

# THE NEW YORK GALLERIES

## Non-Competitive Exposure

By John Preston

The public has a view of the art world that sees an unbridled bohemia filled with free spirits doing, saying and depicting outrageously free things. The whole popular concept of the artist is one of someone who has unburdened him or herself from the tight strictures of society. Here, certainly, must be one arena of life where gayness is truly liberated.

It's not true.

The "art world" is a tightly controlled, homophobic system that banks heavily on the closetness of the gay artist. Success is closely defined, its place can be easily removed from the artist by a phone call.

The whole world turns on a few reviews in a few media. The reality of the art world is that those media harbor the worst homophobic critics in action today. All the cries about book reviewers or theatre critics pale beside the track record of the art writers in the *New York Times*, the *SoHo Weekly News* and the *Village Voice*. How bad is it? A recent front page editorial in the Arts and Leisure Section of the lofty *Times* proclaimed that there cannot be such a thing as women's art. A feminist would be too embroiled in political issues to produce seriously. What do you think they'd say about a bunch of faggots?

There's plenty of documentation; this is not a time when a few gay men's paranoia has carried them into a fit of name calling. Seven years ago Philip Masnick opened a show at the very avant-garde SoHo Gallery. The photographs in the show included graphic depictions of fist fucking and other sexual acts. It lasted less than 48 hours before a vehement group of "liberated" artists succeeded in



Opposite: Robert Mapplethorpe's *Bull's Eye* (collage) photo by James Dee;  
above: *Leather Hood and White Sheets* by Hilton Brown

having it taken down. It wasn't until less than a year ago that the show was ever presented to the public.

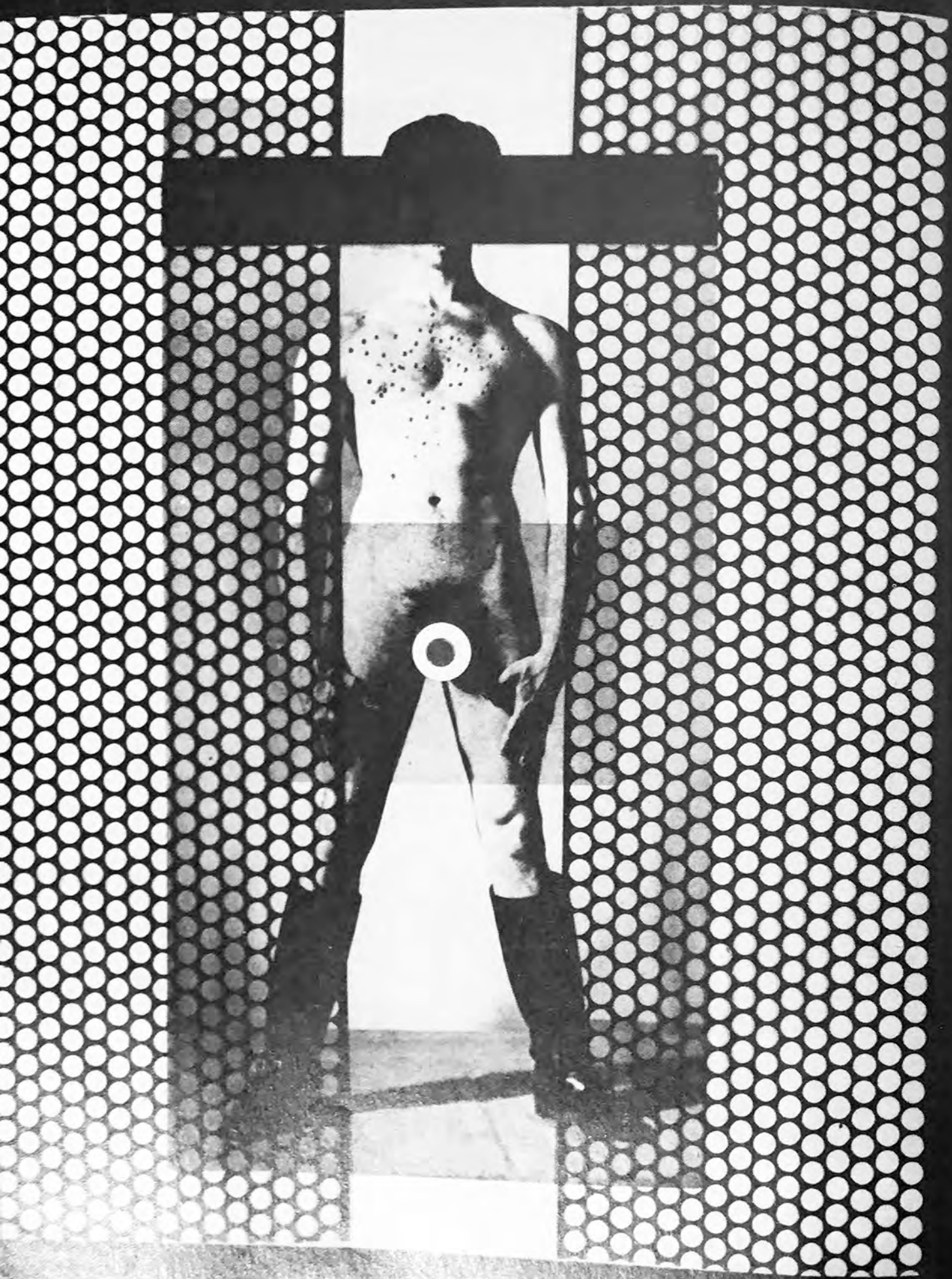
Five years ago two gay theatre companies, TOSOS and the Glines, had shows in their waiting areas for viewing during intermissions. One show at the Glines of the work of artist Philip Gornstein so incensed a largely straight cast of one play that the embarrassed company was again forced to take down the show.

