

# **Taboo**

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## **ta·boo**

*adj.* forbidden or disapproved of; placed under a social prohibition or ban.<sup>1</sup>

*Their desire for one another was so taboo, they chose to remain in the closet.*

From the moment I paint a figure on a canvas, I enter into a complex dialogue with the long history of figurative painting that fills museums, galleries and our visual memories. It is my challenge as a contemporary figurative painter to create engaging and poignant works amid an endless cacophony of images. I place my work in this context of identity politics, with equal parts feminist agenda and lesbian narrative. I take the route of translating my own autobiography into a sort of composed fiction, creating works that present the viewer with richly symbolic images of intimate relationships between two women, acknowledging and emphasizing the female gaze. I draw on my own life with my partner of eleven years as well as on the intimate lives of lesbian couples in my community to build visual narratives that champion our undeniably intense, complex, celebratory and (still) taboo relationships.

The materiality and sensuality of paint has always seduced me, but my process usually starts with a photographic source. I take photographic portraits of couples, often in a constructed pose that I have mined from an existing painting or photograph, such as the well-known portrait of Gertrude Stein and her lesbian lover Alice B. Toklas (Fig. 1). With this process, I enter into dialogue with artists who have come before me by appropriating compositional elements of their works. I choose paintings or photographs that depict male/female couples and replace both figures with women, although some of the women are very androgynous looking. Blurring the lines between female and male identities makes gender distinctions more ambiguous and challenges viewers' expectations. Viewers may approach a painting assuming to see a male/female couple because couples are typically defined as male/female or because they

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<sup>1</sup> Dictionary.com, accessed August 17, 2013, <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/taboo>.

recognize the composition. Only on closer inspection do the two female forms reveal themselves.

I also alter the narrative between the figures. In my reinterpretation of Frida Kahlo's *Dos Fridas*, in which she painted herself twice in a surrealistic heartbroken state, I painted myself and my lover surrounded by signifiers of our oneness. I replaced Frida's two hearts with a single heart and a single lung—a complete pulmonary system shared by two people. In another series of three paintings, I appropriated the anonymous 1594 painting of two sisters, *Gabrielle d'Estrées et un de ses Soeurs*. I exchanged the two sisters for lovers in addition to imagining the moments immediately after this scene, creating three sequential paintings titled *The Proposal — Parts One, Two and Three* (Fig. 2). Although I often begin my photo sessions with models implementing these various poses, it is my intent to move away from the art historical references so that they are no longer evident in the final work. The moments that I capture in between the specified “poses” are often the best ones. The spontaneous nature of working with couples often leads to new imagery and content for my paintings.

My photographs of lesbian couples capture their personal dynamics, their individuality and their domestic spaces. Elements of theatricality, including costumes, curtains, mardi gras parades, and surreal botanical backdrops bring magical and dramatic qualities to my paintings. Two female figures standing hand-in-hand on a beach or facing one another in closely-cropped spaces present viewers with fleeting intimate moments in my watercolor monoprints.

### **in·di·vid·u·al**

*n.* a distinct, indivisible entity; a single thing, being, instance, or item. a person.<sup>2</sup>

*They are all interesting individuals.*

I spent much of my first year focusing on formal aspects of painting psychological

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<sup>2</sup> Dictionary.com, accessed July 21, 2013, <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/individual>.

portraits, painting only portraits of individual artists around me. I gave myself parameters: the artist-subject had to be seated in some way so that I could include the complete figure, the subject's foot or knee had to come forward almost into the viewer's space, and the background had to include elements of still life or landscape to provide depth and environment. These parameters led to rather large canvases of nearly life-size figures. My interest in the single, full-body portrait was sparked by Barkley Hendrick's lecture during the first-year. His intense stylized portraits completely gripped me. Every portrait showed strength of character and individuality, and his subjects held the steady gaze of the viewer. I too wanted to create iconic, highly individual portraits. I started the next morning by painting *Big Shoes to Fill: a Portrait of Barkley Hendricks* (Fig. 3) immediately after Hendricks visited my studio. Naturally I couldn't ask him to sit for hours, but he allowed me to capture him with his ever-present camera in his lap, with just one snap of my camera.

