

November 2019



Gilbert Baker (center) as Pink Jesus in the 1990 San Francisco International Lesbian and Gay Freedom Day Parade

Designer, Provocateur, Diva: Rainbow-Flag Creator Gilbert Baker's Art and Activism

by Charles Beal

In 1978 a young artist named Gilbert Baker (1951–2017) created a flag to represent the LGBTQ community at that year's San Francisco Gay Freedom Day Parade. Over the subsequent 40 years, the rainbow flag has become an internationally recognized symbol of the LGBTQ community and an icon of contemporary design. In 2017, shortly after Baker's death, his estate selected the [GLBT Historical Society](#) to preserve his personal archives, artwork and memorabilia. These precious materials are at the heart of a new exhibition, "[Performance, Protest and Politics: The Art of Gilbert Baker](#)," opening November 1 at the GLBT Historical Society Museum.

Co-curated by Jeremy Prince, who has overseen many exhibitions at the museum, and Joanna Black, the archivist who oversaw the donation of the Gilbert Baker Collection, the exhibition positions the rainbow flag as a starting point for exploring Baker's artistic endeavors,

showcasing how Baker deployed his talents in service of his activism. *History Happens* interviewed Prince and Black to discuss their curatorial approach to the exhibition.

How has the concept for this exhibition evolved since the GLBT Historical Society received the Gilbert Baker Collection two years ago?

Prince: It was always intended to explore Baker's life and artistry beyond the rainbow flag, including his drag personas. But the more Joanna and I explored the treasures in the collection, the more amazed we were by the sheer depth and breadth of his artistic output. From his "Pink Jesus" persona to the recreated concentration-camp prisoner uniforms, Baker's artistic oeuvre was shocking, provocative and expressed his opposition to the injustice he witnessed in the 1980s and 1990s. That's what led us to focus the theme of the exhibition on art and performance as protest.

Black: As I arranged the transfer of the collection to the society's archives, I sorted through exquisite costumes, large-scale paintings, silk-screened posters and bedazzled footwear, but also protest banners, fliers and provocative photographs. I came away deeply moved and knew that we had to share this aspect of Baker's life with the public.

One constant of the exhibition has been to provide a sense of Baker's artistic range and his unique personality. But it wasn't until later in the process that Jeremy and I decided to incorporate quotes from Baker's posthumously published memoir, *Rainbow Warrior*, into the curation. It's comparatively rare to be able to include an artist's own words alongside examples of their work; Baker tells his own story, and the exhibition helps bring those words to life.

What aspects of Baker's artwork do you think viewers will find surprising?

Prince: I think they'll be struck by the facets of Baker's personality — artist, provocateur, diva. And they'll be impressed by his achievements: Designing and overseeing construction of the two original flags for the 1978 San Francisco Gay Freedom Day parade was a groundbreaking accomplishment, but sewing a mile-long flag — and later a 1.25-mile-long flag — is recordbreaking.

Black: I think viewers will be most surprised by aspects of Baker's drag personas. For example, "Pink Jesus" is pretty shocking, and Baker *owned* that persona entirely. He crashed the 1990 Pride Parade nearly naked, covered in hot-pink body paint and carrying a giant cross — now that's a statement! And it wasn't out of vanity. He was always guided by the desire to press for social and political change.

What do you hope visitors will take away from the exhibition?

Prince: Exploring the history of the rainbow flag and contextualizing it really underlines its significance. This is an American story about a gay boy from Kansas who designed a wildly successful symbol — and then spent his life deploying his artistic talents as a weapon to fight for rights, equality and dignity against institutions actively trying to erode them.

Black: I hope viewers bear witness to what a multifaceted, complex, passionate and compassionate human being Baker was. His struggle to exist and live his truth openly is universal. Without the courage of artists like Gilbert Baker, we'd all be living in a less free society than we do.

NOTE: "Performance, Protest and Politics" is on display at the GLBT Historical Society Museum through March 8, 2020.

Charles Beal is a lifelong social activist and an award-winning art director for film and television. He was a close friend of Gilbert Baker.

From the Staff

Transitioning Terminology, Transitioning Collections



by Isaac Fellman

It's easy to imagine that archives are eternal and unchanging, yet their meanings can radically shift. We use different words to talk about queerness; our interpretations evolve as a collection's subject slowly passes from living memory. Something that would have been obvious in 1990 may need explaining in 2020.