The amazing contradiction in all this was the existence of a truly disproportionate number of gay artists among the ranks of the well known. The most damaging and damning form of oppression existed — the artists could be shown and their work could be sold so long as their art didn't reflect their life style.

Charles Leslie and Frederick Lohman were among the first people to realize the situation and to react to it. In 1970 they moved to a SoHo loft, in the vanguard of creative people who would turn that industrial neighborhood into one of the prize communities of Manhattan in the next ten years. They were, naturally, surrounded by artists. They were also quickly in touch with those artists who were gay and began to view a vast amount of the gay-themed work that would never see the light of a gallery. The first move they made was to institute an annual showing of gay art open only to a limited number of known friends. They were anxious to have the work shown to people who would and could appreciate it. The shows were so successful, and the need was so great that they opened Leslie-Lohman gallery at 485 Broome Street in 1975. And, Philip Gornstein had a show.

Philip Masnick also ended up in another gay gallery. The Robert Samuel at 795 Broadway, in 1979.

For years, actually decades, Tom of Finland has been known and reknown as the leading figure of unashamedly gay pornographic art. And while there is no doubt that the work is pornographic, it is also undoubtably Capitol Art. But the work could only be found in small circles of friends in Europe where it sold for





Above: *Before Time Changes Them* by Andrew Sychel at the Leslie-Lohman Gallery. Below, right: *Man to Man* by Robert Gable, photo by James Dee.

\$20.00, or in often outrageously poorly printed magazines. Two years ago Stompers, a Village boot store, owned by composer Louis Weingarten, opened a gallery in the backroom of their retail space at 259 West Fourth St. Tom of Finland had a home and a formal art opening.

Much of the gay art of the century is European. Some, like Tom of Finland (he really is Finnish), got to this country, but much of it wasn't being shown. Rob Gallery, the foremost gallery in Amsterdam for gay work, has opened a branch at 8A Charles Lane in the Village and now that too, has a place in the world.

The Stoned Wall Gallerie, 221 W. 28th Street in Chelsea rounds out the listing of gay art places. It's more oriented to the community than the other four, but is playing an important role in giving some beginning artists, and an increasing number of well-known artists, still another New York base.

The five gay galleries are one of the

most obvious and significant manifestations of liberation in the gay world. If one gives any credence to the idea that art has a place in a movement, social or political, than the presence of a competent artistic expression has an obvious importance. There's a more complicated meaning also. The society as a whole has lived off of the accomplishments of gay people without ever giving us our due. The "due" is our own self-image, our own self-worth, the fruits of our own community's labors. Our artists have been told that they can produce "art" so long as it doesn't refer to us. These galleries give our artists a way to relate to their own community. To present the images and the concepts that they hope we will find important.

