experience? What is our American experience? Who are we as a people, what is our identity, that what we're able to do with these is take these, take these narratives and flesh them out, and bring in that the art of poetry. into things, I think, for instance, that in the piece, in our enormous interest, the actual book and the fact that it exists, and the factual things that are in there that are just astounding to have in 1895, the unambiguous expression of sexual pleasure between one woman and another, for instance, in a totally wild trial scene, that gets expressed to have the most cutting edge thought, in homosexual studies, that was coming from text that hadn't even been translated into English yet that was in Germany, at that point, you know, getting incorporated into this novel in Texas, written by a medical doctor, all of those things are totally, just wonderful to bring out. And what our strength is, is to find a way in using the material that we used and using the format that we used to, to make those facts sing in an artistic and poetic way.

V

Vince Lee 23:40

I was going to mention that, I know that many of your works have incorporated many primary source LGBTQ materials from archives and institutions. When I guess when you think of or start work on a piece or installation, is there any type of thought or process or philosophy or approach that you all go through? Or is it case by case? Organic --

N

Nick Vaughn 24:11

There's a lot of feeling around our work. When we, I hope I'm not talking over to you, you froze for a second. So I apologize.

Vince Lee 24:22

We're good.

Nick Vaughn 24:24

Great. Whenever we sort of first start, there is no whenever it's literally different with every project. So sometimes, we will catch a thread of something in an anthology or in a book that we're reading for some other project or there'll be like a little shred of something that is like, Oh, this looks like an interesting story. We should go dig into that sometimes will show up and just start driving around the state and talking to everyone who is part of our sort of expanded Network. and see if people have senses of where we should start digging. Sometimes we'll just go into libraries and start looking through archives. And then essentially what we do is we just kind of try to act like heat seeking missiles and find whatever it is that sings to both of us that like, because they're amazing stories that don't suggest any connection to present a queer culture or that don't suggest that we can't do anything with that are just like, they're beautiful. And you're like, great, I'm glad this exists. I'm glad I know about it, but like that don't suggest a course of action. And then there's some, you know, it's it's a really sort of intuitive process of like, the things that feel like they really start sparking tangents into all of the other places. And I think those are like the qualities that I would say do that are stories that feel like they speak to broader threads in a regional history, economic threads, racial threads, social threads. That feel like they're reaching into all of those places, things that feel like they speak to contemporary concerns of the queer community, and things that feel just from an artistic standpoint, like they begin to suggest form in the like basic materials that exist. So you know, one of the things that was just thrilling when we finally found Norma Trist, I think originally Jake, Jake found it in the basement of the Fondren Library at Rice on microfilm. This was before we had realized that hard copy of it existed at U of H. One of the very few hard copies still in existence. Was literally like, as soon as it popped up was Norma Trist or Pure Carbon, A Tale of the Inversion of the Sexes of like, oh, well, there's something really sort of spooky there and like pure carbon of like, Great, let's start thinking about that. And so you start thinking about graphite, and nanotubes and whatever else it is. But you know, that's how we ultimately ended up finding our way into graphite both as like a writing and printing material, but as a, as a distillation of this pure carbon. And then, like where that functions in the story, metaphorically, and like where that even comes from, because it's never mentioned in the story once it literally only exists in the title.

Vince Lee 27:59

I think I think we all I'm not sure if the internet connection --

J Jake Margolin 28:05

Oh, I'm sorry, you were frozen. You're back.

V

Vince Lee 28:08

You're back as well. You're frozen for a moment as well. And I think I lost a little bit of what Nick was talking about,

J

Jake Margolin 28:19

was probably the best thing that we saw.

N

Nick Vaughn 28:21

Oh, yeah, most definitely. It was really. I was just saying that like when the like, my guess is, I think the last thing I was saying is that pure carbon Yes, in the title doesn't actually appear in the book anywhere. There's no mention of carbon, there's no, it's, it's completely it's only in the title. And so it suggests this certain, like metaphorical significance. That is a sort of jumping off point of like, where to start digging. Yeah, I think that I think that's where I was finishing off.