The moment an archivist finishes drafting a finding aid — the essay-style catalog that we write for each collection — it too becomes a historical document. When I joined the GLBT Historical Society as reference archivist in June, I noticed that many of our older finding aids used terms for transgender people that were mainstream at the time they were written, but are now archaic — and could even be construed as offensive in certain circumstances.

One of my major projects since joining the staff has been to undertake a comprehensive evaluation of the finding aids that accompany our transgender-related collections, and to update obsolete language where possible. My first discovery was that our trans collections have been under-cataloged. In many cases, the problem wasn't a dated finding aid, but a nonexistent one. In the past few months, I've written more than 20 new finding aids and have updated several others.

Balancing Needs

This has raised complex questions: Do I simply replace dated terms, even when the collection's subject strongly identified with them — for example, as a transsexual, an MTF/FTM or a transvestite? Should I consider the comfort of researchers or prioritize the subject's own choices? What about the different degrees of obsolescence: Do I treat the term "FTM," which some trans men still proudly use, the same way I do the term "tranny," which used to be common trans slang and is in the title of at least one of our collections, but is now almost universally

considered offensive?

In grappling with these issues, I have consulted friends who have transitioned and my own conscience as a transgender archivist. This insight has guided my decisions as I strive to balance researchers' and subjects' needs, putting terms into their appropriate context without denying subjects' autonomy. To prevent implying that the currently preferred terms for trans people are the last word, we now add a disclaimer to every new finding aid, acknowledging that future researchers may well find 2019's terms jarring and dated.

I've found this thematic approach to underappreciated collections to be very valuable. Because it immerses me in important linguistic and political debates, it helps me provide better reference services, which are the core of my job.

Isaac Fellman is the reference archivist at the GLBT Historical Society.

Gala 2019 Roundup

"It is Long Past Time": Mayor Endorses Museum



GLBT Historical Society
Executive Director Terry
Beswick and San Francisco
Mayor London Breed

Our annual gala on October 18, "Reunion: Chosen Family," was an enormous success, raising over \$100,000 and bringing together queer history enthusiasts and the GLBT Historical Society's board, staff, members, supporters and sponsors for an evening of celebration and socializing. When guests weren't enjoying the spectacular view from the

top of the Salesforce Tower, they were being entertained by our fabulous hostess, Juanita MORE and her glamorous troupe.

San Francisco Mayor London Breed's opening remarks were undoubtedly the highlight of the evening. She enthusiastically pledged her support to the GLBT Historical Society's plans to establish an LGBTQ Museum and Research Center in San Francisco, declaring "It is long past time."

In the Archives

Crawford Barton: Capturing a City's Gentle Carnival



by Alexander Gray

One evening, not long after moving to San Francisco in 2011, I stood at the corner of Castro and 18th Streets, transfixed by the parade of humanity of all shapes, sizes, colors and gender presentations reflected in the protective Mylar coating of a bank window. The

oblique angle of the window to the street crossing made the throng seem as though its members were revolving — a carousel of humanity.

Few photographers have captured the personalities of the city's gentle carnival as strikingly as photographer Crawford Wayne Barton (1943–1993). The [Crawford Wayne Barton Papers](#) is one of the GLBT Historical Society's most frequently requested archival collections, and much of it can be browsed [online](#). Barton is best known for his photographs of LGBTQ life in the Castro during the 1970s and 1980s, many of them featuring the very intersection where I was mesmerized by the reflections of passersby.

Using Juxtaposition

Barton's photography is iconic in its use of juxtaposition. He looks at San Francisco with inclusiveness and charity. Take one of his most familiar images, "[Two Couples](#)." The juxtaposition of subject matter — chaste, middle-aged heterosexuality next to beer-swilling, denim-studded homosexual heavy petting — is comical and charming. But when considered within Barton's oeuvre, it's but one example of the artist's decision to photograph people of distinct classes, genders, sexualities, races and ages. His choice of subjects portrays a type of radical inclusion that is uniquely queer and magical. And uniquely San Franciscan.

His images teem with the consumer pleasures of urban life in the 1970s. "I wanted to feed back an image of a positive, likable lifestyle — to offer pleasure as well as pride," he wrote. Two [lithe men walk down Castro Street, lapping up melted ice cream](#) from their cones. It evokes the bars from Donna Summer's recording of "Macarthur Park" — all that sweet green icing, flowing down.

Utopian Possibilities

I adore the well-known work of Robert Mapplethorpe, but some of his most iconic images alienate and shock. In contrast, Barton's work presents a sense of openness. His people smile. They are far more like me. They stand in line with [ladies wearing kerchiefs](#) at the Castro Theater. They [smooch on park benches](#) while straight San Franciscans walk their dogs.