The world of gay art is about ten years behind the world of publishing. The existence of the five New York galleries assures some outlet for gay work in New York. Slowly, the 'uptown' galleries are just beginning to respond to

the existence of the gay work of their artists. Unfortunately, that recognition comes in only one of two ways: If the artist is of the first caliber and can handle any critical response he receives (Paul Cadmus's recent show at the Midtown Gallery is a rare example) or if the work is highly sensationalistic — and without question Robert Mapplethorpe is the prime example here.

Mapplethorpe has become the focus of a large, ongoing controversy among gay people interested in the arts. He, without any question, is a superb technician — perhaps the best working at the moment in many peoples' minds, but his work, which is shown in the 'best' uptown galleries is sometimes seen as an elaborate rip-off. The point is that his heavy leather, S&M, macho images are allowed into the galleries only because of their shock value. The suburban buyers of art can tolerate his homosexual photographs only because they are so removed from the reality of their own life. Sam Hardison, manager of the Robert Samuel Gallery, is one of the art-folk who will defend Mapplethorpe's work. He's quick to point out that the first show of photography was still lifes which gathered Mapplethorpe's initial critical acclaim. Still, the idea of the parallels between the straight art world's co-optation of the sensationalistic is disturbingly close to the film controversy over *Cruising*.

The five galleries in New York have begun to accomplish one very important transition that impacts the lives of gay artists. They have finally begun to nurture and educate a body of gay collectors. While the owners of the galleries acknowledge that most buyers are people who simply buy what they like and then hang the work in their own homes, still, the base of the art buying community is composed of people who collect art — primarily those who collect it for some level of investment. The accomplishment of the galleries in a very short period of





Untitled drawing by Gary Finkel, photo by James Dee

time has been to impress on many people the worthiness of the gay art works. The galleries have convinced people that this is art and that it is not devalued just because it depicts homoerotic situations. And, also, they are beginning to show just what a good investment the work can be. Tom of Finland's show at Stompers in October 1978 had pieces for as little as \$300. In February 1980, Tom had another exhibit at Robert Samuel where pieces of comparable technical quality were being offered for \$3000. The result is bound to be a situation where more and more artists can expect to be able to earn a living while they are creating.

In a gay world full of skepticism and one where so many of us have learned to expect the worst from many entrepreneurs, the owners and managers of the five galleries have to be singled out for two noteworthy traits. They are remarkably supportive of one another. And they are remarkably conscious of their role in the community.

Art galleries tend often to be stereotypically bitchy to one another, highly competitive and highly critical. Yet, in numerous interviews and conversations

not one of the people involved would do anything or say anything that wasn't strongly supportive of the others. It was a remarkable experience of community cooperation. In fact, Sam Hardison has become furiously vocal over recent critical attempts to separate the Robert Samuel gallery from the other gay institutions. The Samuel is physically in a better neighborhood, its space is larger, its works tend to be more expensive and closer to what would be shown in a "straight" gallery than the others. An increasing number of critics have singled it out as the "only legitimate," or "only respectable" gay gallery in the city. Sam will have none of it. He's aware of the day to day barriers he is forced to overcome, the ever increasing pressure to be "responsible" by someone else's definition and the reality that his situation is always going to be closer to the other gay galleries than to any other institution's. So far as he's concerned, the gay enterprises are in it together, and he's attempting to resist every attempt to remove his labor from the others.

The community responsiveness is most acutely shown in the openness and,

frankly, the charity with which the galleries deal with new, younger artists. They will all look at anyone's portfolio. They all consider it part of their obligation to mount group shows that will display the work of previously unknown artists and they have all engaged in some attempt to reclaim a forgotten past of gay art by showing the work of past decades.

Leslie-Lohman's June group show is one of the best examples of the nurturing of new artists; Stomper's show of the homoerotic work of the 40's and 50's last year is an immediate example of the mounting of a historical show.

All in all the existence and perseverance of the gay galleries in the face of open hostility and an under-educated gay public is one of the high points to gay life in New York. The emergence of new artists of the caliber of Brick and Andrew Epstein and the enormous photographic talent of many photographers like Philip Beard and Arthur Tress make it seem highly likely that the force these places represent will continue to fuel promise of the community over the next few years.