

The Art of Community

Queer|Art provides a supportive and safe space for LGBTQ+ artists BY JULIE JACOBS

IT'S BEEN PARTICULARLY BUSY as of late at Queer|Art, the Manhattan-based nonprofit that serves “a diverse and vibrant community of LGBTQ+ artists across generations and disciplines.” The staff had been actively preparing for an important board meeting while continuing to balance its regular full schedule at the organization, founded in 2009 by filmmaker Ira Sachs.

During a lunchtime break on a late-winter Monday, Queer|Art Programs and Operations Director Río Sofia (she/her), a visual artist with a background in community organizing and fundraising for transgender communities and artists, explains by phone that the reason why Sachs “was motivated to

start an organization like Queer|Art was because there had been so much death within the queer community that generations of queer artists were sort of siloed from one another. One very important aspect of queer culture is intergenerational exchange and queer wisdom that is passed down from generation to generation, and because of the AIDS pandemic, there had been such a devastation and such an incredible amount of loss that he was realizing that there wasn't as much generational exchange as what he had grown up with.”

Queer|Art has indeed become a welcome and beloved source of kinship for LGBTQ+ artists. The organization focuses equally on film, performance, visual art and literature, supporting member artists who are often interdisciplinary — visual artists who are also writers, filmmakers who are also performance artists, for example. It takes a three-pronged approach to uplifting its members, through “Practice, Presents, and Awards.” Practice, centered on creative and professional development, helps artists acquire the skills and tools necessary to self-advocate and sustain and sell their work. It also stresses goal-setting, peer accountability, habit-building and community-building.

“We're very, very big on community building,” Sofia emphasizes, later adding, “We find that, while resources can sometimes feel

scarce, within community you can actually find a lot of abundance.”

The core of Practice is Queer|Art|Mentorship. Created by Sachs, the annual program joins emerging and established artists for a 12-month exchange. Mentees, referred to as Fellows, apply to work on a specific project and, once in the program, meet monthly with their mentors and with the other Fellows for deep discussion and reflection about their own work and the collective queer artistic experience. The program also includes a weeklong retreat in upstate New York, as well as Queer|Art|Pride, a yearly showcase featuring work by alumni, past mentors, and select Fellows. To be eligible to participate, artists must self-identify as queer, be early in their career, live in the United States, and not be enrolled in school in order to have the time to commit to the program. Started in 2011, Queer|Art|Mentorship began accepting applications nationally in 2020.

Some mentees, like Camilo Godoy, have become mentors. Godoy, a visual artist, was a Fellow in 2012 when the program was, as described by Sofia, “bare bones.” Godoy collaborated on projects and curated a film series for Queer|Art with his mentor, Carlos Motta, with whom he remains close, and went on to work at the Whitney Museum, teach at the New School and have solo exhibitions. Godoy's

▼ Queer|Art Mentorship Fellow Justin Allen shares his work at the LGBT Center, where the 2018 Annual Party took place.



PHOTO BY ERIC MCGNATT

trajectory from emerging artist to mentor has “been really beautiful to watch,” says Sofia.

Reaping the Rewards

Queer|Art’s other two components showcase and honor the work of its members and the extended LGBTQ+ community. Queer|Art|Presents has involved various events, exhibitions and other types of public forums including the Queer|Art Annual Party, all held in New York City and livestreamed across the country. It also continues to host a monthly film series at the IFC Center in Manhattan called Queer|Art|Film, at which LGBTQ+ artists screen and discuss movies that have inspired them.

In 2017, the organization launched the Queer|Art Community Portrait Project, a yearly, marathon photography session where the artists sit for a commissioned queer photographer and become the subject of art themselves. Many have returned for subsequent sessions, some of which have taken place at locations that resonate within the queer community, including Chelsea Piers and the historic Greenwich Village gay bar, Julius. The portraits have been exhibited at the Whitney Museum and the LGBT Center.

The final arm is Queer|Art|Awards, which confers a series of grants and prizes. Queer|Art|Prize, bestowed in partnership with HBO, for instance, presents two awards, one for Sustained Achievement and the second for Recent Work. Others include the Barbara Hammer Lesbian Experimental Filmmaking Grant, with support from the estate of the late filmmaker; the Eva Yaa Asantewaa Grant for Queer Women(+) Dance Artists, named in tribute to the visionary dance curator, critic and

educator; the Robert Giard Grant for Emerging LGBTQ+ Photographers, from The Robert Giard Foundation, established after the passing of the portrait, landscape and figure photographer whose work focused on the LGBTQ+ literary community; and the Illuminations Grant for Black Trans Women Visual Artists, developed with photographer Mariette Pathy Allen, writer Aaryn Lang and multidisciplinary artist Serena Jara. This last grant, national and for \$10,000, is especially important as “nothing like it has existed [before],” Sofia points out.

Queer|Art is funded by a combination of government, foundation, individual and corporate giving. Lead institutional support is provided by HBO, Blundstone, the National Endowment for the Arts, New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, New York State Council for the Arts, Horace W. Goldsmith Foundation and Shelley & Donald Rubin Foundation. Venue partnerships, such as those with the Whitney Museum and LGBT Center, are just as critical to the organization’s operations.

The organization has certainly made an impact. Estimated figures for 2018 to 2021 reveal it supported 1,540 artists and received 1,657 award applications. And Queer|Art|Awards has distributed \$282,000 in grants and prizes.

Beyond widening its reach nationally, Queer|Art has been looking to go deeper with its mission and “meet artists where they’re at,” Sofia says. Within the last few years, she continues, “One of the things that we have been trying to be responsive to is supporting artists in their totality, not just supporting them when they’re ready to present an artwork, but also supporting artists when they’re exhausted and need a space



for rest, supporting artists when they are struggling with financial means or maybe are in crisis.”

Toward this end, and motivated by the pandemic, Queer|Art established The Giving Circle. The initiative gives out modest disbursements biweekly to LGBTQ+ artists in the Queer|Art|Mentorship community to help cover basic needs. To date, more than 50% of the contributions are from artists in the mentorship program.

“Some of the expectation that a lot of people have on artists is that they produce, produce, produce, and if they’re not producing work, they’re not artists,” remarks Sofia, noting that the organization really wants to challenge that.

She adds, “One of the mandates that we have is to also to make sure that we’re a safe haven for queer and trans artists and that we are doing our best to support them, keeping them safe, giving them a place of respite and of connection where they’re not feeling alienated and where they also have a platform to express whatever it is that they need to articulate.” ■

▲ Heather Lynn Johnson and her mentor Pamela Sneed at the 2019 Queer|Art Pride Book & Print Fair