J

Jake Margolin 29:00

But we also use, as you were saying primary sources from a lot of different archives. And so and a lot of different institutions, and they range from, you know, sort of major institutions like the like the University of Houston archives, you know, which have massive holdings of LGBT history things, particularly this region, to organizations like the like GCAM, the Gulf Coast Archive and Museum for Gay and Lesbian History, where, you know, has incredible collection of ephemera, and documents and magazines and things like that. And then also, you know, we use a lot of university libraries that don't have particular GLBT holdings because we're finding individual things within those. And then we also use a lot of personal archives, a lot of things that people are still holding on to and that they have that we get introduced to people. And over time, as they come to understand really what we're up to, they say, Well, you know, I've got this, this thing over here, I've got this thing over here. And we're in a place that Nick and I find very thrilling in history right now, where institutions really, for the first time major institutions are interested in holding and caring for LGBT archives. And we are also encountering many of the people who have had the fortitude and the foresight, and the, you know, whatever mental state it takes to archive these things we've been holding on to them forever, who are very distrustful of major institutions, right, and are also very distrustful of everybody, because they've been protecting these things that, you know, the mainstream society has literally wanted to burn and get rid of, for so many decades. And so we we get to use this incredibly wide array of resources out there, ranging from major institutional ones to very, very private ones, which is great fun. And there was something else that I wanted to say about, about using. So often, you were asking how we set about doing, how we how we start off doing things. And one of the things is that we're just constantly keeping our feelers out for what is going to be moving and what's going to resonate. And so for instance, we were going through the GCAM Gulf Coast archiving museum for gay and lesbian History Archives with Judy Reeves, their director for a project that we were doing. That was a tangential piece from our Texas project that involved making an intricately hand cut work on paper that was depicting drag

queens, from the Houston drag scene in the years between Stonewall and the beginning of the AIDS crisis. And part of what we had come to understand in researching the bars and spaces all across Texas, was how profoundly important the drag community was to both keeping the community coherent, and to fighting for rights, but also literally for fundraising for AIDS Relief for doing I mean, pretty much everything that a forefront activist does. The drag community was doing in spades, as well as lifting everybody's spirits, and making people feel glamorous, and gorgeous and sexy. And so we were going through old magazines and photographs at GCAM. And one of the things that they happen to have there was a whole bunch of pageant crown pageant tiaras that they've been holding on to it, we're like, well, these are just gorgeous, and they don't fit into this piece that we're making. But they're gorgeous. And hearing Judy talk about, in particular, a drag queen in Houston named lady victoria lust, who had raised just millions of dollars for AIDS causes for things across the queer community in Houston. And she was saying, you know, you can't make a piece about the drag community in Houston without talking about waiting for your lust. And so we wound up using one of the pageant crowns there to make a totally separate piece. And it's not something we ever would have sought out on our own. But it's the perk of going into a sort of encyclopedic archive, is that you're going to come across the things that are amazing. Similarly in Louisiana. We were at the cash, what is it called? It's the State

 N Nick Vaughn 34:01

Historical Museum, the state great historical society.

 J Jake Margolin 34:06

I mean, there's this is gonna get recorded. That's all right. Well, I'm gonna look this up and send it but the the X camera road is called, it's

 N Nick Vaughn 34:16

having a 21 month old the

 J Jake Margolin 34:20

they have in their holdings, these marvelous archives of Mardi Gras, and everything around Mardi Gras. And within that there's a subset of the gay Mardi Gras, the gay crews of Mardi Gras. And in talking to their archivist and seeing these materials, we started to really understand that even though we hadn't intended to be making anything, particularly about the gay krewes of Mardi Gras

 J Jake Margolin 34:51

and in ways that we never could have expected and so that I mean, that's how we use how we use archives.

V

Vince Lee 35:03

That's what I love. I think I cut out a little bit. That's what I love about your works is that there's so transformative from the original primary source pieces into what it was and what it can be. So that from my novice perspective, it's a very transformative work from the original piece.

J

Jake Margolin 35:32

That's wonderful to hear. And I think Connect.

