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# SURFACE DESIGN

**SEEING /  
BEING SEEN:**



**LGBTQIA+ WRITERS ON  
LGBTQIA+ FIBER ARTISTS**

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Winter 2023 / \$20.00



# GUEST EDITORIAL: SEEING / BEING SEEN

by Rebekah Frank

LGBTQIA+ is often followed by the word *community*.

This suggests that identifying with one or more of the ways represented by the acronym locates a person within a singular, collective *community*, implying shared beliefs, values and culture. The reality is it's shorthand for a broad range of people grouped simply because of their shared struggle for visibility and acceptance, as well as their fight for equal rights and protection from harm.

The individuals represented within this array of letters also encompass additional identities that intersect, merge and blend with the endless complexity of humanity. Race, class, spirituality, disability, mental health, immigration status, occupation and a boundless array of intersecting identities, circumstances and localities exist alongside sexual and gender identities. Additionally, there are social communities centered around activities like drag, ballroom, music, dance, hobbies, art and all the other endless ways that people come together to socialize, connect and experience joy.

The expansiveness of the LGBTQIA+ community is what inspired this special issue. I often think the depth and differences held within this particular space is minimized by the implied cohesiveness of a singular community. I invited writers who identify as LGBTQIA+ to speak on or engage with LGBTQIA+ artists specifically on identities that are adjacent to their sexual orientation or gender identity. The perspectives in the issue all start from an awareness and embodiment of LGBTQIA+ issues—specific, broad or personal—themes and interests that vary wildly. It's a bit chaotic, which I appreciate.

In addition, as someone who isn't from the world of textiles, I found the broad material practices presented extraordinary. The process of reviewing the submissions was a rich experience of learning and I thank everyone who took the time to submit a proposal. I made efforts to include numerous ways of making for my own edification and to showcase the incredible talent and varied interest in the LGBTQIA+ creative space: weaving, lace-making, fashion design, knitting, embroidery, crocheting, sewing and so much more.

I'd hoped for a broad cross-section of people who live in different cultural contexts and am pleased to include artists and

writers from the United States, Canada, South Africa, Sweden, Korea, Mexico, Puerto Rico and New Zealand. Within these pages are individuals inhabiting various gender identities and a diverse range of sexual orientations. While the call for proposals welcomed abstracts by and about LGBTQIA+ people, there was no request for qualification. Identity is in constant flux for so many people, and if they understood the premise, that was enough for me.

I prioritized artists who wanted to submit first-person accounts of their practice, resulting in five artists writing directly about their work. Diné textile weaver **Venancio Aragon** (he/him) writes about the oral histories, and ancestral teachings that inspire his textiles which utilizes over 250 colors of both synthetically and naturally dyed wool yarns. New Zealand textile designer **Dan Collings** (he/him) shares his textile and capsule fashion collection, which offers alternatives for fluid gender expression through experimentation with trompe l'oeil illusion. A recent graduate from Konstfack in Sweden, **Bogil Lee** (he/him) combines pop culture and his Korean upbringing to argue that knitting is both making and thinking, with the capacity to embody multiple layers of time and space. Italian-American **John Paul Morabito** (they/them) meditates on the legacy of Félix González-Torres through their beaded tapestries, making a connection between the Covid-19 and AIDS pandemics and the queer sensibility found in the place where joy and sorrow meet. Puerto Rican artist **Vanessa Viruet** (she/her) explores the importance of identification in both gay cruising and gang culture through the shared, socio-economic textile: the bandana. By offering space for their voices, these artists reflect directly on their experience of identifying as LGBTQIA+ and how that might show up in their creative practice.

Dialogue between two people brings a different tone, reacting to each other's thoughts and perspectives in active conversation. Since both participants identify as LGBTQIA+, I hoped for an ease in communication, with less need for cultural explanation and, hopefully, more understanding. Philadelphia-based curator and multi-disciplinary artist **Kyle Herrington's** (he/him) interview with Portland-based artist **Michael Espinoza** (they/them), a non-binary, multi-racial, multi-disciplinary artist, touches on queer kink, intimacy and collective trauma while dreaming of the potential of queer futurity through Espinoza's intervention of embroidering polaroids. San Francisco-based author **George**

**McCalman** (he/him) shares an illustrated conversation with artist **Ramekon O'Arwister** (he/him), capturing O'Arwister's free form sculptures that incorporate crochet, weaving and quilting recently featured at San Francisco's Museum of African Diaspora. **Anne Gatschet** (she/her) connects with artist **Char Schwall** (she/her), both based in Kansas City, about her sewn fabric assemblages, abstractions in a palette of gentle colors reminiscent of the oceans and the life contained within. Lace depictions of the body, intentionally left unfinished, with bobbins attached and dangling, by South African artist **Pierre Fouché** (he/him) intrigues American artist and writer **matt lambert** (they/them) as they discuss metaphors around transparency, blurring and function.

