

# Field Tripping: Queer Interioring



"Queer Interiors" at the Baltimore Museum of Art (Jill Fannon)



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Field Tripping

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**M**y **Friday nights** usually consist of ordering in and staring at the television—long work weeks will do that to you. I save my fieldtrips for the magic of the Saturday afternoon—I'm rested, and I don't have to start thinking about a new work week quite yet—but when the ladyfriend invited me on a hot date to the opening of "Queer Interiors," the new exhibit of work by Jaimes Mayhew and Rahne Alexander at the Baltimore Museum of Art, I was quick to the jump: The event was scheduled for the very Kate-friendly Friday night time of 6-9 p.m., we could walk there, and there was promise of food, cocktails, and a collection of dapper queers.

Queer Interiors is part of the BMA's Commons Collaboration project, which commissions artists to develop an installation of work and a slate of public programming related to the museum's "Imagining Home" exhibit. There's nothing not to love about this Commons Collaboration business. It pays real money to artists to do new projects—that we expect artists to work for free never ceases to piss me off—and has invited the community to come in and see themselves in the work. Adjacent to the Joseph Education Center, the collaborations bring

artists to teach the rest of us not only about the art, but how to make our own. It's just the sort of embedded work our big institutions should do, but rarely manage.

And now it's Mayhew and Alexander's turn, and they've done some witchy queer magic in that space. "Queer Interiors" consists of several main pieces. 'Identity Shelves' displays artifacts from individual homes, each taking on a special significance just by virtue of their display. The 'LGBTQUI Home Movie Quilt' hangs on the wall as a video projection fills each quilt square with changing photographs collected from Baltimore's queer community. And then there's the giant bed made of giant squares, each covered by a different kind of pride flag, pushed together and inviting everyone to get on it at once. The room feels open, cozy, and, well, like home.

That is a big part of the point of the exhibit. Alexander says she is inspired by the quotidian, in all its sense of the everyday and mundane. "I want to reveal queer 'ordinariness,' and to reveal the ordinariness of 'queer.' A lot of my life is really boring, and not at all as exotic as it might sound were I to tell you that I'm a 'lesbian-identified transsexual queer artist,'" she says. "True equality is when we each get to be as boring and ordinary as everyone else."

For Mayhew, the project is also about reframing the idea of home for everyone. He is "inspired by the mundanity of home life for LGBTQI+ people, as well as the more nuanced differences from heteronormativity." It isn't that queer people are just the same as straight people, but that queer people have as much access to ordinary difference as anyone else.

The 'Home Movie Quilt' does this work best, I think. It is hanging on the far wall, just over from the giant bed. Each quilt square shows smiling people in various stages of making themselves at home. There is a woman in bed covered by dogs, a group smiling at a dinner table in a restaurant, someone lugging a sled down a snowy Baltimore street, a woman dressed up in her cosplay finest, a man teasing a child—it's a roulette of scenes that as you watch it shift and change reminds you that this is a much bigger quilt than what you're seeing, that the scenes are many, and each one is just a snapshot of a life that has its own twisting array of scenes. For a group of people often denied their complex personhood, reduced to simply "being" their sexuality, this is a big deal.

Watching the quilt spin on opening night was really special. The big bed was packed with queer people, many of whom I know, or know about. The bed is really, really big, and that's on purpose. Mayhew says "the scale of the bed is about the significance of THE BED to our histories...The bed is the place where, in the '90s gay men make work about dying from AIDS, where there were sodomy laws about our bodies and what we did there, where most humans are the most vulnerable and comfortable, and where many people in our communities who are homeless do not have the privilege to have access to." Beds aren't just where we sleep—they're where we love, organize, battle, make art, and do politics.

When I asked Alexander why such a big bed, she answered, "All the better to seat you with, my dear."

And indeed it was. We all piled in and reveled in being the center of attention that night. Seeing this art in this place with these people, I felt seen in a way I rarely do. I mean, look at all these queers taking over the Baltimore Museum of Art! The free tickets for the event sold out as Alexander and Mayhew packed the place. Many of us

were dressed to the nines (which for me means raising my game to a three), and we got to take in the surprising pleasure of seeing ourselves reflected in a place where we are often the ones doing the looking. Representation is complicated, and it won't set us free, but as I learned when taking in "Fun Home" on Broadway, when it suddenly happens to you, it'll gut you, learning how much you needed that.

But that doesn't mean the exhibition is just for LGBTQUI+ people. Alexander hopes it can "help non-queer people see the ways in which they can connect as well, as well as to challenge preconceived notions about what various aspects of queer lives are or are not." Rather than an exhibit about what queer lives are, it's an exhibit about the fact that queer people simply are, and that's still a really powerful point.

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