

Discriminating Art

Why is male figurative art today so frequently considered 'gay'? Local painter Tom Acevedo asks from his professional experience of being rejected by 'mainstream' galleries and decides to stand by his art

If some had their way you could turn me over and find a label that reads "Gay/Artist/Man, Made in USA."

So why am I surprised that people would then label my work—a collection of paintings with no intended sexual orientation—"gay" as well?

I am new to this. I have embarked on a new career as an artist in the autumn of life. I make no claim to be the best at what I do. I do not profess to even know what people like or how they see art. I do however hear the giggles. I see the rolled eyes while people step into, or step around my open studio's at SOWA on First Fridays.

It was not until interacting with the general public that I began questioning mainstream galleries' denials to be included in shows. Maybe, just maybe, I was getting snubbed, not because of my lack of skill or imagination, but because of an underlying misconception.

Has the once mighty male nude of Roman cathedrals been tarnished?

I happen to paint figurative works. To date the predominant subject has been the male figure frozen in a moment of time. Those uninterested in the story might simply see a handsome man, but to me the subject is such a minor point when compared to the story and the concept. Still the collection has at times been described as "gay" or "erotic" and sometimes both.

About three years ago I was showing my work at a real estate office in Charlestown. The crowd was very small, but the advice of one person set me on the trajectory that

influenced how I have been seen by many. She said, "You need to go to Provincetown. They will love your work!"

Having fool's courage on my side, I wrote to every gallery in Provincetown. I submitted paintings of tasteful, non-nude, male figures in dramatic settings. Each painting contained one figure, with no other figure to relate to. Simply solo men.

On first introducing myself and my work, I was ignored by all but one: "We don't

“We don't sell that type of work.”

sell that type of work." After a month of no more responses, I was pleased to have any feedback at all, especially when I was told of a gallery that does "carry that type of work."

I was accepted into that gallery, and was thrilled and unaware of my first step into the "luxurious embrace" of the gay and erotic art world that I am still happy to be part of. At the time I did see similarities in the content of art that hung from the walls, but the common factor was "men." My ego told me that I was the novelty in this symphony of beautiful art. I was this separate voice that stood alone. Within an

hour, this false sense of self was bolstered with news of a sale of one of the paintings. And there I was walking happily, while whistling in the dark on a path I had not admitted I was on.

In certain circles of male figurative painting admirers, there is an implied subtext that the artist should create a body of work that excludes women, avoids anything too dark or controversial—unless of course it is provocative in nature. If done correctly, the allure of popularity and profit and multiple hits on your web pages follows. If I follow that path, then my collection is often labelled and viewed as gay and risqué and distinct from other art circles in which I wish to participate, and my work is frequently overlooked.

I never wanted to be a "gay artist," but I seem to have found myself classified as such. Admittedly, at first, I was lured to make heads turn, and stories and concepts were secondary. Sex sells and beauty opens doors. In the right environment, cash registers open, depending on the subject you paint. I am blessed to have my work loved and to have it welcomed in gay resort towns' galleries, publications, and books. But no matter how plush all

of it is, it still re-enforces what I perceive as "us" and "them." "Legitimate" galleries" and "gay galleries."

The view people take on the contemporary male nude became more clear to me while displaying at the SOWA open studios in the South End. I had a gentleman and his girlfriend come in. I watched them mumble together and as he approached, I did something out of the ordinary. I asked, "What do you think?"

He stepped back and smiled, hand to his chin and said, "Well, it's—really, eh, gay."

My curiosity was piqued. I asked, "Why?" I went on to say, "The characters