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INTERVIEWS

## Two Transgender Artists on the Importance of Queering Home

Rahne Alexander and Jaimes Mayhew's installation at the Baltimore Museum of Art invites viewers to connect their own domestic lives to those of LGBTQ people.

Cara Ober | May 10, 2017



Jaimes Mayhew and Rahne Alexander in their installation "Queer Interiors" at the Baltimore Museum of Art (photo by Jill Fannon)

BALTIMORE — How often do you get the opportunity to loll around in bed at an art museum? Artists [Rahne Alexander](#) and [Jaimes Mayhew](#) invite the public to do just that in "Queer Interiors," a site-specific installation within the exhibition *Imagining Home* at the Baltimore Museum of Art (BMA). While lying on a giant bed, complete with fluffy pillows and patterned comforter, you can watch a slide show projected onto a patchwork quilt

on a far wall of snapshots from backyard barbecues, kitchens, and living rooms. If you get tired of reclining, you can also browse the books and personal ephemera displayed in several slim cabinets nearby. It isn't overt, but the photos and objects reflect the lives of queer and transgender people, all willing participants in the project.

*Imagining Home* is a three-year exhibit featuring a variety of works culled from the museum's permanent collection that explores ideas of domestic space. Alexander and Mayhew's related collaboration invites viewers to connect their own domestic

lives to those of LGBTQ people — to find a common bond in the everyday activities we all share at home.

The project is subtle and inclusive enough for all sorts of visitors to appreciate it; on the day that I visited with the artists, children wriggled around on the giant bed. For those who look deeper, though, “Queer Interiors” sends a powerful message to a country vacillating between fear, contempt, misunderstanding, and acceptance of transgender Americans. The installation calmly proclaims the obvious: that people, regardless of their gender or sexuality, tend to live similar lives and that we’re all entitled to equal rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. When the show opened last September, this message didn’t seem so revolutionary, but since the GOP’s sweep of the federal government in November 2016 — and subsequent attempts to roll back legal protections for everyone except cisgender white males — the artists’ message has grown more poignant.

I reached out to Alexander and Mayhew to discuss the work in relation to their personal biographies, the act of queering a domestic space, and the importance of visibility for LGBTQ people in American museums.

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Detail of Rahne Alexander and Jaimes Mayhew’s “Queer Interiors” at the Baltimore Museum of Art (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic unless otherwise noted)

**CO:** *Can you each talk about your own experience being a transgender person? What was it like growing up and being you?*

**Jaimes Mayhew:** I grew up not knowing that lesbian, gay, and bisexual people existed, let alone transgender people. I grew up in Littleton, Colorado, which is really conservative, heteronormative, white, and Christian. I came out as a dyke in the mid 1990s, when I was 15 or so, after going to some youth retreats with the Unitarian Universalist church and meeting people who were also gay and lesbian. I was one of two out gay or lesbian people in my high school of over 2,000

people.

I landed in Seattle in my early 20s and met other masculine-identified trans people there. I began to think about transition. My living full time as male began as a long-term performance art project for a class at the art school I was attending. Thirteen

years later, I have never stopped the performance. That identity has become me, and I have become that identity.

**Rahne Alexander:** I was clear about my sex and gender from a very early age. As early as five I had an understanding of myself as female, and by the time I was eight I had discovered, through medical texts, that transsexuals existed. Learning that word, learning that there were medical treatments out there, somewhere, gave me a lot of hope. I lived with this quiet knowledge of myself for another decade or so, waiting to leave the closet, my hometown, and the religious oppression that threatened me with violence and conversion therapy.

Denial is a strong emotion, and I believe that it was very much at work within my family and the world in which I was raised. I think everyone knew, at a visceral level, that I was not a boy, even when they were attempting to make me participate as one in the world. As a teenager, I was passing as female frequently without even trying. The first time I was ever harassed on the street, I was called a bulldyke. The first time I was “in drag” in public was at a themed school spirit day. And as I came out to people in the years afterward, the general reaction was, “Oh, now I understand that you’re a woman. That makes sense.”

