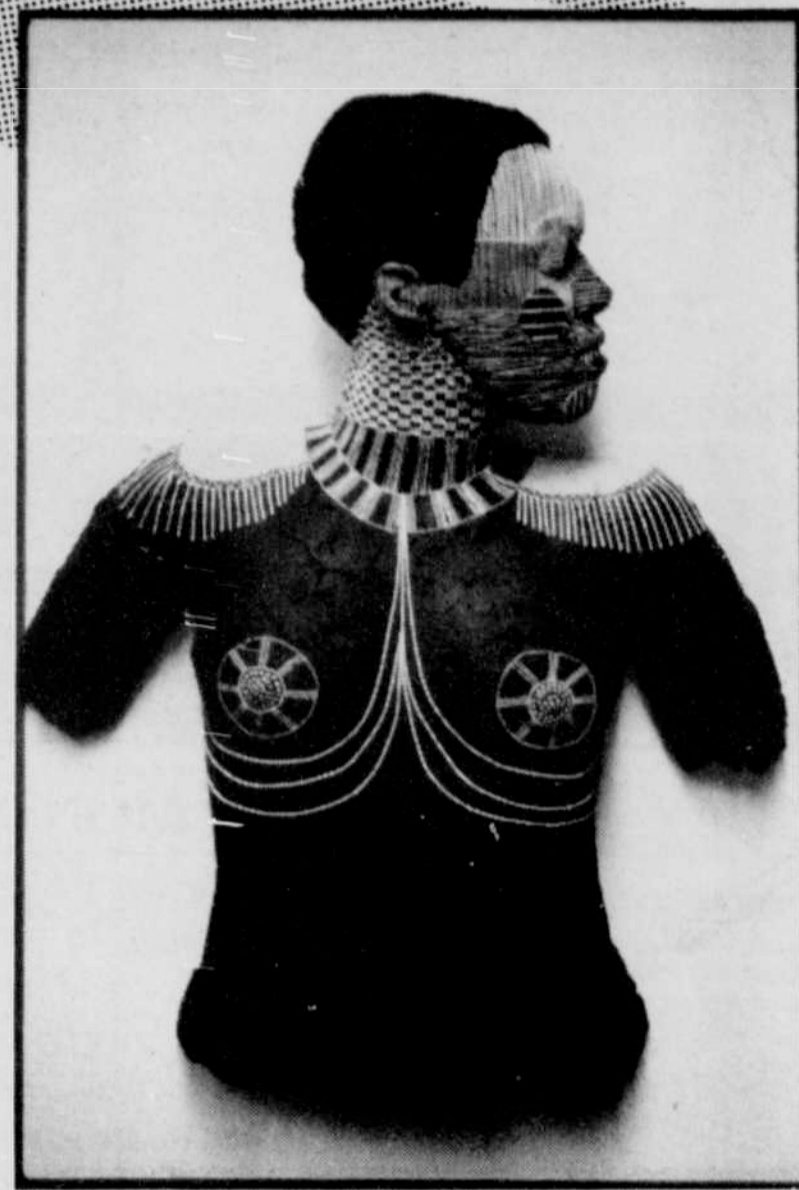


SUB-CULTURE

After winter's gloom, we now remember why we choose to live here: Portland does promise you a rose garden. It also promises — and delivers — a wealth of art, theatre, and entertainment. This month, as spring goes, so goes culture. Just Out celebrates the ferment of culture in Portland, and in our gay and lesbian community in general. The talents in our backyard are blooming!



Not going gently

Jon Erin has been affectionately called the oldest gay man in Portland. At 80, Erin is still active as a printer; and he is increasingly full of stories and opinions. In a recent conversation, he talked about gay art, the differences between generations, and "life back then."

What do you think of being known as the "oldest gay man in Portland?"

I don't particularly think of myself as gay anymore. I'm the protagonist of the gay movement, but I'm not in favor of gays *per se*. They're all a bunch of assholes.

Why do you say that?

Because they don't support anything. They look bright and cheerful and spend their money on pleasure. They're just hedonists. What gay artists do you know in Portland?

I don't know many.

I don't know *any*. I have no way of encountering the gay movement as far as art is concerned because gays don't care for art. They'd rather spend their money on amusement. Their idea of art is quiche.

Did you see the film "Before Stonewall"?

Yes. It was accurate. It served its purpose.

What did Stonewall mean to members of your generation?

It was a breakthrough. I lived right above the Stonewall Inn, but I didn't even know it was a gay joint. It was mainly a hangout for stevedores.

What would it have been like for a pre-Stonewall generation to have encountered AIDS?

We were old fashioned. We had nothing but gonorrhea and syphilis.

