



# JOAN COX **Taboo**

THE SILBER ART GALLERY  
Goucher College Athenaeum

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## **ta·boo**

adj. forbidden or disapproved of; placed under a social prohibition or ban.

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**JOAN COX** **Taboo**



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*The Proposal, Part One*  
2013  
oil on canvas  
30" x 40"

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In *Taboo*, artist Joan Cox orchestrates and captures intimate looks between lesbian lovers. Over the past two years, she has arranged and captured these moments through photography, then translated the images into large-scale paintings and monotypes to produce a personal and fresh perspective. Her solo exhibition uses narrative, historical art references, theatrical elements of costumes, and autobiography to acknowledge and emphasize the female gaze. Her images open up a dialogue about the increasingly visible presence of lesbian couples in contemporary society and the lack of their presence in the history of Western art.

The work in *Taboo* falls within the context of identity politics, equal parts feminist agenda and lesbian narrative. The paintings are full of symbolic complexity and social relevance, while also portraying women who are confident in their own sexuality. By translating her own biography into a sort of composed fiction, Cox creates works that present the viewer with images of intimate relationships between women, acknowledging and emphasizing the female gaze. She draws on her own life with her partner of 11 years, as well as on the intimate lives of lesbian couples in her community, building visual narratives that champion these undeniably intense, complex, celebratory, and still-taboo relationships.

While Cox was in graduate school, she realized that museums and galleries lacked paintings depicting the intimate lives of women together, and the idea of revealing her own “otherness”—dissecting it and even celebrating it—began to germinate. Historically, society has ignored the notion of the very existence of lesbian couples. Images of female couples in both painting and photography have been repressed, hidden, or explained only as erotic material for the male gaze.

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*Lullaby*  
2012  
acrylic on polyester  
40" x 48"

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*Our Dream*  
2013  
oil on canvas  
42" x 62"

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Cox uses a process of appropriation to insert lesbian narratives where patriarchal ideals have had a stronghold on visual memories. Through borrowing and building upon powerful, recognizable iconography, she creates works that alter the narrative and subvert the erotic moments between the figures. In ***Our Dream***, Cox paints two women reclining together as in Courbet's *The Sleepers*. Her women are not sleepily on display for the male viewer; they are consumed with each other. She adds the shape of the vase from the Courbet painting into her composition that otherwise resembles Rousseau's *The Dream*, in which a single nude female reclines on a sofa in the heart of an imaginary jungle. Cox paints the lush, dreamlike setting for the couple in the painting to inhabit together.

Surreal botanical backdrops, elements of theatrical costumes, curtains, and Mardi Gras parades bring magical and dramatic qualities to Cox's paintings. In her watercolor monoprints, two female figures stand hand in hand on a beach or face each other in Schiele-inspired poses, presenting viewers with fleeting intimate moments. Her photographs of lesbian couples capture their personal dynamics, individuality, and contemporary domestic spaces. Cox's body of work increases the visibility and awareness of lesbian women by presenting their relationships as socially, culturally, and historically relevant.



She Keeps Me Warm  
2013  
photo installation  
240" x 60"



***A Handsome Couple*** is a nearly life-size watercolor monotype in which Cox painted two nude women, standing intertwined together, peering defiantly at the viewer from behind masks that suggest that their true identities may be hidden. The masks themselves are left unpainted—the white of the paper acts as a barrier separating the viewer from the intimate relationship that exists on the other side of the masks. The masks are metaphorically invisible because the figures don't wear their lesbianism like skin color—it is an imperceptible otherness. Even though they live openly as lesbians, society still may not notice, recognize, or validate their relationship. The opacity of the white paper becomes a heavy symbol when compared to the translucent nature of the watercolor washes that make up the women's bodies.

Cox's process usually begins by photographing a lesbian couple—often in a constructed pose that she mines from both historical paintings and photographs. She chooses works that depict traditional male/female couples and replaces both figures with women, but one is often more androgynous. She blurs the lines between female and male identities by making gender distinctions more ambiguous and challenging viewers' expectations. Only on closer inspection do the two female forms reveal themselves.

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*A Handsome Couple*  
2013  
watercolor monotype  
36" x 70"

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**Kissing Giantesses** features a couple dressed in outrageously bright pink stilt-walker costumes, wearing birthday hats and kissing on the corner of a tall city building in the middle of a gay pride parade, making a very public display of their love. Although the viewer does not see the other elements of the parade, the figure on the right holds a small rainbow flag left over from the revelry. The figure on the left is more androgynous but certainly female.

Cox seeks to overturn the ownership of the erotic gaze by empowering females in representative portraiture and narrative. Female subjectivity and self-representation have been repressed in favor of male eroticism in the history of Western painting. Cox turns male erotic art upside down. She reclaims and reinterprets a pulp fiction novel cover that features an illustration of lingerie-clad “lesbian” women by painting it with her own idea of what a realistic erotic scene between two lesbians might actually look like. She used herself and her partner as models for the juicy image, painted in thick, sumptuous oil and included the title of the imaginary book directly on the painting: ***I Was Once a Tomboy, Now I'm a Full Grown Lesbian***. The reclining figure wears black-and-white plaid and is clearly the dominant figure in the composition, despite the fact that she is in a traditionally submissive pose. The standing figure looks wryly out at the viewer, owning her identity as a “full-grown lesbian.” She is caught in the act of undressing herself for her partner ... or is she re-dressing after an erotic encounter? The rose-like designs subtly covering the surface of the canvas hint at femininity, while the blue jeans and button-down shirts painted with loose patches of color reveal their more androgynous personas.