Painting my mentor, 82-year old, Baltimore artist Paul Moscatt was probably the most difficult and also the most successful portrait I made out of this series of seven (Fig. 4). He moved around his studio talking, joking and evading my efforts to photograph him. He was uncomfortable being on the other side of observation. Most of the artists I painted were reluctant subjects who were far more comfortable being the creator rather than being the observed. Eventually I held a mirror in front of me just below the lens of my camera and asked Paul to peer into the mirror as if he were painting a self-portrait, and I finally got him. His expression was not jaunty or superficial; it revealed something of his inner angst instead. Somehow I translated a bit of that angst along with the overstuffed contents of his studio into the painting. My subjects were beginning to really *own* the canvas they were painted on.

When I entered the program I was already focused on portraits of individual friends, especially my gay friends, and I was just beginning to investigate contemporary portraiture. I made a few self-portraits too, but the most exciting work I had just finished was a double portrait:

two individual male nudes confronting the viewer with both their nudity and the bold revelation that they are each one half of a whole couple. I presented them as individuals who were more than the sum of their parts. I signified their togetherness by painting them on a common ground of pink tulips from the park near their home. I included a photographic transfer of the Baltimore city skyline to create a linear connection across both canvases and a cultural backdrop. The figure on the left looks slightly toward the one on the right; the one on the right looks directly at the viewer in self-possessed stance. The idea of double portraits began to come back in to my thinking as I finished the last portrait in the artist series by painting both Edgar and Caterina together in the printroom. It was apparent that two figures on the canvas can create a more palpable emotional dynamic than just one.

### **cou·ple**

*n.* two persons considered as joined together, as a married or engaged pair, lovers, or dance partners.<sup>3</sup>

*They make a handsome couple*

Xenia Hausner's homoerotic painting *Nachthunger* (Fig. 5) has an element of intimacy and directness: two women reclining together on a sofa under colorful blankets, gazing fixedly at the viewer. This painting struck me because it is one of the only contemporary paintings of two women in an obviously romantic relationship that I remembered seeing in person. It was, in fact, the only one I could even think of. I approached my next painting as if I was setting up a theater stage: I recreated Hausner's scene in *Nachthunger* at home on my own sofa, with my lover, under our own blankets—one with a masculine pattern of red and black plaid and the other a hand-knitted blanket of feminine rosettes. I wanted to create an intimate portrait of the duality of our relationship and the hidden roles we each play by emphasizing the signifiers in the painting such

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<sup>3</sup> Dictionary.com, accessed July 21, 2013, <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/couple?s=t>.

as the blanket and clothing patterns. I painted the patterns and even the figures with intense hues and thick brushstrokes, balancing the overactive foreground with a theatrical backdrop of dense black. A small sketched portrait of our dog Claribel floats in the upper left corner on an invisible shelf adding just a bit of humor (Fig. 6).

Realizing that paintings depicting the intimate lives of women together were lacking in museums and galleries, the idea of revealing my own “otherness”—dissecting it and even celebrating it—began to germinate. In many ways, the idea of painting lesbian couples seems as if it would have been an obvious choice before now. There is so much potential content to explore simply by focusing on the notion of a couple: the many ways the individuals manifest and interact as well as the many ways society ignores and represses the very existence of these couples. Why didn’t I do it before now? Why aren’t others doing it? I avoided confronting my sexuality in my work because it is so revealing and puts me into a very vulnerable position. For many years I had to hide my identity, or at least I chose to hide it because of fears of rejection by my family and society. I attended Catholic schools and was the model of a “good girl,” with a very religious grandmother whom I loved dearly and never wanted to disappoint. I felt like a chameleon, trying to blend in when I was in public and trying to figure out who I really was in private. Although I have been out now for many years—since my grandmother passed away in 1995—I often still feel like that chameleon in everyday situations where people simply assume that I am “normal” like them. They don’t always see my otherness. I have to come out again over and over in my daily life—it is finally time to come out in my painting and to celebrate my identity. My painting, *Kissing Giantesses* (Fig. 7), does exactly that. It features a couple dressed in outrageous pink cake 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. I

added a hint of a bra strap on her shoulder as an extra clue to viewers who might assume this is a painting of a traditional couple.