I'm wary of images of wholesomeness; I feel anxious looking at Norman Rockwell's famous covers of the *Saturday Evening Post*. But Barton navigates the wholesome expertly, opening up utopian possibilities in his uniquely queer *mise-en-scène*. His is my San Francisco, our San Francisco.

Alexander Gray is a volunteer at the GLBT Historical Society.

Upcoming Events

[Exhibition Opening](#)

Performance, Protest & Politics: Gilbert Baker's Art



Friday, November 1

7:00–9:00 p.m.

The GLBT Historical Society Museum

4127 18th St., San Francisco

[\\$5](#) | Free for [members](#)

A new [exhibition](#) at the GLBT Historical Society Museum uses textiles, costumes, photographs and ephemera to paint a complex portrait of San Francisco artist Gilbert Baker (1951–2017),

who designed the iconic rainbow flag as a symbol of the LGBTQ community. First displayed at the 1978 San Francisco Gay Freedom Day Parade, the flag has transcended its humble, hand-sewn origins to become an internationally recognized symbol. Yet the success of this design has in some ways overshadowed the larger story of its creator and his exceptional creative work.

Curated by Joanna Black and Jeremy Prince, "[Performance, Protest and Politics](#)" examines how Baker blurred the lines between artist and activist, protester and performer, emphasizing his intuitive understanding of the ways art can serve as a powerful means to address political and social issues. By exploring the less well-known dimensions of Baker's wide-ranging oeuvre, it places the rainbow flag back into the unexpected and evocative context of his exceptional life as an activist and artist. Light refreshments will be served. Tickets are available online [here](#).

[Performance](#)

Mighty Real 2019: A Comedy Evening

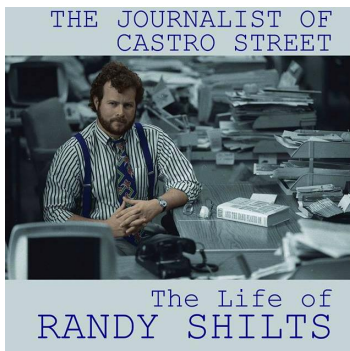


Saturday, November 2
7:30–9:30 p.m.
PianoFight
144 Taylor St., San Francisco
\$20–25 online | \$30 at the door

Join us for Mighty Real, an evening of stand-up performance featuring a diverse array of comedians who'll provide a laugh-out-loud night of punchlines for and by queer and transgender people of color. Cosponsored by the GLBT Historical Society, Mighty Real is a project of [Hear + Qwere](#), a community organization created in 2018 that supports queer and transgender people of color by organizing regular conversation and event series. All are welcome at the show, which benefits San Francisco's Compton's Transgender Cultural District. More information is available [here](#). Tickets are available online [here](#).

[Author Talk](#)

Reconsidering Randy Shilts: America's AIDS Chronicler



Thursday, November 7
7:00–9:00 p.m.
The GLBT Historical Society Museum
4127 18th St., San Francisco
\$5 | Free for [members](#)

As the author of the landmark 1987 book *And the Band Played On*, San Francisco journalist Randy Shilts (1951–1994) became the most recognized chronicler of the AIDS epidemic in the United States. Andrew E. Stoner, associate professor of communication studies at California State University, Sacramento, will discuss his new book, *The Journalist of Castro Street: The Life of Randy Shilts* (University of Illinois Press, 2019). This biography traces the remarkable life of the brash, pioneering gay reporter, whose relentless work ethic and belief in the power of journalism illuminated the contours of the AIDS crisis but whose assertions about the epidemic made him a controversial figure in the LGBTQ community. It also considers other aspects of Shilts's experience, including his struggles with alcohol and substance use, as well as his personal battle with AIDS. Tickets are available online [here](#).