Would your generation have organized any differently around the issue of AIDS than we are presently?

Organization presupposes a program, and if your program is pleasure-bent, then you've got nothing to do but bury the dead — with appropriate wine, music, and dancing.

You've characterized the modern gay movement as pleasure-bent. How would you characterize the groups that you lived in when younger?

The only difference is that we were productive. We were the vanguard of a vanishing movement of art. We were all artists. We were studying and working. But we had an entirely different point of view. We were optimistic. The gay world today is pessimistic. Their idea of pleasure is "Me, too, but me first." We lived together, were a part of something, a consanguinity. We all helped each other. The people today don't understand brotherhood. They have no concept of a world that could be built out of participation. There are givers and takers. Artists are meant to give. Artists are contributors, not takers.

When did you live in San Francisco?

In the '30s. I was one of the "bold crowd," in the Bohemian set. Herb Caen gave me a plug one time: "Certain artists have customers but Jon Erin has heart."

What was the gay scene like there, then?

It was legitimate.

There was more brotherhood?

And sisterhood. Don't leave the sisters out of it. The women have controlled everything. All the joints were owned by women. Have you heard of Mona? She was the queen of San Francisco. Her joint was Finocchio's. In fact, when I got too broke, I used to wash shorts and socks for some of the cast of Finocchio's so I could eat. I had the only apartment in the building with a bathtub in it.

Where else have you lived?

Tucson. In Key West there was a gay writer (Truman Capote) who used to have a little boy on a chain that he used to drag along with him and called him his poodle.

What advice would you give to young artists?

Learn to become a sign painter.

Would you have done anything differently?

I'd have been a sign painter.

W.C. McRae

Yes, and other answers questioned

I ask 'why' a lot in my art work," says Portland artist Phyllis Yes. For Yes, who teaches at Lewis and Clark College, the "questions" may take the form of a floral-painted Porsche or a plaster cast of a female torso abstractly painted with riotous electric colors. In fact, Yes's artistic project could be characterized as extended wondering.

Yes recalls that her current works had their beginnings in a chance, overheard remark. At a show exhibiting Yes's large canvasses of intricately painted lace (which themselves posed uneasy questions about the relationship between art and craft), a viewer examined a painting of a shawl, then dismissed it as "too feminine." Yes, who overheard the remark, began to wonder, "Are there things that are 'too feminine'?" Is there anything that's "too masculine"?"

As she examined the cultural values that assign gender, according to appearance, to objects and activities, Yes developed an installation called "The Artist's Workshop." Seeking to confound the stereotype that "boys took shop and girls took home-ec, I did an entire display of tools — stereotyped male objects — painted with very colorful lace, which I used as a female symbol."

A second installation evolved from the same questioning, called "The Lace Military Cover-up." Yes painted military paraphernalia — bazookas, cots, gas masks, missiles, even maps — in lacy, floral patterns. Covering "masculine" objects with "feminine designs and colors" effectively robbed the weapons of their menace, Yes recalls. "But this war activity isn't fun and games. So I took a solid black leg and put it on the cot next to a lace helmet, as a focal point. No matter how you do a lace military cover-up, war still maims and kills."

After 'floralizing' a racing Porsche

("Race car driving is and probably always will be a real male bastion"), Yes began to wonder about the gender-identifying power of uniforms, be they business suits, khakis, or women's dresses. When wearing an antique military jacket, for instance, Yes found she assumed a different posture and felt free to order people around. Realizing that this power came from the stereotypes associated with the uniform, she explored the feminine potential of military epaulettes. She designed ten pairs of epaulettes in 18-carat gold, studded with precious stones and strings of pearls.

While working on military themes, Yes discovered that soldiers are decorated for honors as trivial as changing camps. "The 'Honored Women' series comes from thinking about reasons to honor our female side, both for men and women," Yes says. "Everyday folks need to be honored. We need medals for standing patiently in the grocery line, for not running over kids. A lot of people need 'decorated'."

Yes's pun on "decorated" is made good on her torsos. Some are intricately painted with precise elaborate designs and intricate jewelry, conforming to images of native body adornment. Others are expressionistic — the torso casts are treated like a canvas and painted with abstract design and vivid colors. Part of the "Honored Women" series are casts of black women: "Black women are working under a double jeopardy and especially deserve to be honored."

Yes plans to work with male torsos soon, and may explore painting other body parts. She will take next winter term off to travel to Africa to study native body adornment.

Yes is represented locally at the Elizabeth Leach Gallery (a show of "Honored Women" is planned for later this year) and has work on display at the Contemporary Crafts Gallery.

W.C. McRae

Cool