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Exhibition creates space for queer women while exploring the spaces they've lost



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Yomna Osman, the curator of "To Know Herself," is seen at the Wattis Institute.
Photo: Jana Asenbrennerova, Special to The Chronicle

There's a space, a little alcove, in the back of "[To Know Herself](#)," an exhibition at the Wattis Institute. It's framed by a royal-blue curtain, and there's a black mat laid flat on the floor. A spotlight is trained on the center. Overhead is a faint speaker and a clear cone to keep the music focused here, on this one small place, this place for dancing.

The same song plays over and over, a plaintive version of an old pop song, backed by a mandolin.

Oh darling save the last dance for me/ Oh save the last dance for me.

Every day, five minutes before the gallery closes, the Oakland artist [Tammy Rae Carland](#) (or somebody filling in for her) comes to this place with a partner and they dance. somebody filling in for her) comes to this place with a partner and they dance.

Usually the women waltz, but the sort of dance isn't the point so much. The dancing is. When you're there to see it happen, it feels simple and sweet and joyful. And then, as you consider the show around it, an exhibition that explores that lack of physical space for queer women, it also becomes somber and sad.

In all of San Francisco, this is one of very few places with a fixed schedule made for queer women to come and dance and be with each other. And the exhibition closes in a week, on Saturday, April 27.

"Dancing for me was the kind of thread for all the queer bars," says Carland, "the way to come together in touch and have intimacy that other people took for granted."

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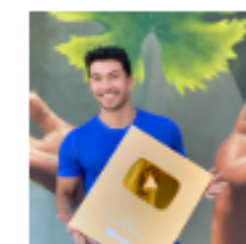
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Artist Tammy Rae Carland is seen at the “To Know Herself” exhibition.
Photo: Jana Asenbrennerova, Special to The Chronicle

“To Know Herself,” a show curated by [Yomna Osman](#), a master’s student at the California College of the Arts, explores this enduring loss of space, while at the same time creating some, if only temporarily. The show is relatively small. Only one other artist, [Macon Reed](#), contributes works. But the two artists explore the subject in such different, but complementary, ways that the room feels full.

Where Carland constructs a space for intimacy, Reed shouts through her work. At night, even from the street outside you can see a neon sign that she has used to lay claim to the gallery: “Dyke” in an orange-red and then “Bar” in the brightest pink. Inside, the sign’s light falls onto all the glass surfaces, repeating the words again and again and again. “The word ‘dyke’ is on most of the works,” Osman says as she looks around the room. “I think it’s really beautiful.”

Two years ago, Osman came to the Bay Area from Cairo to attend graduate school. Like so many who come here now, what she had imagined was not what she found. “The image that’s always been painted is this radical, liberal, really fun city that’s always been inclusive,” she says. “Then I came, and it’s just really expensive.”

The idea of spaces, where and why they’ve gone, kept coming to her. A scale model of the city, 41-by-37 feet, exists, created in the 1930s through the Works Progress Administration. Osman was tasked with cleaning it and sharing it with the city’s neighborhoods, showing off its small toy homes and tiny trees. And as she did this, she looked at other maps of the city, including one in an atlas written by Rebecca Solnit, “[Monarchs and Queens](#),” a map that indicated “butterfly habitats and queer public spaces.” This, she realized, was texture that this massive model could never account for. And so she began exploring, in earnest, the history of queer spaces in San Francisco, specifically the spaces by and for women. The exhibition comes from this research.

Reed, who lives in New York City, has shown her piece, “[Eulogy for the Dyke Bar](#),” before. There are various iterations, but in each of them, she names the place a dyke bar — “in an expansive and inclusive way,” she says — and fills it with childlike reconstructions of various objects. (She’s included a neon-colored jukebox in this showing.) And on the wall, Reed hangs 20 pieces of ephemera relating to bars that have closed or events that have ended. The descriptions, when stacked, create something with the rhythm of a poem:

“Notice: Keep the Duchess Open,” New York City/ Event Flier: “Female Trouble,” San Francisco/ Release: “What Happened, How and What You Can Do to Help.” Peg’s Place, San Francisco. April 11, 1979/ Photograph: 10-Year Anniversary Party at the Lexington Club, San Francisco.”



Miriam Klein Stahl (left), Tammy Rae Carland and Lena Wolff at the exhibition space.
Photo: Jana Asenbrennerova, Special to The Chronicle

When Reed does this, she asks people to come and tell their stories and to listen. The events are always full, people hungry for the space she has made and so much more. “That proved to be superpowerful,” she says. “There were a lot of people crying at that first event.

“There are so many different things that we’re losing with those spaces that we don’t even realize,” Reed says. These were places to dance, to flirt, to organize politically — “a place to go and meet who I have things in common with in terms of queerness and sexuality. We don’t really have a chance to be together en masse like that very frequently.”

With the same sort of intention, Osman has placed four tables and several chairs at the center of the exhibition. She wants people to use them. “I hope people are comfortable sitting down, to have a conversation or have a thought or write something,” she says. “That they would feel comfortable enough to do that and from that space comes at least a potential for social and political change or even just an impactful personal moment.

Beyond “Save the Last Dance for Me,” Carland has contributed a few more traditional pieces, including some photography and a series of collages that attempt to bring a historical figure, San Francisco activist Jo Daly, back into the sort of space she was frequently photographed in. But it’s that small alcove where the moments that Osman spoke about seem to happen.

At the opening, Carland waltzed with Kelly Martin, the woman who recorded the song. She has also danced with her daughter and old friends. She’s saving her last dance for her wife, whose lesbian moms are also scheduled to dance together. “I don’t know how to dance, so I had to do YouTube tutorials to teach myself the basic waltz.”



Artist Tammy Rae Carland (left) dances with Lena Wolff.
Photo: Jana Asenbrennerova, Special to The Chronicle

At around 5:50 p.m. on a recent Saturday, Miriam Klein Stahl and her wife, Lena Wolff, came to dance. Wolff went first.

“We’re gonna dance together,” Carland said.

“You look pretty,” Wolff said.

Their feet dragged against the mat as they moved. They were clumsy and they laughed, and they chatted.

“How has your day been?”

“Good,” Carland said. “I’m such a bad dancer, but that’s kind of the point.”

This was art, but it was also connection, a simple act of being together. And when the exhibition closes, another place for a simple act will be gone.

“To Know Herself”: Open through Saturday, April 27. Wattis Institute, 60 Kansas St., S.F.

www.wattis.org



Ryan Kost

Ryan Kost is a San Francisco Chronicle features writer. Email: rkost@sfchronicle.com.
Twitter: [@RyanKost](https://twitter.com/RyanKost)

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