

ART

Two Queer Artists Recreate San Francisco's Shuttered Dyke Bars

To Know Herself at the CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts honors these bars as spaces in which community connections start, and where love grows.



Roula Seikaly April 19, 2019



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To Know Herself, 2019; installation view, CCA Wattis Institute; Photo: Glen Cheriton

SAN FRANCISCO — On view at the CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts through late April, *To Know Herself* addresses gentrification's insidious effects on local culture and pays homage to dyke bars as places of personal and community empowerment at a time when such locations are not long for this world.

The intimate installation pairs work by multimedia artists Tammy Rae Carland and Macon Reed. Carland may be best known for tragicomic photographic series *I'm Dying Up Here* (2011), but is here represented by multiple 2-D works and a commissioned installation: *Dear Jo* (2010). Her evocatively collaged notes convey the author's bittersweet ache for a paramour. No longer than one page each, the letters capture the nuance of lesbian or other forbidden love as something nurtured in secret, perhaps through furtively passed notes or in the low light of a favorite bar. "Save the last dance for me" (2019) represents Carland's collaboration with Los Angeles-based musician Kelly Martin; the stage-like corner of the gallery-cum-bar is enlivened by the repeating track from which the installation draws its title. When not populated by performers, the unoccupied stage is all the more lonely for the soundtrack that plays in a loop, suggesting absence where once there was presence and gesturing mournfully to the loss of not only dyke bars as physical spaces, but to communities of friends and lovers that once visited. At first, I was disappointed to see that the stage was not programmed during regular hours, but the absent figures symbolize both the missing physical spaces and the women who spent time there.

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Tammy Rae Carland, *Dear Jo*, 2010 and *Looking for my museum*, 2012; *To Know Herself*, 2019; installation view, CCA Wattis Institute; courtesy of the artist and Jessica Silverman Gallery, San Francisco; Photo: Glen Cheriton

Macon Reed’s “Eulogy for the Dyke Bar,” (2015) sets the physical terms of the installation, temporarily turning the gallery into a less rarified, and to many, a more relatable space. The framed photocopies — grainy black and white photos of bar interiors, and letters laced with anguish and defiance written by bar owners explaining why the spaces must be shuttered — hold space as cherished mementos and suggests an important yet widely unknown collective archive. In all of her constructed pieces, Reed makes no effort to hide her handiwork, an effect that renders each object as nostalgic talismans for time and spaces lost.



Macon Reed, “Eulogy For The Dyke Bar” [jukebox and neon detail], 2015; *To Know Herself*, 2019; installation view, CCA Wattis Institute; courtesy of the artist; Photo: Glen Cheriton

In both her exhibition essay and our conversation during a walkthrough, curator Yomna Osman uses the word “texture” to describe what dyke bars offered the neighborhoods in which they were formerly located. Born in Cairo and transplanted to San Francisco for graduate study at California College of the Arts, a homesick Osman questioned how city denizens form deep connections with their environment, and it is from that line of inquiry that the exhibition stems. Texture, in this context, is multi-sensorial. It is the heady scent of bodies in motion on the dance floor. It is the sound of energetic conversations about grassroots organizing, or who is crushing on whom. It is the sight of familiar and beloved faces, and feels something like home. While that immersive experience isn’t captured in this installation, Osman comes close to it and offers much-needed institutional critique in the process. As a representative Bay Area arts space, the Wattis isn’t responsible for mirroring what dyke bar patrons would experience. But I, and many others, argue that the venue and its peer institutions must understand their role as gentrifiers, and in smoothing the gloriously rough edges that made San Francisco a cultural mecca in the first place.



Tammy Rae Carland, “Save the last dance for me” (2019); *To Know Herself*, 2019; installation view, CCA Wattis Institute; Photo: Johnna Arnold

For some visitors, the exhibition may elicit exasperated eye rolls and comments about how cities, by their nature, change, and what’s the point of mourning another shuttered watering hole? For others, the point clear: without spaces such as Maud’s (1961-69), Amelia’s (1978-1991) and the Lexington Club (1997-2015), the texture of personal and community life is not as dense, and we suffer for it. *To Know Herself* honors dyke bars as spaces in which community connections start, and where love grows. More importantly, it exposes a history of resilience, and hope for a future in which the gaping economic and cultural maw created by an obscene cost of living is narrowed.



To Know Herself, 2019; installation view, CCA Wattis Institute; Photo: Glen Cheriton

To Know Herself is on view at the CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts (360 Kansas St, San Francisco, CA 94103) through April 27. The exhibition was curated by Yomna Osman in partial fulfillment of her MA in Curatorial Practice at California College of the Arts.



To Know Herself, 2019; installation view, CCA Wattis Institute; Photo: Glen Cheriton

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