### **in·vis·i·ble**

*adj.* kept hidden from public view; secret; clandestine<sup>4</sup>

*The actors were invisible on the stage until the lights came up.*

I have discovered numerous photographers, including Berenice Abbot and Claude Cahun in the 1920's, Barbara Hammer in the 1970's, and Catherine Opie in the 1990's, who have openly portrayed lesbians in their photographs, but I have found relatively few painters. The bulk of women painters who openly explored lesbian themes worked in the 1920's and 1930's, during the first wave of feminism in Western culture. Tamara de Lempicka, Romaine Brooks and Leonor Fini were working in Paris during the years after World War I when women were entering the workforce, wearing factory uniforms or modified ladies clothing that had the appearance of men's clothing. They supported the war efforts and found a bit of freedom from gender roles along the way. Lesbians lived more openly during this time, but this more open way of life came to a halt with the dangers of World War II causing many ex-pats and Jews to flee Paris. By the time the second wave of the feminist movement arrived in the 1960's, happenings, video and photography held sway rather than painting. Critics overlooked female painters even when they fit into the modernist trajectory of Abstract Expressionism and Color Field painting to Minimalism. Lesbian painters Louise Fishman and Joan Snyder participated in the feminist movement but chose to paint in an abstract expressionist style, avoiding any blatant references to sexuality in their works. Leonor Fini was one of the few painters to present erotic paintings of lesbians in the mid-1960's, but she was mostly ignored by the critical establishment.

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<sup>4</sup> Dictionary.com. Accessed July 21, 2013. <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/invisible?s=t>.

Even as the feminist movement of the 1970's included ground-breaking exhibitions of women artists—including many lesbian artists—the written history continues to gloss over the impact that lesbians made. In a 1996 essay in *Art Journal*, Laura Cottingham examines the continual erasure of lesbian history in our patriarchal society.<sup>5</sup> As of 1996 there had been only two major museum exhibitions that focused on the feminist art movement of the 1970's: *Division of Labor: "Women's Work" In Contemporary Art* (1995) and *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago's "Dinner Party" in Feminist Art History* (1996). According to Cottingham, both exhibits and the curatorial statements that accompanied them "overly heterosexualized the feminist art movement of the 1970's through the omission and miscontextualization of art made by and about lesbians."<sup>6</sup> Only a few lesbian artists were included in these exhibitions, and the curators minimized their work, discussing it only superficially. Cottingham goes on to argue, "The practice of offering just illustration or description—that is, including usually marginalized artworks but dropping their context—appears to be one of the most popular devices to preclude the real implications of all identity politics. Thus, people make a nod to lesbianism without acknowledging its persecution, use the word *gender* but forego discussing sexism, or write the word *race* when the real issue is racism."<sup>7</sup> Cottingham cites another example of the persistence of lesbian erasure in the narrative of art history :the foreword that accompanies the 1990 book *Berenice Abbot/Photographs*. Here, the author, Muriel Rukeyser, highlights a few of Abbot's portraits of well known men like James Joyce and Jacques Cocteau but completely neglects to mention the many openly lesbian women of the Left Bank that make up the majority of her portraits, thereby leaving out critical information about her own lesbian identity and the subculture of 1920s Paris that she documented.<sup>8</sup> Continued lack of acknowledgement of a lesbian cultural existence reinforces our

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<sup>5</sup> Laura Cottingham, "Notes on Lesbian," *Art Journal* 55 (Winter 1996): 72–77

<sup>6</sup> Cottingham, "Notes on Lesbian," 76.

<sup>7</sup> Cottingham, "Notes on Lesbian," 76–77.

invisibility in both society and art.

Perhaps more insidious than just ignoring lesbian identity and subject matter, Mira Schor argues that “the narrative of the death of painting is meant to jam the signals of other narratives, that is to say the narrative of the Other.”<sup>9</sup> The idea that Western art tells only one story, through the eyes of the white male, is by its nature an exclusionary idea. The so-called death of painting was a tactical discourse that aimed to leave out all others voices. As Schor implies, the all white, male dominated art world excluded all minorities: women, blacks, lesbians, Hispanics, and any other person or perspective who was different. They were denied a voice in the art world and condemned for trying to revisit painting or add anything to the history of painting. Contemporary artists are working now to fill in the gaps.

Because the lesbian perspective has been denied so long in painting, I have been looking at ways in which African American artists work to present their otherness. Figurative artists such as Kerry James Marshall and Mickalene Thomas make socially relevant paintings through the complex investigation of cultural norms, racial and sexual identity and body politics. They mine their unique communities, personal experiences and otherness for meaningful imagery that empowers their visual stories. Marshall and Thomas have begun paving the way by inserting themselves into the story of Western art. They both make powerful, life-size figurative paintings that have gained critical acclaim and more recent inclusion into major museum collections. I attended a lecture at the Smithsonian American Art Museum in 2012 in which Marshall described how he approaches this art-making through the lens of a black aesthetic—one that he has helped to solidify and promote. Changing the paradigm in Western art to one that includes a largely invisible black culture and forgotten black history is what motivates him to create large-scale “history” paintings. It became evident to me that as a lesbian artist, I needed to subscribe to a

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<sup>8</sup> Cottingham, “Notes on Lesbian,” 74.

