

"A queer body imprisoned within a robe of belief stands before a pool of water. It disrobes, jumps and submerges. Did it drown, or will it rise to the surface and obediently return to the shore? Shall it swim to freedom?"

When I performed this [Baptism (Catechumen)] for the camera in July 2009, I was interested in taking back the notion of baptism from institutionalized religion (church) and transforming it into a moment of self-liberation in Nature. Could one baptize oneself? Nevertheless, what if that self-empowering baptism was still filled with ambiguity for the onlooker?"

– Ernesto Pujol⁸

"The photograph is like a stage where anything can be tried, rehearsed, questioned. Or as Adam says: 'a lot of people criticize escapism or fantasy. But if you get to see a fantasy someone has constructed for themselves to feel like their best self, isn't that very real?'"

– Sophie Barbasch⁹



Clearing, 2020
Sophie Barbasch

Hey! Let's help each other out and restock the Synergy Wesley food pantry! To contribute, bring shelf-stable food items to the gallery and place them on the pedestal in the middle of the exhibition space. I'll deliver all donated items at the end of the show. Thanks in advance! xo, DIANE



*Although I am using the term *queer* to denote the full range of identities within the LGBTQIA+ community, respectfully, I also want to acknowledge the term's derogatory and defamatory history as well as the fact that it's not the chosen descriptor for every member of our community.



Time Past + Time Future (Utah)
2014
David Benjamin Sherry

Queer Representation in the Comer Collection

Dr. S. Diane Durant, curator of *Family Photos: Queer Representation in the Comer Collection*, is Director of the Jerry and Marilyn Comer Collection of Photography, which contains over 1,300 photographs dating from the 1930s. Dr. Durant is Professor of Instruction in the Bass School of Arts, Humanities & Technology, teaching courses in documentary and darkroom photography, bookarts, and interdisciplinary approaches to arts and humanities. She can be reached at durant@utdallas.edu.



Harry W. Bass Jr.
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Family Photos

March 25 - April 30, 2025
SP/N Gallery, UT Dallas



Joey Lying on David's Bed, Brooklyn
Nan Goldin, 2001
imaged by Heritage Auctions

SEEING AND BEING SEEN

S. Diane Durant, PhD
Curator

I picked up the camera because there were no images of us that spoke to me at the time when I needed them the most.

—Zanele Muholi¹

Us. We. Our. Ours. Pronouns have become quite the societal sticking point as of late, but not because of a grammar fixation or staunch resistance to change—because of power. Power being wrested, shifting, slipping. Because there's power in the collective demand to be seen, to be dignified as human, especially in photographs, when lopsided histories can be righted, and new stories can rise from the ashes of erasure. Representing oneself through pictures, when agency and authority lie solely with the imagemaker, makes the demand to be seen an act of bravery—*What if my likeness is rejected, or worse, denied?*—and an act of refusal—*I will not let anyone else determine my existence. I am who I show you I am.* Ann Noggle turned the camera on herself in flight goggles while mid-air for *Myself as a Pilot* (1982), corroborating her experience as a woman pilot with the documentary evidence of a photograph. She decided

she wanted to become a pilot after seeing Amelia Earhardt at an airshow in Chicago and would later fly noncombat missions in World War II as a WASP (Women Airforce Service Pilots). She saw what she could be, and she became it.

When Zanele Muholi decided to document their community, it was out of a similar necessity. An absence of visual narratives telling the stories of Black LGBTQIA+ people in South Africa meant that Muholi couldn't see their own lived experience, their own existence, their own flourishing. To solve this somewhat universal problem, they photographed. "I am focused on matters of representation. My images are portraits, so if my work is being exhibited, someone else's existence is also being affirmed." The 2006 gender-bending portrait of activist and journalist Lerato Dumse from Muholi's ongoing series, *Faces and Phases*, was my introduction to their work. It's unassuming at first, soft with midtones and subtle, but the gaze—direct, confrontational, undaunted—dares the viewer to keep looking. On the power dynamic of gazes and the projections they cause, Muholi declares, "[T]his is how we unseat biases. Discrimination begins with the eye and the conclusions are drawn from looking."³

When I experienced Muholi's work at the Venice Biennale in 2019, I was stunned. With my head tilted back to my traps, I stood beneath a 15-foot self-portrait, black and white as contrasting as a Grade 5 filter can achieve, and saw Zanele Muholi

for the first time, exactly as they wanted to be seen. Scale aside, the portrait was imposing, reclaiming both institutional and emotional space, commanding respect while signaling, even to me, that this image isn't just about them; it's about an even bigger *us*. And though I am neither Black nor South African, I could still see the family resemblance.

