

# Come as you are and have a seat

Portland artist Michael Horwitz has been a staple at gay venues, creating portraits of queer youth in an environment all their own

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If you have attended any dance parties around Portland recently, chances are you've noticed revelers taking a break from the festivities to wait in line. The sight is an odd one until you find local artist Michael Horwitz at the center of the crowd, colored pencils sprawled about, drawing anyone who is willing to sit down and have a chat with him.

A Virginia native now in Portland by way of New York City, Horwitz has been making his name known at queer events around the city with his free, portrait-drawing series.

Horwitz began drawing crowds almost immediately when he appeared on the scene last June with his Ikea bag of art supplies and his hand-drawn signs reading "Get Drawn for Free!" Now he and his drawings are fixtures at Portland's queer dance parties such as Blow Pony at Rotture and Gaycation at Holocene, making appearances at a variety of other concerts, art gallery shows, and private parties. From renowned drag queens such as Alaska Thunderfuck to museum patrons to twenty-something partygoers, Horwitz has managed to document a diverse swath of Portland youth/queer culture in the over 700 portraits he has drawn and given away for free.

Now, the Pacific Northwest College of Art grad student's work has been gathered for a show titled "If You See Yourself Here, Thank You" at PNCA's Arthouse. Recently, he and I met over coffee to discuss his portraiture series, his gallery show, and Portland's queer community. And, of course, he came prepared with colored pencils and drew me as we spoke.

**Ann-Derrick Gaillot:** Tell me about the first time you drew people at events around Portland.

**Michael Horwitz:** The first time I did portraits (publicly) was at a Portland Pride party in June featuring RuPaul's Drag Race Runner-Up Alaska. I camped outside on the patio of the venue, Rotture, with a clamp light and a poster taped to the wall letting



"If You See Yourself Here, Thank You" is available for viewing by appointment. [www.ihearhorwitz.tumblr.com](http://www.ihearhorwitz.tumblr.com).

people know what I was doing. I was super nervous at first but it became apparent that people were having a blast and I drew from 7 p.m. until 2 in the morning. I was walking home across Burnside after the party ended and thinking that it felt like I was doing something right and should find a way to do it again. I started e-mailing different venues and booking dates to come to dance parties, clubs and events.

**A.G.:** What gave you the feeling that you had to keep doing this?

**M.H.:** Part of it was this level of trust that something was working that hadn't been before, which was the conversations. And I've been asked a lot why do I do this primarily in gay clubs, and I think the first answer is clearly because I'm a young, gay male and these are the social spaces that I

inhabit. But it's also, for me, an injection of kind of a pause in a setting, in a scenario where most people are not just bored with it but, actually, they go there to have fun and I actually seem miserable most of the time. And I know because I kind of came of age in gay bars. I hung out in them a lot in New York and in Virginia and there's always this sense of expectation, waiting for something to happen. Waiting to meet a guy, or for you to fall in love, or for you to be with friends and it just never met that romantic ideal. There were things there that were good, like community, and sometimes when you weren't worried about being attractive or if someone would find you attractive, then you just kind of let yourself be at ease. So with this kind of drawing, I thought it was a way for me to just get people to sit down and think about



where they are, not so much in a directed way like being more considerate, but just like relax and enjoy it. Like, this space is something that is supposed to be an escape, and because I have been openly gay for so long and going to bars I kind of forget how segregated they are.

**A.G.:** Segregated how?

**M.H.:** From straight venues. It's much different in Portland. And that was actually something that was really surprising, how much overlap there was. I didn't realize it until that first night, and I think it's primarily because in New York that wouldn't happen. And that's definitely less true in certain areas but the more I did it the more I realized I'm just interested in people. And I'll do this anywhere. It doesn't matter if it's a gay place or a straight place or, as long as there's kind of a steady stream of people who are all there for a reason and they're willing to talk. I was getting this interesting cross-section of people who are interested in entertainment, but also in culture.