<sup>9</sup> Mira Schor, *Wet: On Painting, Feminism, and Art Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 153.

similar goal of making my nearly invisible subculture visible. I strive to make paintings that depict personal narratives full of symbolic complexity and social relevance while also portraying women who are confident in their own sexuality.

Mickalene Thomas' work interests me because she begins with photographs, some of which become works of art in themselves, but she uses others to create her confrontational portraits of black women with overt sexual tones and layers of cultural significance. She interacts with her models in a way that allows their inner selves to emerge with visual power. She allows the model's gaze to dominate the composition. Her paintings—rhinestone encrusted, collaged, layered with faux fur patterns and cheap wood paneling—speak to African American stereotypes and décor from the 1970s era she grew up in. She lures viewers in with seductive materials but engages them through genuinely emotional and meaningful subjects. Thomas has thoroughly studied paintings by Western masters and employs both their compositions and titles, such as Courbet's *Origin of the Universe* and Manet's *Dejeuner Sur l'Herbe*, in her own works to create new works that are unique contemporary portraits of strong women. Both Thomas and Marshall successfully engage with historic works of art that go beyond the average art-student copy. In the *Art:21* video segment on *Identity*, Marshall says, "We only move into the twenty-first century on the foundation of things that were established long, long ago."<sup>10</sup> This process of appropriation has encouraged me to follow a similar path of inserting lesbian narratives where patriarchal narratives have a strong-hold on our visual memories. Through borrowing and building upon powerful, recognizable iconography, I create work that, like a tree, has equally strong roots but which grows new branches.

Thomas' lesbian identity and inherent female gaze come through strongly in her images of sexualized women. Although her overly decorated and bejeweled women could be misconstrued

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<sup>10</sup> PBS, *Art:21–Identity*, accessed August 5, 2013. <http://www.pbs.org/art21/artists/kerry-james-marshall>.

as negative, stereotypical portrayals of women, she effectively owns the stereotypes and turns them in on themselves, forcing viewers to question her intent. A male critic for *Wound Magazine* sums up his response to Thomas' overtly lesbian narrative:

Thomas, of course, rather than apologising for the depictions or the desire she may or may not feel for the depicted women, instead demands the validity of the position. Perhaps, like men who enjoy ogling 'porn lesbians,' it might never have occurred to us that what appears to be an object of desire and gratification purely to serve our needs, may, in fact, be involved in an erotic or emotional interchange with someone else altogether different from ourselves. Despite the egotistical assumptions of certain men, the pretty lesbians engaged in activities of great interest to the male observer may, ultimately, be completely disinterested. These sisters might very well be doing it for themselves.<sup>11</sup>

This type of realization on the part of a viewer suggests that Thomas' impact is far-reaching and has the ability to open up dialogues about sexuality and gender equality. I want to increase the visibility and awareness of lesbian women and their relationships as socially, culturally and historically relevant. By creating works that are hyper-theatrical in the way that Thomas' are hyper-decorative, I try to ensure the visibility that I desire. There are attention-grabbing cues inherent in dramatic lighting and the use of costumes, curtains and props that literally set the stage for a viewer to be able to engage with a painting rather than pass it by or layer it with their own agendas.

### **o·pac·i·ty**

- n.* 1. the state or quality of being opaque; not transparent or translucent.
2. *Photography*. the proportion of the light that is absorbed by the emulsion on any given area of a film or plate.
3. obscurity of meaning.<sup>12</sup>

*The opacity built by layering and splattering paint creates history on the canvas.*

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<sup>11</sup> KP. "Mickalene Thomas: Material Stealth." *Wound Magazine*, Issue 4, Fall 2008.

<sup>12</sup> Dictionary.com. Accessed July 21, 2013. <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/opacity?s=t>.