[Film Screening](#)

Through the Windows: A History of Twin Peaks Tavern

Thursday, November 21
7:00–9:00 p.m.
The GLBT Historical Society Museum
4127 18th St., San Francisco



\$5 | Free for members

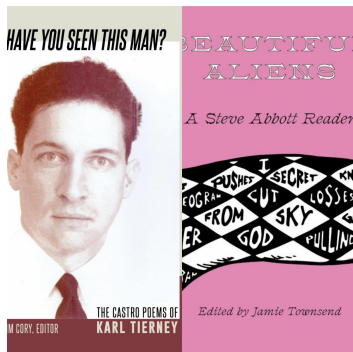
With its plate-glass windows looking out on the corner of Castro and Market Streets, the landmark San Francisco gay bar Twin Peaks Tavern is not only one of the Castro's most beloved establishments, but also a living testament to the revolutionary idea that LGBTQ people should be seen and celebrated rather than hidden in the darkness of alleys and

behind blacked-out windows. Filmmakers Petey Barna and Bret Parker will present their new documentary, "Through the Windows" about the history of Twin Peaks Tavern, featuring deeply personal interviews that illuminate the history of the bar and the lesbian owners who transformed it from a straight working-class tavern into a gay landmark in 1972. The film recounts the ways this establishment has provided a feeling of home, family and emotional nourishment for its patrons every day of its 47-year history.

Tickets are available online [here](#).

[Author Talk](#)

Enduring Struggle, Enduring Spirits: Lost Literary Lives



Sunday, December 1

3:30–5:00 p.m.

San Francisco Public Library

Latino/Hispanic Meeting Room, Lower Level

100 Larkin St., San Francisco

Free

A public reading, cosponsored by the GLBT Historical Society in honor of World AIDS Day, celebrates the lives of Steve Abbott and Karl

Tierney, two gifted Bay Area writers prominent in gay literary circles who were both lost to AIDS. Editor Jamie Townsend will read from a new collection of Abbott's work, *Beautiful Aliens: A Steve Abbott Reader* (Nightboat Books, 2019) which brings together a cross-section of Abbott's work over three decades, including poetry, fiction, collage, comics, essays and autobiography. Tierney's work will be shared by Jim Cory, the editor of the new poetry collection *Have You Seen This Man? The Castro Poems of Karl Tierney* (Sibling Rivalry Press, 2019), a time capsule of San Francisco in the 1980s and 1990s that ranges from observation and humor to hunger and fear with razor-sharp wit. Free and open to the public; no reservation required.

[Author Talk](#)

Becoming Eve: A Conversation With Abby Stein

Tuesday, December 3

7:00–9:00 p.m.

California Institute of Integral Studies

Namaste Hall



1453 Mission Street, San Francisco
\$10 online | \$15 at the door

Author, educator and activist Abby Chava Stein will discuss her new book *Becoming Eve: My Journey From Ultra-Orthodox Rabbi to Transgender Woman* (Seal Press, 2019) at this program cosponsored by the GLBT Historical Society. She will share her remarkable journey of shedding one identity and growing into another,

with its universally human moments of vulnerability, glory, frustration and revelation. The conversation will be led by Randi Reed, an LGBTQ inclusion and training specialist with [Keshet](#), a nonprofit that works for LGBTQ equality in all facets of Jewish life. Copies of *Becoming Eve* will be available for purchase and signing. For more information, click [here](#). GLBT Historical Society members can receive a 20 percent discount off the admission price of advance tickets by entering the code "GLBT19" into the "Promo Code" box at checkout; tickets are available online [here](#).

Current Exhibitions

Front & Community Galleries

[Performance, Protest & Politics: The Art of Gilbert Baker](#)

Open through March 8, 2020

[More information](#)

Main Gallery

[Queer Past Becomes Present](#)

Long-term exhibition

[More information](#)



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CREDITS. FEATURE: Gilbert Baker as Pink Jesus in the 1990 International Lesbian and Gay Freedom Day Parade; photograph by Robert Pruzan, collection of the GLBT Historical Society. FROM THE STAFF: Photo courtesy of Isaac Fellman. GALA 2019 ROUNDUP: Photo of Terry Beswick and Mayor London Breed by Steven Underhill; used with permission, all rights reserved. IN THE ARCHIVES: “Women on a Bench” (ca. 1978–1979); photograph by Crawford Wayne Barton, collection of the GLBT Historical Society. UPCOMING EVENTS. Exhibition Opening: Gilbert Baker wearing his international flags gown on a Golden Gate Bridge–themed float (ca. 1987); photograph by Robert Pruzan, collection of the GLBT Historical Society. Performance: Graphic courtesy of Here + Qwere. Author Talk: Detail of the cover of *The Journalist of Castro Street*, courtesy of University of Illinois Press. Film Screening: Detail of the poster for “Though the Windows”; photo by Adam Habib and graphics by Susan Bradley, used with permission. Author Talk: Cover of *Beautiful Aliens* courtesy of Nightboat Books; cover of *Have You Seen This Man* courtesy of Sibling Rivalry Press.

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