**A.G.:** What in your mind makes a successful portrait?

**M.H.:** It's paying attention to how much they're giving me information-wise by what they're listening to, what they're saying, how they're sitting, if they're conveying realistically the way they are inhabiting the space, posture. There's energy, I think, in people so I'll include an aura around them, usually in paint. I think the biggest thing is doing as much as possible with as little as possible so the less noodling there is I think the stronger the drawing is for it. I'm really happy with it when people say, "Oh, that's how I feel like I look like," or "These are things I do that I hope no one else notices." I've never done a drawing where I've tried to make anyone feel bad about the way they look. It's like the number one reason for doing it in these venues: A lot of them are focused on, yes, community and queer people, but also there's this really toxic level of imagism and body focus and I want people to see, like this is how you look and it's good enough. It's definitely a concern of mine.

**A.G.:** Usually when I see you, you have a line of people waiting to get drawn. Why do you think people like being drawn by you so much?

**M.H.:** I think part of it's because I'll keep talking until my mouth hurts. So if they're

not talkative I'll pick up the slack and show them I don't need anything from you except you relaxing. And I hope they feel comfortable enough that they can go wherever they want to go in the conversation. We talk about innocuous silly things, we talk about video games, we talk about "Adventure Time," we talk about music and then we talk about heavy stuff every now and then. And I'm pretty open with people too when they ask about me. I don't really censor it too much just because I feel like if I give a little then they feel comfortable to share.

**A.G.:** The person sitting with you, what do you feel like they have to give you in order for it to be a good experience?

**M.H.:** Part of it is information (about their lives), but it can even be as minute as this is what I'm feeling today. As long as they're honest about what they're feeling and not just compartmentalizing. With this I'm also trying to provide people with the opportunity to hopefully just relax in their feelings and feel them. Some people get really uncomfortable around that.

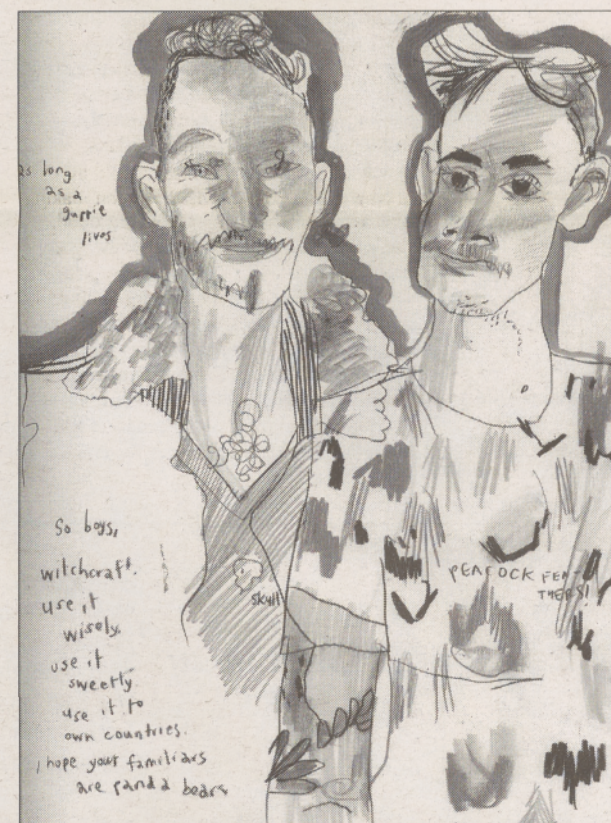
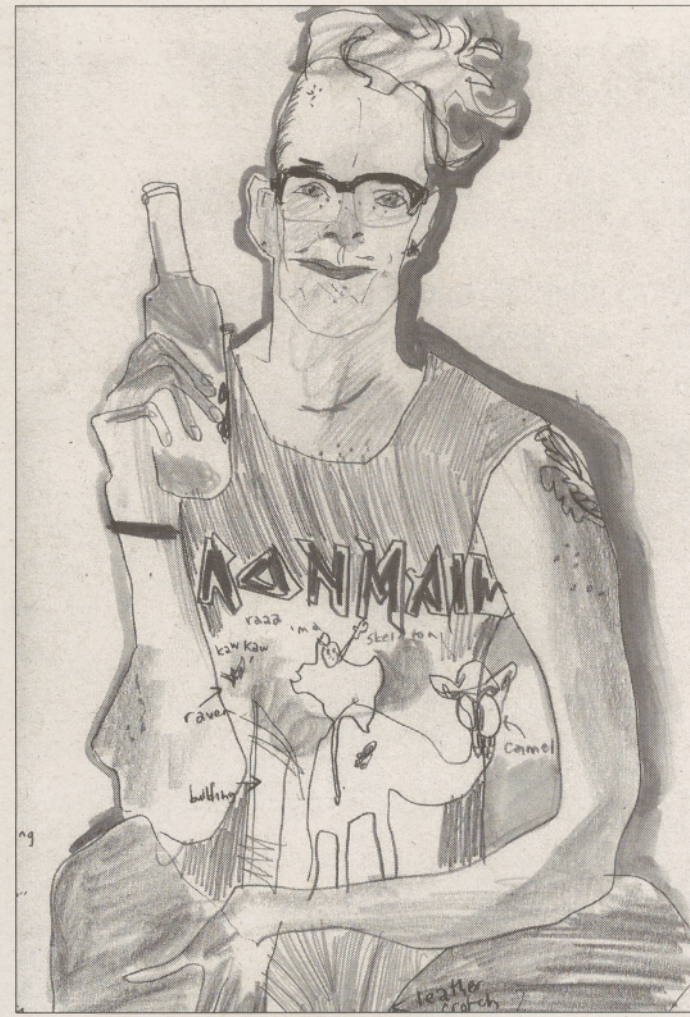
**A.G.:** Do you see this as kind of a performance art project?