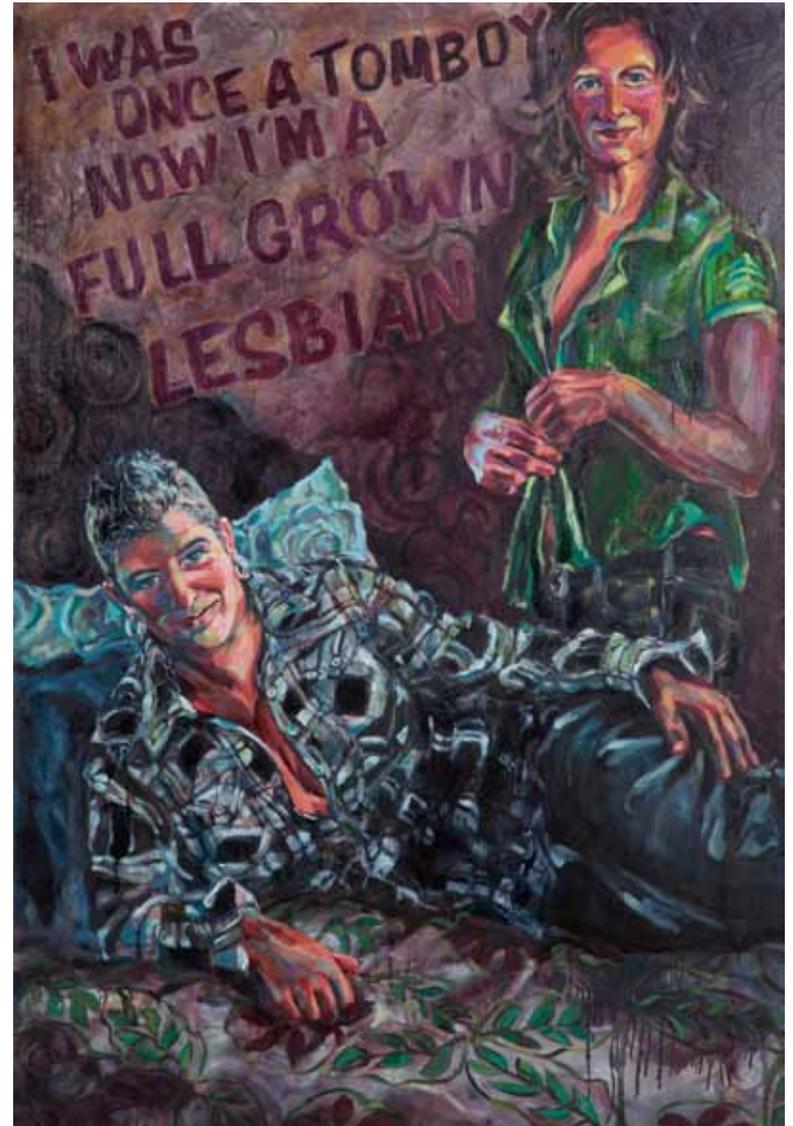
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*Kissing Giantesses*  
2012  
oil on canvas  
40" x 66"

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Cox presents lesbian women with the image of the tomboy, but also with images of the femme and the gender-neutral. Every painting becomes a presentation of her own identity. Every photograph captures one more lesbian-identified self. Through her photographs and paintings, Cox validates the presence of dynamic, complex, sensual, sexual, and loving relationships between women—making them less taboo. She is creating a visual history of an identity that is deeply personal, distinctly “other,” and yet familiar.



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*I was Once a Tomboy, Now  
I'm a Full Grown Lesbian*  
2013  
oil on canvas  
40" x 60"

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# JOAN COX **Taboo**

October 22 – December 8, 2013

**ARTIST'S RECEPTION**

Friday, November 8, 2013, 6-9 p.m.

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## THE SILBER GALLERY

Goucher College Athenaeum

**DIRECTIONS**

Baltimore Beltway, I-695,  
to exit 27A. Make first left  
onto campus.

**GALLERY HOURS**

11 a.m. to 4 p.m.  
Tuesday – Sunday  
410-337-6477

The exhibit is free and open to the public.

The Silber Gallery program is funded with the assistance of grants from the Maryland State Arts Council, an agency funded by the state of Maryland and the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Baltimore County Commission on the Arts and Sciences.

[www.goucher.edu/silber](http://www.goucher.edu/silber)

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**COVER**

**LEFT TOP**

*Hidden in Plain Sight, after  
Magritte*  
2013  
digital photograph  
16" x 24"

**LEFT BOTTOM**

*Night Hunger, After Xenia  
Hausner*  
2012  
oil on canvas  
40" x 50"

**RIGHT**

*The Lovers (after Schiele)*  
2013  
watercolor monotype  
48" x 40"

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