

NOV | DEC 2022

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Defending Our Youth

Dr. Scott Hadland,
LGBTQ+ pediatrician

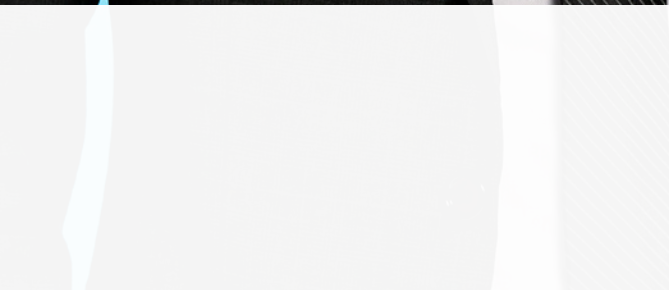
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"Flower Puddle," open edition print, 2018, by Shoog McDaniel

The Queer Gaze

Portland, Maine gallery's showcase of LGBTQ art and the legendary songwriter Bob Crewe

It may sound like a stretch from "Jersey Boys" to a queer art exhibit in Maine, but that's the zig zagging, creative route of "Can't Take My Eyes Off You," a group exhibition that celebrates queer culture through art and music. Taking its title from the hit Frankie Valli song written by Bob Crewe and Bob Gaudio, "Can't Take My Eyes Off You" runs through December 23 at Speedwell Projects in Portland, Maine.

The show features work by mostly queer Maine artists.

"I was interested in finding contemporary artists who represented a really wide range of queer identity and also looking at ways that queer visibility can manifest through a creative lens," said the show's

curator Faythe Levine whose many independent art projects include the 2015 publication "Bar Dykes," an oral history about lesbian bar culture starting in the 1950s that Levine conducted with her friend, Tennessee-based writer and activist Merrill Mushroom.

The "intergeneration relationship has been formative to me," said Levine who wanted to "get Merrill's story out to a younger audience in a format they'd be interested in. It goes back to the energy of the [Maine] exhibition. What can we learn from sharing experiences and being open to the wide range of what queer can look like?"

Initial funding for "Can't Take My Eyes Off You" came from the Crewe

Foundation, established by legendary songwriter Bob Crewe, who's best known for writing hit songs from the 1950s through the 1970s, including "Rag Doll," "Walk Like A Man," "Lady Marmalade" and "My Eyes Adored You." Crewe is a featured character in the Tony Award-winning musical "Jersey Boys," based on the story of Frankie Valli & the Four Seasons, and is credited as the show's lyricist.

Crewe, who died in 2014, had moved to Maine in 2010. He established the Crewe Foundation to support the arts and the LGBTQ communities in his adopted state. His brother Dan Crewe, who also lives in Maine, cofounded the foundation and serves as president.

Levine said she hadn't known that Crewe was gay and was moved by his "personal story of queerness, coming out after such a prolific career. Love songs are usually interpreted through a heteronormative lens," she said. "An idea I've explored before is 'queering' something such as a song to make it more identifiable. There are love songs written with a different

agenda but it warms my heart to think about them potentially being written with a different agenda than the public was aware of.”

One of the works in the show deals specifically with the “queering” idea while others are more conceptual. Michelle Beaulieu-Morgan’s “vibrant and intricate embroidery piece” pops with words and imagery of roughly 200 songs, from Elton John to Patsy Cline, that helped shape the artist’s desire, politics and her aesthetic sensibilities. “The easy way to describe it is the music that made her gay as a youth, that coddled her queerness,” said Levine.

“Lavender Country,” a short documentary by Marcelo Martinez and Natasha Woods, chronicles the career of Patrick Haggarty of Lavender Country, whose self-titled 1973 album is the first-known gay-themed record in American country music history. Now 75, Haggarty is still the irascible, irreverent activist for social change who recorded “Crying These Cocksucking Tears” and a self-described revolutionary who still performs and has earned a following of young audiences. “It highlights that element I spoke to [when discussing



“Collective survival part one: won't you celebrate with me,” mixed media, 2022, by Lukaza Branfman-Verissimo

‘Bar Dykes’] about the importance of an intergenerational queer community that I believe is something that everyone can benefit from,” Levine said.

It was Annika Earley, Speedwell managing director, who reached out to Levine. “We are thrilled to be working with Fayette,” said Earley. “She curated a beautiful and lush exhibition celebrating the queer gaze.”

The installations and works in the show feature a broad range of materials and approaches, said Levine, that “amplifies the multitudes of ways queerness

can exist.” Ceramic work by Caitlin Rose Sweet “explores the layered relationship between the human body, the haptic nature of clay, and the history of the ceramic vessel.” Shoog McDaniel’s color photographs of trans bodies “joyfully explores how many ways there are to be beautiful and sensual.”

Other artists in the exhibit include Lukaza Branfman-Verissimo, whose “obscured letterforms and Devon Kelley-Yurdin’s layered and delicate print work challenge the viewer to consider how stories are told and who is telling them,” according to Speedwell’s description. Heather Flor Cron, a farmer, performer and transdisciplinary artist, “explores the defeat and transformation of trauma through the twin powers of vulnerability and forgiveness [and] Jan Bindas-Tenney’s self-guided audio walk leads the viewer through the writer’s South Portland neighborhood and acts a love letter to Bindas-Tenney’s trans body, their family and friends, and the strange community on the urban edges of which they are a part.” [x]

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