My takeaway was always that I never made sense as a male person, even to people that knew me casually. It was very telling that once I came out to my mother, I never really had a deep, continuing conflict about my gender or even my name change. She adopted those terms very quickly and easily. We held on to a difference of opinion about religion for years until she passed, but it was always very interesting to me that she welcomed my change with relative ease.

**CO:** *Your exhibit at the BMA breaks through many stereotypes about LGBTQ people in America. It’s domestic, cozy, and emphasizes everyday life. Can you talk about the concept for this piece — why you wanted to build a giant bed, include a quilt, slide show, and cabinet, and what these objects represent?*

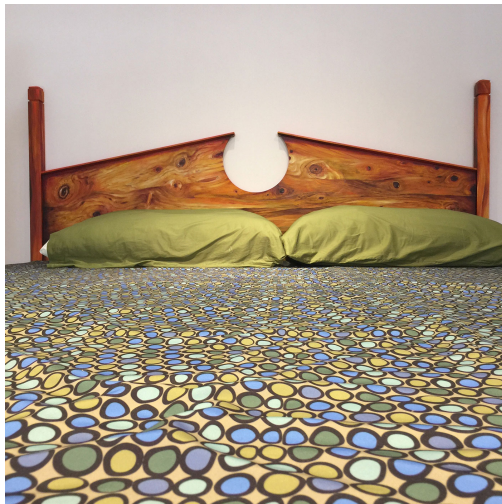
**RA:** I have always been very interested in the transformative power of the ordinary. Perhaps because of my own experience — that my own change, while revolutionary for my physical and emotional health, was really received as a sensible and ordinary progression.

**JM:** The everyday is a language that can acknowledge difference while still allowing recognition of familiar things. Within the context of the *Imagining Home* exhibit, it seemed logical to choose a bedroom as the subject of an installation about “queering

home,” because it’s a contentious place in regards to sexuality, gender, sex, and identity.

This has been the “year of the bathroom” for transgender people, and several cisgender people have asked why we didn’t choose a bathroom. I like to remind them that it isn’t really a problem for transgender people to use the bathroom in their own homes.

The bed is the stage for sexual acts with an assumption of privacy, but historically, the bedroom has not been private enough to prevent sodomy laws from attempting to stop “deviant” sexual acts from happening.



Detail of Rahne Alexander and Jaimes Mayhew’s “Queer Interiors” at the Baltimore Museum of Art

**CO:** *What does the oversized bed mean to you?*

**JM:** I designed the bed to be larger than life for a few reasons. This show is about queering the domestic, and the bed stands in as a monument to our shared histories with beds. It’s also playful and invites visitors to lie on it. A bed that relates to our bodies in the way that we are used to would not accomplish the same things.

The bed was an important [image] for gay artists during the HIV/AIDS epidemic. I designed the fabric for the comforter based on the bedsheets in AA Bronson’s “[Felix Partz, June 5, 1994](#)” (1994/1999), a photograph of Bronson’s General Idea collaborator hours after his death due to AIDS-related illness. The pillows on the bed, with their indentations, refer to Felix Gonzalez-Torres’s “[Untitled \(billboard of an empty bed\)](#)” (1991), in which the indentations in the pillows suggest absent bodies, in particular Gonzalez-Torres’s partner Ross.

Additionally, beneath the cover of the bed are 12 hand-dyed pride flags that represent just a few identities under the LGBTQ umbrella. The flags remain out of view except for on special occasions, which, for me, is the way many LGBTQ people reveal identity, mostly because we are presumed to be cisgender and straight until proven otherwise. Of course, some people can’t hide, or don’t hide their identities, but some do.

**CO:** *Can you talk more about the ways these objects are designed to connect with a diverse museum-going audience?*

**RA:** A lot of the work I've done in the last decade has been focused on making connections outside of what are maybe more insular LGBTQ spheres. My feeling is that we need to be talking across these identities — not to obscure or diminish them, but to manufacture a greater desire to connect across the barriers or spaces that identity politics can create.

This installation is something that I see as very comforting and familiar. I wanted all who see it to find some points of relation there. When I look at this exhibit, I see a queer ordinariness; in many ways, this is what my everyday life has looked like for the past 20 or 30 years. I hope that this is conveyed for other queer people as well, and I hope this helps people who think they are on the outside of queerness understand a new way of seeing.