That's right, family. We can't always say *gay*, so it's in the code: "They're family." And it may be the only thing we have in common, but the otherwise ineffable bond of our shared queerness transcends biology, offering security, relief, recognition—*being-seenness*. This gift of visibility also extends to photographs, highlighting the intimate relationship between the photographer, the subject, and the viewer, too, who bears witness after the fact. And that's what a photograph *is*. An invitation. To be clear, photographs can also betray, mislead, exploit, and exclude. But queer representation in photography goes against the grain of the photograph's most enduring myth to reclaim and restructure the power dynamic embedded in the photographic tradition. The queer desire to be seen transcends the risks of representation (ostracization, persecution, elimination) in favor of telling stories with our own voices, through our own eyes—seeing *and* being seen.

David Benjamin Sherry documents the contemporary landscape of the American West, national monuments under threat of losing protected status, and other natural wonders earlier documented by (straight, white, male) photographers Timothy O'Sullivan, Carleton Watkins, and Ansel Adams. In short, we've seen these pictures before. But his monochrome printing process introduces a new element to the work: vivid, unrealistic (dare I say, queer) color. "I try with my photographs to help others 'see' the world differently and offer space to resonate with these places."⁴ Sherry's queer vision challenges our interpretation of natural landscapes and invites viewers to imagine both the tragic and romantic extra-ordinary. Is Chisos Basin in Big Bend National Park still Chisos Basin if in its photograph it's purple? Is Utah still Utah if in its photograph it's pink?

Like Sherry's landscapes, no filter or framing or photography exhibition changes the reality of queer existence, and yet the acknowledgement of this very existence has the considerable power to change how we are seen by society—if we are seen at all. In her 2011 retrospective, *About Love*, Gay Block features over 200 images from her career as a portraitist, including six photographs from her 2005 series, *Gay in Santa Fe*, which documents out-women out enjoying their lives at the Paramount, a local nightclub. The photos are almost casual, like snapshots and party pics, unlike Block's more refined portraits she's so well-known for. The subjects are smiling, carefree, vulnerable—human—and when out dancing, Block knew immediately she wanted to photograph their joy. "Living in a world that almost accepts homosexuality, it just always felt great to be in a women-only environment, seeing other women unafraid to enjoy each other in public."⁵ I don't know if the series title is a play on her name or a reference to her sexuality and that of her subjects, but looking at the photographs makes it clear: it's about love. And she has one directive for viewers: "I want people to love everybody I photographed, as I did when I was photographing them, as I have and I do."⁶ For Block, photographing someone is inextricably linked to seeing them and loving them exactly as they are, for who they are. And by photographing members of her community, she is photographing herself in a complementary



Baptism (Catedumen), 2009
Ernesto Pujol

act of love. Because the reciprocity of the queer gaze between photographer and subject (and viewer, if you're so inclined), can't be underestimated, as this is the quintessential moment of pure recognition—simultaneously seeing *and* being seen—and it is life-giving.

As Joan Didion famously pronounced, "We tell ourselves stories in order to live."⁷ If I may, a queer revision: we tell *each other's* stories in order to live abundantly, and those stories are our history, our witness, our reflection, and to be truly seen as we truly are, our family photos. Ours. We. The collective, beautiful, myriad *us*.



Myself as a Pilot, 1982
Anne Noggle
©Anne Noggle Foundation



Lerato Dumse,
Syracuse, New York,
2015
©Zanele Muholi.
Courtesy of the artist
and Yancey Richardson,
New York

Notes

1. Hannah Abel-Hirsch, "Zanele Muholi: Art and Activism," *British Journal of Photography*, November 24, 2021, <https://www.bjp.org.uk/photography/2021/11/zanele-muholi-art-and-activism/> (accessed February 20, 2025).
2. Ibid.
3. Jareh Das, "Zanele Muholi Stakes Their Claim," *Ocula Magazine*, August 4, 2021, <https://ocula.com/magazine/conversations/zanele-muholi-stakes-their-claim/> (accessed February 20, 2025).
4. Manuela Klerkx, "Photographer David Benjamin Sherry: Queering the Landscape," *Gallery Viewer Magazine*, January 31, 2023, <https://galleryviewer.com/en/article/1624/photographer-david-benjamin-sherry-queering-the-l> (accessed February 20, 2025).
5. Gay Block, "Out in Santa Fe," <https://www.gayblock.com/out-in-santa-fe-gallery> (accessed February 24, 2025). More images from *Gay in Santa Fe* are available on Block's website under the portfolio title *Out in Santa Fe*.
6. Gay Block, "A Conversation: Gay Block & Anne Wilkes Tucker" in *About Love* (Radius Books: Santa Fe, 2011), 299.
7. Joan Didion, *The White Album* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979).
8. Ernesto Pujol, e-mail message to author, March 21, 2025.
9. Sophie Barbasch, artist's statement, e-mail message to author, March 11, 2025.