Over the past two years, I broadened my painting-only studio practice to include the making of watercolor monotypes and numerous other types of prints, as well as paintings on translucent mylar, photographs, and even video. If I am working on an idea for a painting, I will make a series of watercolor monoprints, lithographs, and collages. All of these methods become ways of making sketches for larger paintings. I frequently spend extensive periods of time in the studio moving fluidly from painting to drawing to printmaking, creating multiple pieces at once from the same group of source images. The work starts to feed itself and evolve naturally. I discover my content through process: discovering which images allow themselves to come forward and which recede. The process often dictates the final format of a piece. A particularly strong photographic portrait can lend itself to being presented as a large format print like *The Spark Between Them* (Fig. 8), and other times there is great content in a photo that needs to be further developed as a painting. *A Handsome Couple* (Fig. 9) is a nearly life-size watercolor monotype in which I 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—just 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 as well since the figures don't wear their lesbianism like skin color—it is an invisible otherness. Even though they live openly as lesbians, society may still not recognize the value of their relationship. It goes unnoticed and unvalidated by many. A photograph alone couldn't give life to the mask as metaphor: the decorative nature of the mask might obscure my true intent. 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.

While content always comes first in my work, carefully considering the presence of opacity versus transparency influences how the work is perceived and how the content manifests.

When working with oils on canvas I combine areas of transparent paint layers that suggest ethereal and emotional experiences with more opaque sections of paint that direct a viewer's attention to a certain part of the painting. I try to strike a balance between loose gestural painting and intentionally ramped-up areas of vivid detail. In *Bioluminescence* (Fig. 10), I enveloped the majority of both female figures in the darkness of a night beach scene with multiple layers of thin oil glazes. Around their hands—which are clasped together tightly—there is a glow of opaque reds and oranges, radiating the energy and excitement the two feel during their first moment of “touch.” The only other dominant space of opaque painting on the canvas is on the left figure’s distinctive, cactus motif cowboy boots. The boots, a gender-neutral footwear choice, present a striking element of persona and shine out of the darkened canvas like the full moon.

### **re·pre·sent**

- v. 1. to serve to express, designate, stand for, or denote, as a word, symbol, or the like does; symbolize.
2. to stand or act in the place of, as a substitute, proxy, or agent does.<sup>13</sup>

*The classic tomboy is often used to represent lesbian identity.*

The inherent quality of paint lends itself to the representation of sensual subjects—most of which have historically been claimed by male artists for the purposes of creating and owning a male-centric eroticism. I seek to overturn the ownership of the erotic gaze by empowering the female gaze in representative portraiture and narrative. Mira Schor writes about the “return of visual pleasure as a feminist intervention in painting” in her essay, *The Erotics of Visuality*.<sup>14</sup> She states, “Women artists have been impelled to resist visual pleasure in painting, moving from investigations of mark-making and from involvement with material toward a strictly instrumental use of imagery appropriated from other, presumably less lascivious media, or toward working in other media altogether; further, women artists are made to deny the implications of the

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<sup>13</sup> Dictionary.com, accessed July 21, 2013, <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/represent?s=t>.

<sup>14</sup> Schor, *Wet*, 165.

appearance of visual pleasure if and when it occurs in their work despite their best intentional focus on other aspects of the work.”<sup>15</sup> While female subjectivity and self-representation has been repressed in favor of male eroticism in painting and while representation has been shunned as a regressive step in painting, Schor poses the question, “what would a feminist erotics of visuality be?”<sup>16</sup> I decided to turn male erotics upside down by taking a pulp fiction cover that featured an illustration of lingerie-clad women and re-painted it with my idea of what a realistic erotic scene between two lesbians might really look like. I included the title of the book directly on the painting, *I Was Once a Tomboy, Now I’m a Full Grown Lesbian* (Fig. 11). The reclining figure wears a black and white plaid shirt painted with thick, juicy paint 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.

What does a feminist erotics of visuality look like? What can it look like? I intend to continue answering that question from at least one woman’s perspective, through one woman’s gaze, and one woman’s reflection. I represent lesbian women with the image of the tomboy but also with images of the femme and the gender-neutral who are Black, White and multi-ethnic. Every painting becomes a presentation of myself. Every photograph captures one more lesbian-identified self. I hope to validate the presence of dynamic, complex, sensual, sexual and loving relationships between women—making them less taboo. I am creating a visual history of an identity that is deeply personal, distinctly “other” and yet familiar.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