V

Vince Lee 35:39

Oh, that was Yeah, I think it the connections, and I apologize if it's my end, it might be ours. It kicked me off a bit. So but it looks like it resumed the recording again. So goes, I'm glad we have Mauricio in our library to do the editing, so to speak for the oral history. So yeah.

J

Jake Margolin 36:07

Got what it was? Oh, I was mentioning that. What was that mentioning?

N

Nick Vaughn 36:16

Something about proposing new? I don't know you haven't gotten that far in it?

J

Jake Margolin 36:25

Well, I hope it will come back.

V

Vince Lee 36:32

One question I had that I didn't necessarily share with you. But it's on my mind is obviously we're in a historical moment, with the pandemic, what's that impacted you as artists in terms of access, creativity, working on Zoom, and, you know, trying to be as collaborative as possible with the tools that are before us? Can you maybe talk a little bit about that? Yeah,

J

Jake Margolin 37:02

so the pandemic. I mean, like, in every field, it just, like, threw a wrench in everything, right. And that ranged from, you know, projects getting indefinitely postponed to cancelled to. One of the things that Nick and I were talking about, at some point, maybe about nine months in, and we were trying to sort of diagnose why we're having a hard time getting started on new things,

right, like we're starting to work on a, our 50 states Utah piece, and we're so excited about it. And there is a certain amount of research that we can do remotely that we can do actually, in collaboration with archivists, in this case, the University of Chicago Library has holdings that we are relevant to this and like, you can communicate back and forth like that. But it really has brought to light for us how much our practice actually depends on being in person in a place and getting to feel what a landscape is, and getting to talk to people over meals and over drinks and in their living rooms. And that there is very little that is of value to us without actually being with people. And I think part of it is the lesson that we learned very strongly when we moved to Texas, which was that the only way that we could know what was going to be interesting to members of the queer community in Houston was to really know members of the queer community in Houston. We couldn't, we couldn't know. As, as outsiders. It's just it's impossible. And what is interesting to an outsider, and why it's interesting to an outsider just has nothing to do with what's going on somewhere. A way that we started to realize about it is that I think that I had an idea. Because for me, moving to New York as a young person was so important, an idea that everybody thinks of themselves in relation to these major cities. And then to realize that no, in fact, not only are people not thinking of themselves in relation to the major cities, they're not thinking of themselves in relation to any other city. They're thinking of themselves, in relation to themselves that each place we go to is the nexus of its own universe. And you have to actually be there and actually understand that universe to make anything meaningful. And that has been just not possible,

N

Nick Vaughn 39:42

I would say without fail. We really haven't been none of the state projects have come into focus for us. until at least like a year of visit, visiting and spending some extended time on The ground and each location that we're working in. Just because it takes so long to really understand what's going on both in the community among the people that we're working with, but also just like, it takes that long to really begin to understand a landscape, I think. There's a phrase we're both of our backgrounds are in theater, we come out of theater training, I was trained as a second costume designer, and Jake was trained as a actor and writer and director, we continue to work, we continue to work with a collaborative Theatre Company in New York. And there's a phrase that has come up in the company couple of projects ago, that was you can only move at the speed of trust. I'm trying to remember where that I wish I can attribute that correctly right now. Which are not going to be a symptom of the idea that like, you just have to, you cannot rush these things. Or they will inevitably become extractive or surface or tell you make window dressing.

J

Jake Margolin 41:20

Sort of tangentially related to what you're asking, or it's not what you're asking. But we recently had a couple of pieces at the University of Houston's Blaffer Art Museum. As part of an exhibit that they had, there was a large group show of mostly Houston based artists working on work that involves the body, talking about the body in different ways. And part of what I think the curators were interested in, in what we were doing was how our work drew a connection between the current pandemic situation and the AIDS crisis, which is, of course, the, probably the largest influencing crisis in our identity as gay men and when we grew up, and not Oh, that. And one of the things that, of course, is resonant between the two is that they both really disproportionately affect certain communities, and they bring to the fore, the inequities, and all