**M.H.:** It has elements of performance art in it. Performance for me is something that's practiced and understood through repetition. It includes observations of patterns and all of that is in this project. Because I've done this enough times I kind of understand the different cues that people provide, my own mindset going in, my energy levels. I understand what turns people on in terms of the set up and what is confusing. And that's actually taken a while to realize.

**A.G.:** Did you have a show in mind when you started this project?

**M.H.:** Not at all, no. The nice thing about having the show is that it's been completely a surprise. But I made all of the work really prepared to never see it again. ... But I never really knew how to display the work. Display has always been a weakness of mine, so the act of giving it to people kind of solved that problem.

**A.G.:** What's it like seeing all this art in one place that you were never really expecting to see again?

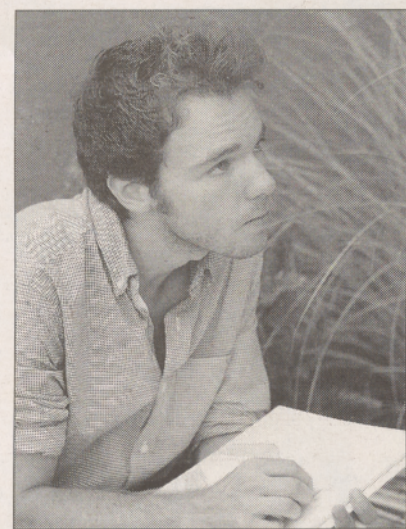


**M.H.:** It's really surreal, honestly. Some of them are from that first night. It says to me that I was doing this for the right reasons. I didn't really do it expecting, certainly not to make money, but I didn't expect it to resonate as much as it did. That was a hope, certainly a hope.

**A.G.:** So what's next for you?

**M.H.:** Right now I'm working on my thesis project for grad school, which will be a 50-page comic about my fictional romantic relationship with the writer Walt Whitman. On Facebook we're dating and I've constructed a very detailed backstory for us, and I update quite frequently with stories about our life together. I'm also collaborating with the Museum of Contemporary Craft on an upcoming fashion exhibition in the spring and with the Portland Art Museum from a program organized by Jen Delos Reyes, called Talking About Museums in Public, which features social practice artists directly engaging museum goers. I have a show at East End Bar that I'm working on currently that should go up in February.

Above, the work of Michael Horwitz. You can find Michael drawing portraits at about 9 p.m. at these upcoming events: Jan. 18, Club Tropicana at Knock Back 2313 NE Alberta; Jan. 25 at Blow Pony at Rotture, 315 SE 3rd Ave; and Jan. 31 at Lounge, 2432 SE 11th Ave.



Michael Horwitz