## Figures

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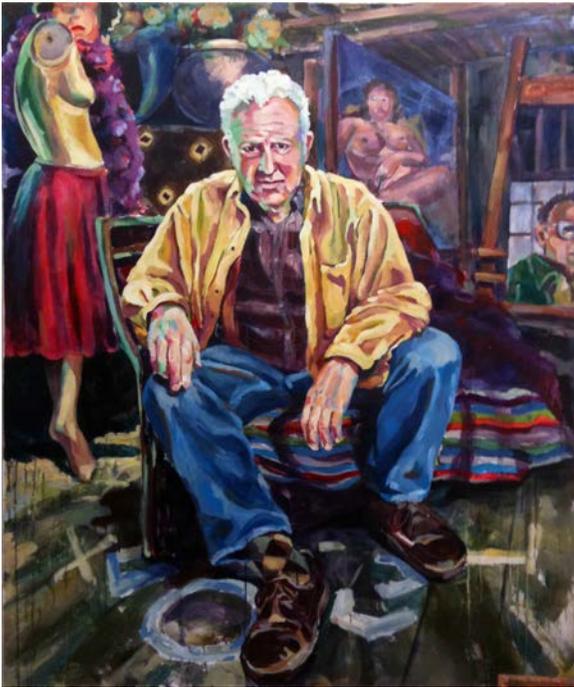
*Fig. 1: Sir Cecil Beaton, Gertude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, photograph, 1937*



*Fig. 2: Joan Cox, The Proposal – Parts One, Two and Three, oil on canvas, 40" x 30" each, 2013*



*Fig. 3: Joan Cox, Big Shoes to Fill: Portrait of Barkley Hendricks, acrylic on canvas, 40" x 50", 2011*



*Fig. 4: Joan Cox, Portrait of Paul Moscott, acrylic on canvas, 40" x 50", 2012*



*Fig. 5: Xenia Hausner, Nachthunger, acrylic on board, 205 x 250 cm, 1998*



*Fig. 6: Joan Cox, Night Hunger— after Xenia Hausner, oil on canvas, 40" x 50", 2012*



*Fig. 7: Joan Cox, Kissing Giantesses, oil on canvas, 40" x 66", 2012*



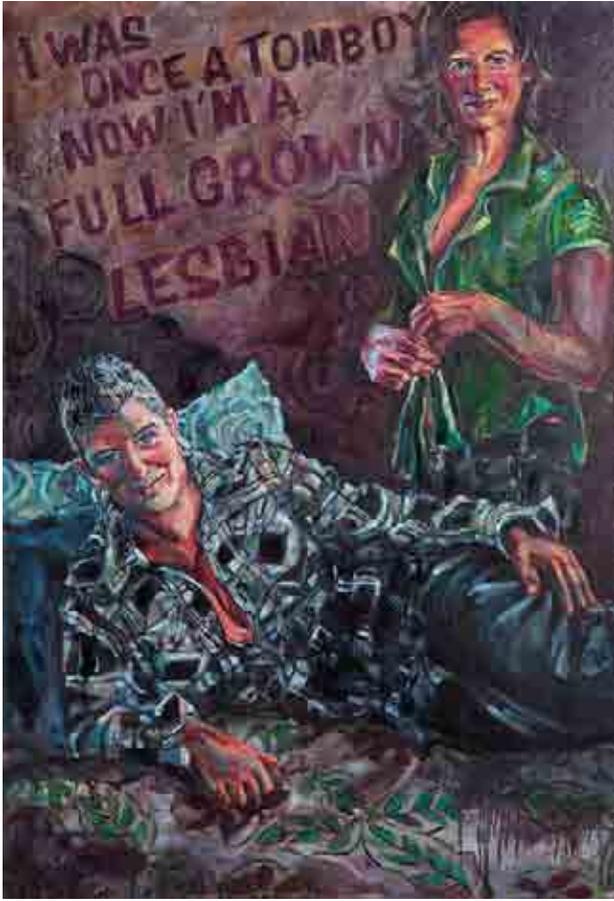
*Fig. 8: Joan Cox, The Spark Between Them, photograph, 38" x 48", 2013*



*Fig. 9: Joan Cox, A Handsome Couple, watercolor monotype, 36" x 70", 2013*



*Fig. 10: Joan Cox, Bioluminescence, oil on canvas, 50" x 64", 2013*



*Fig. 11: Joan Cox, I was Once a Tomboy, Now I'm a Full Grown Lesbian, oil on canvas, 40" x 60", 2013*

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