

In 1970, a group of students started weekly meetings at the London School of Economics; they called for an end to discrimination against homosexuals in employment, education, the age of consent and in being treated as mentally unwell. Celebrating 50 years of activism, radical protest and positive queerness ‘GLF at 50: The Art of Protest’ at Platform Southwark is part of a sprinkling of events marking half a century of the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) and their core assertion that ‘Gay is Good’. Their manifesto (republished for this exhibition) was a seminal clarion call for equality.

UNWELL. CELEBRATING 50 YEARS OF ACTIVISM, RADICAL PROTEST AND POSITIVE QUEERNESS ‘GLF AT 50: THE ART OF PROTEST’ AT PLATFORM SOUTHWARK IS PART OF A SPRINKLING OF EVENTS MARKING HALF A CENTURY OF THE GAY LIBERATION FRONT (GLF) AND THEIR CORE ASSERTION THAT ‘GAY IS GOOD’. THEIR MANIFESTO (REPUBLISHED FOR THIS EXHIBITION) WAS A SEMINAL CLARION CALL FOR EQUALITY. REVIEW BY IAN GILES)

The grassroots approach utilised to produce the exhibition mirrors the founding spirit of the Gay Liberation Front. Rather than presenting vitrines of badges, banners and photographs, the exhibition shifts our focus and instead features artworks made by original members of the GLF alongside other works by a handful of younger LGBTQI+ activists and artists. The main room is populated by traditional looking figurative paintings and works on paper from the last 50 years. The act of sharing these works opens up the idea of what activism can be, where it can take place and its reach. The very making of these personal artworks actively expands our understanding of what formats were employed by those who wished to speak directly to their own sexuality. These are artists who are working from the inside out. The men who made these works were mainly born in the 1940s and 50s – they took active roles in gay liberation, living radical lives through their positive queerness without apology or equivocation.

Many of the works exhibited are images of muscular, idealised naked men – they function like bold slogans on banners in their direct depiction of intimate same-sex desire. Activism needs to be clear and get to the point. These are artworks not by institutional artists, rather they are flares in the once darkness. Raw and clear, the male nudes are objectified, but you understand that both the models and the artists are in cahoots and these are works of mutual celebration rather than one-sided longing. They are by and of men who confidently and absolutely loved other men and were happy to show it. It’s largely thanks to the GLF that such unabashed visual celebrations of queer desire don’t feel at all radical to the contemporary viewer.

The gallery space is divided up by transparent shower curtains that brilliantly queers and reframes the display of works by the mainly Sunday-painters. These plastic screens are playfully collaged with hand-pasted digital images of Greeks, gays and overripe fruit. What started as a necessary DIY solution to visitor safety during the present pandemic becomes a humorous reminder that being gay is as ancient as the Greeks. Made by Associate Curator Lily Cheetah, the intervention adds a punk pop and through its newness links the actions of the founding GLF members to the contemporary queers who proudly honour and carry on their work.

The second room (which will host concurrent events) includes recent home-made GLF banners and slogan-based flyers produced by Eden Topall-Rabanes and Jenny Boat which curator Dan de la Motte began noticing and collecting during lockdown. Block printed letters call out ‘If Your Queerness Isn’t Anti-Racist You Aren’t Queer’, ‘Self Love’ and ‘People Are Worth More Than Capitalism!’. These graphic posters remind us that there are still plenty of intersectional issues to wrestle with, work through and develop. As with many socialist movements, the GLF always backed and marched for more causes than just their own. There are lots of different ways to be gay and thanks to the work of the GLF the last 50 years has seen hugely positive steps towards genuine equality. Now it’s time to liberate the 70 countries around the world that still criminalise same-sex relationships because – as the collective work of the GLF can attest – it’s good to be gay!

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