**CO:** *Has it been officially confirmed that this is the first major exhibit in a US art museum by transgender artists? Are there any other examples that you're aware of?*

**JM:** There have been other transgender people in museums. [Wu Tsang](#), for example, has been in the Whitney Biennial and exhibited in several museums, and [Zackary Drucker](#) and [Rhys Ernst](#) were also in the Whitney Biennial. It gets difficult for me to parse exactly what this exhibit might be the first of, because it gets into a long list of qualifiers and winds up distracting from the work on some level. While it's great to be a first, I am more excited at the opportunity to get to produce museum-quality work. I'd love it if people were interested because a trans perspective is not the norm for a museum show, and especially not the norm for a museum show in Baltimore — that's what makes me proud to have participated in this collaboration.

**RA:** As far we've been able to determine, this is the second major museum to offer a collaborative installation by two trans artists, with the first being the 2014 Whitney Biennial, which worked with Zackary Drucker and Rhys Ernst. Other museums have worked with trans artists, to be sure, but this seems to be the first time that a major museum has offered an installation of this magnitude and duration to a pair of trans collaborators.

The art world has a long history of working with trans artists, but, as with most things that have to do with trans populations, it's sometimes been hard to track. The [Museum of Transgender Hirstory and Art](#) offers this list of artists: [niv Acosta](#), [Mark Aguhar](#), [Effy Beth](#), [Justin Vivian Bond](#), [Vaginal Davis](#), [Zackary Drucker](#), [Chloe](#)

Dzubilo, Reina Gossett and Sasha Wortzel, Juliana Huxtable, Greer Lankton, Amos Mac, Pierre Molinier, Genesis Breyer P-Orridge, Flawless Sabrina, Buzz Slutzky, and Chris Vargas.

To my mind, though, it's really less about being able to make this claim for this exhibition. I'd like to see more museums actively seek out these kinds of collaborations, because trans artists have been making excellent and challenging work for a long while. I'd like this to be a more common practice.



A group of children visiting Rahne Alexander and Jaimes Mayhew's "Queer Interiors" at the Baltimore Museum of Art, with the artists on the bed in background

**CO:** *Why is it important for museums to support the message and mission of equality for LGBTQ communities? What is a museum uniquely poised to offer that other institutions can't?*

**RA:** I've heard many people say that they haven't seen themselves represented in art; specifically, I've heard from some people that they have never seen such a concentration of queer people in a museum all at once before coming to our opening night. These comments have made me recognize that I've found myself in the privileged position to have much more frequently visited museums and found queer alliances there, perhaps because

I've sought out the work of artists that have fueled me.

**JM:** As an audience member, I was really inspired by Carlos Motta's show *We Who Feel Differently* at the New Museum back in 2012. It changed the way I thought about LGBTQ time, bodies, and lives, as well as breaking new imaginative ground in what an exhibition's content could be, especially as it related to LGBTQ people. Seeing a history of something I could relate to in a museum legitimized a whole history that has not been well documented. The New Museum offered a space for this to happen and be on display. Art museums act as a container for objects that are institutionally ranked as higher on the hierarchy, that are special, and that are important to a culture and time period.

I am grateful to get to make a show about LGBTQ communities and to have it in the BMA. I am especially excited that we are in Baltimore doing this show, and not in one of the major LGBTQ centers like New York, San Francisco, and others that have

more recognized histories of LGBTQ people. I am so happy that so many people in our communities are excited by the installation, are participating, and that we have built a space that speaks to these communities.

**RA:** This exhibition tells me that the things our work is exploring matter. I haven't even been alive that long on this planet, but in that time I've had my political concerns and artistic interests dismissed and diminished by people both inside and outside of my communities. It moves me that the concerns and interests explored in this piece have been valorized by the BMA, an institution whose own reputation and collection is so stunning to me.

*[“Queer Interiors”](#) continues at the Baltimore Museum of Art (10 Art Museum Drive, Baltimore, MD) through August 31.*

**Correction:** *This article original included Pauline Boudry and Renate Lorenz on the list of trans artists who've shown their work in major museums. It was a mistake; the artists are not trans. We regret the error, and it has been fixed.*