of the sort of fault lines and horrible things that exist in our society anyway, get amplified in a crisis like this. And there has been something in you know, as we've been, because you're saying that we're in a moment, in a historical moment, that is profound, right, because of the pandemic, we're also in a historical moment that's profound in terms of the Black Lives Matter movement in terms of a seek for racial justice, coming to the forefront, in a different way than it has in this generation. And so part of what's going on, I think, is just us. During this time, thinking about how our work, support supports, taking down structural systems of oppression, and how are we part of that? And how can we be more part of that? And how do we as cisgendered white men, create work that, you know, that helps to foster a sense of utopia and move towards something that is meaningful and better than what we are in and what we have been in? And that I think, you know, I don't know how it's gonna play out. But I think we'll maybe in 10 years, we'll be able to really draw you to reflect on how the pandemic changed our practice and changed who we are. Because I think I think that it will have that said, I can't wait to not be doing everything on Zoom.

V

Vince Lee 44:17

I know, I know. I can't wait to resume face to face interactions with you all my colleagues, family and friends, everyone and that no, no, thank you for using your art and your work as a reflective piece of society because I know it's brought out the best in folks but also some of the worst things in folks where there's blame trying to go around. Pitch mentioned. More were more aware of Black Lives Matters. Things that are going on in the Asian community, you know, seems like in any pandemic is always the kind of reaction and you're trying to look for answers. And there's always a blame game going around. So, you know, I don't know, I don't know the answers to that. But I think as we go along, we're going to have to take a hard look and reevaluate.

N

Nick Vaughn 45:16

That's one thing that has been true, since we started this project. So the very first piece we did was our 50 states Wyoming piece. And it happened because we found this story of this 1843 Pleasure excursion of 100 Most likely, gay men are same sex attracted if you want to, like really dig into your Foucault. And we -- it was like an amazing story, and we made a piece about it. And we're like, okay, we need to make 49 more of these for all of the other states. And we very rapidly came up against the realization that one of the issues of dealing with historical archives is whose archives were kept, and who was most likely to write archives. And it became very apparent that if we were not extremely careful, and conscious of it, we would end up making 50 pieces about gay white men. Because they were the most likely of, you know, what is already a slightly, you know, marginalized community to be the least marginalized within that community. And then most likely to have paper trails and records. And have some historical documentation. And so one of the things that I we drive for, and I will certainly not say necessarily succeed it, but it that is a sort of constant push, and our work is trying to make sure that we are engaging, commissioning platforming, working with people whose who are better at telling these some of these stories than we are. For example, the Colorado piece that dealt with somebody who we would now most likely refer to as a trans man who lived in the small mining town of Trinidad, Colorado, in the 1890s and early 20th century, we ended up commissioning a bunch of trans or gender non conforming posts from around the country to create these potlucks and propose toasts to Charles Frenchy, vos BA, who is this figure. And

part of that was just about, like, we're good at digging. And we're good at setting up some poetic parameters around things. And we're good at figuring out how to like, stage some of these things as artistic, metaphorical poetic experiences. But that was, in some ways, not our story to tell. And so the, the document of that piece that is, has become the ultimate installation, you actually don't hear us speak at all. You only hear the trans and gender non conforming hosts. And so it's just something that like we're constantly very aware of, of the danger in taking the materials that are in archives at face value, because they have their own lenses and limits. And I think we're, you know, the last year, has just brought into focus and brought into question all kinds of parts of the way that we proceed in, in our work and the ways to do it, ethically, and the ways to advance collective liberation and equity and all of these things, given that we are, you know, cisgendered white men.

V

Vince Lee 49:12

Thank you for sharing that. I think that's all the questions I have. I guess the final thing I have is, is there anything else you'd like to talk about that we didn't necessarily cover? From previous questions?