The themes that writers submitted are as varied as the locations and processes: queer desire, prison labor and intersectional identities. New York-based writer and educator **Nicole Archer** (she/her) writes about the routes of queer desire formed by the histories of migration experienced by Sikh communities recorded in the tangled embroidered tapestries of Canadian artist **Jagdeep Raina** (he/him). From Madison, Wisconsin, **Cate O'Connell-Richards** (they/them) examines the connection between prison labor and craft, specifically the craft of broom making at Wyoming Territorial Prison site in Laramie, Wyoming from 1892–1902. They invite us to consider the broom as both a utopic, exemplary object and an “easy” craft, fit for unskilled, unpaid and captive labor. Recent Stanford graduate **Tyah-Amoy Roberts** (they/any) writes about the soft sculpture and textile work of San Francisco-based **Alex Hernandez** (he/him) which merges quilting with digital imagery, layering and exposing the imperfection inherent in his intersectional identities.

Lastly, Philadelphia-based art historian, curator and critic **Alpesh Kantilal Patel** (he/him) writes about trans as a concept, using the work of four artists from one of three exhibitions he curated at Urban Glass called *Form and Formless: Constellations of Knowledge*. He shares his thoughts of how the work of artists **Julia Kwon** (she/her), **Amy Cousins** (she/they), **Katie Schulman** (she/her), **Abbey Muza** (they/them) and **Max Colby** (she/her) embodies the concept of “trans” through movement, by a lack of fixity, through an anti-identitarian stance and through a shifting in form.

What's beautiful to me about this special issue is the diversity of people and practices who responded to the open call. In some ways, the LGBTQIA+ and textile communities are similar in their expansiveness. Neither is a singular monolithic community. Instead, each embraces multiple ways of being/making, tangentially connected. Through this project, I wanted to revel in the differences, the complexity and the unconnected ways that LGBTQIA+ people exist in the world, and, in doing so, perhaps find more than a shared desire for survival.

We are living during strange times with conflicting currents within our culture. There is more visibility of LGBTQIA+ people in the arts, in the media and in our day-to-day lives. For some, the concept of “the closet” is becoming an anachronism, losing its relevance as more people are welcomed as LGBTQIA+ participants in community and culture. Yet, there is intense backlash by state legislatures who want to turn back time, forcing people backwards into the space of shame and fear that necessitated the closet for survival. Along with legislation like Florida's Parental Rights in Education act, also known as the “Don't Say Gay” bill, there is a flurry of book banning, intimidation and acts of violence against queer venues and protests against drag queen story hours. The threat against Black trans women's lives is relentless and devastating; young people are still being bullied beyond their capacity; history is being re-written to erase the stories of marginalized people.

I hope that this collection of articles, essays and interviews demonstrates that to know someone who identifies as LGBTQIA+ is to know just one thing about them. The essentializing of someone's identity is too easily used as an excuse to minimize, ostracize and de-humanize each other, ignoring all the possible points of connection, the most important being our shared humanity. This compilation of essays, interviews and articles by LGBTQIA+ writers about LGBTQIA+ textile artists offers an invitation to see and be seen, in all our complexity.

### Gratitude

I'd like to thank Surface Design Association for the invitation to be guest editor for this special issue. It's been a journey! I'm indebted to Journal Editor **Elizabeth Kozlowski** for her gentle and persistent guidance as I learned the nuance and complexity of putting a magazine together, a process started in April 2022. Special thanks to Copy Editor **Laura Lindamood** who helped me and the other writers clarify our thoughts while staying within slippery word counts. Immense appreciation for everyone who shared the call for proposals, submitted an abstract, wrote a piece or otherwise participated in this project, not the least of which is my long-suffering partner, who listened patiently as I figured it all out. And finally, much gratitude to the **National Endowment for the Arts** for supporting this issue through a generous grant.

*—Rebekah Frank (she/her) is a studio artist, independent writer, and arts administrator based in San Francisco, CA. Her creative practice focuses on steel while her writing practice amplifies artists' voices with a focus on queer makers and those using non-traditional material practices.*

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**Char Schwall**, *Undine III*, 2020. Sewn and appliquéd organza and cotton fabric, 18 x 18 inches. Photo: courtesy of Bruno David Gallery.