J

Jake Margolin 49:25

Yeah, I do want to say so that piece that we were talking about making that we collaborated with G cam on the maps that were about the drag queens, we've shown it in a lot of different places. And my absolute favorite exhibition of it, where it felt like it really worked and did what we were hoping that it would do was that we the way that the pieces set up is it can separate into its individual components with each drag queen, and we set it up so that we had half of them exhibited at the University of Houston. MD Anderson library, and then half of them at the great gay club, Tony's corner pocket, which has stripped shows, and drag shows, and is the most bump in like, place that everybody in the Houston gay world goes,

N

Nick Vaughn 50:18

by far one of the most diverse queer spaces have ever seen. Like literally everybody like racially socio economic age, why age, everybody goes there. It's the it's amazing. And so

J

Jake Margolin 50:30

having these works in both of these two places, and for us having them be equally what's the word that I'm looking for? formed? Yeah, they're just that they're equally positioned, and in our practice are equally positioned with. So like the contemporary art museum or the mfh, or the commercial gallery that we show it. Like that is our agenda as artists, and it was such a wonderful experience. And I just wanted to make sure that that was in any kind of a recording that was being made for the University of Houston,

N

Nick Vaughn 51:06

I should also for this show, want to take just a second to dive into this the question about myself

I should also for this show, want to take just a second to dive into like the amazing print work that flatbed did. And

J Jake Margolin 51:22

Catherine birnberg, go for it. Oh is the master printer behind behind flatbed press. And when we first approached her were put in touch with her about doing this. And we started talking to her about what we thought we should do, she started to have these incredible ideas about how she could do some really unexpected things with print processes to match the research that we had done and the tenor of the installation that we had made. And so very much unlike a lot of artists driven print processes. This was a true collaboration with a master printer who

N Nick Vaughn 52:03

was brilliant. Yeah, one of the things that I think is so amazing about the the six folio prints that are part of the addition is that they're this beautiful combination process of etchings which is an intaglio process. So it means that the ink in the from the plate is actually pressed into the surface of the paper. And so it has this like very deep work, right. So they're etchings and totally electrons that are then flocked in graphite powder, which is built up on the surface of the wet ink. And so they they turn into these beautifully, that they just the prints feel like forever deep. It feels like you know, they both sit on top of the page and then descend into the page. And there's the beautiful depth and then that is just so powerful like Katherine did such astounding work on them. They're pretty profoundly cool. And then the folks cloverleaf built the box, and it's standard to the boxes in hand dyed does all this information is on the call upon. But it seems useful to say it because not everybody reads everything. The box is coated in hand dyed Tyvek, which sort of in some ways like speaks to the same graphite texture and is this sort of wonderful thing that like even though it's a synthetic material has this organic pattern, that means that every one is completely individual. And so in the same way that the flocking introduces just a slight amount of variability to what is otherwise a perfectly identical audition. The Tyvek on the covers has the same kind of like as a uniformity into the way it's died and handled and how the boxes are constructed. But each one has its own sort of like fingerprint. Which felt appropriate.

J Jake Margolin 54:01

The last thing that I want to say is that the book has an inscription and it's inscribed, the original book is inscribed. It might be getting the exact words wrong, but it's to one whom we dearly love, who here shall remain nameless. This book is affectionately inscribed. And the it feels like it captures so much about the we can never find out who Carhart is talking about. We have some thoughts but like you can never know. And this sort of ambiguous and poetic way of speaking about these histories. And knowing that the people who were the gatekeepers to this knowledge kept many people's names and stories, unnamed and private. is sort of the huge thing. that we're looking at. And it's something that I think about kind of whenever we get into archives, and I think about whenever we're making work is that it feels also to us that like, we're making this for a community that we dearly love. And we're making it for the people who remained nameless and will never be known. You know, feel somehow in a spiritual way like we're speaking to them.

N

Nick Vaughn 55:30

Yeah.

V

Vince Lee 55:35

Thank you so much, Nick and Jake, for your time today. I really appreciate you spending an hour and chatting with me about not only your our artistic work, but moving to Texas and Houston specifically and us getting to know you and you, us as well as the community and you're a little bit of an on philosophy and process of your artwork and kind of this moment that we're in right now. So I really appreciate you taking the time to do this.

V

Vince Lee 56:08

Thank you both. Totally. Our pleasure.

J

Jake Margolin 56:11

Thank you for including us and yes, it's a total honor.