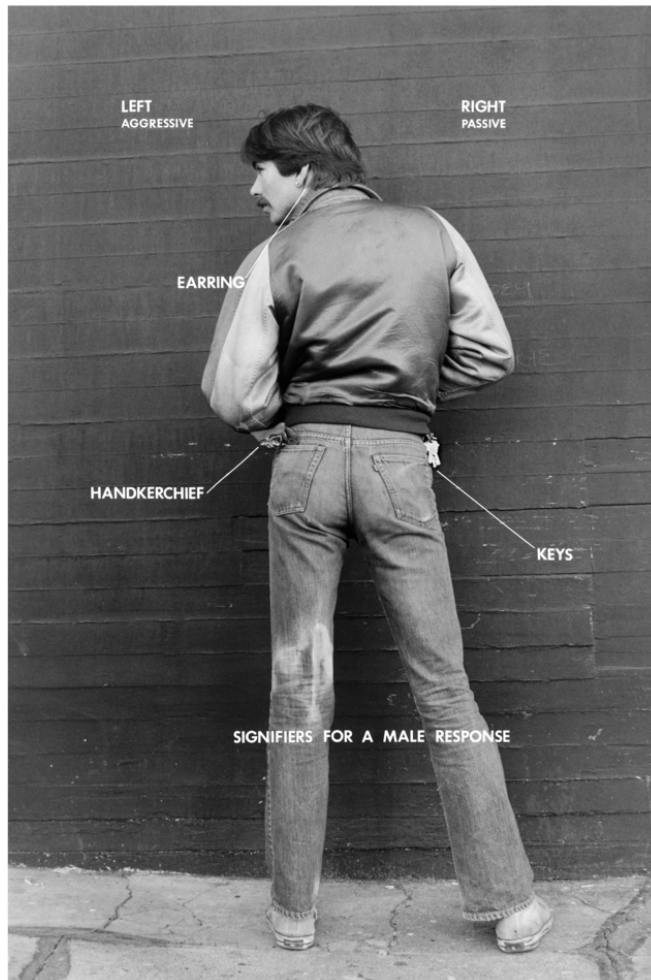




ART & EXHIBITS

Hal Fischer's Castro scene photos revived in 'The Gay Seventies'

Tony Bravo | October 16, 2019 | Updated: October 17, 2019, 1:06 pm



Hal Fischer's photograph "Signifiers for A Male Response," from the series "Gay Semiotics," 1977/2014, uses text to explain how gay appearance signals different messages.
Photo: Hal Fischer

San Francisco's gay world in the late 1970s was a cultural event unlike any previously seen in the city, from its political activity to an overall feeling of social and sexual liberation following the Stonewall riots in New York. Photographer Hal Fischer knew it demanded documentation.

“I tend to believe most photographers, if they have a moment, it tends to be about three years and it happens earlier in the career,” says Fischer. “There’s a thing where you hit the culture at a certain moment and not everybody gets it. I was a recipient of that or a participant in that. I remember standing in a gallery and saying, ‘This is never going to happen again like this.’”

Fischer, now 69, moved to San Francisco in 1975 to study photography in the graduate program at San Francisco State. His work was soon featured in exhibitions like “Photography and Language” and he became part of an unofficial movement of photographers, including Lew Thomas and Donna-Lee Phillips, who used a combination of text and images in ways that expanded, or sometimes reinterpreted or contradicted the imagery. By 1977, Fischer’s “Gay Semiotics” series and photo book used those techniques to document and explain the gay culture around San Francisco’s Castro neighborhood.

The photos were portraits of men, with text and helpful arrows pointing out different cultural signifiers the men demonstrated in their clothing, poses and settings. Images and topics included things like gay “hankie code,” which indicated certain sexual preferences or behaviors; media tropes of the masculine cowboy or gay leatherman; and fetishes including bondage and S&M.

“What this environment provided was a kind of acceptance that said it was fine to do these things,” Fischer says. “This really became about my subculture, my culture in those neighborhoods. Almost everybody in those pictures were friends or acquaintances. It was about doing that with people and what I saw.”

“Gay Semiotics” was followed in quick succession by five other photo book projects including the neighborhood specific “18th near Castro St. x 24,” and “Civic Center.” The 1979 work “Cheap Chic Homo” was Fischer’s final before he embarked on an art career focused on criticism and museum work. Now, Fischer’s photo books have been gathered into a single tome, “Hal Fischer: The Gay Seventies” published by San Francisco’s Gallery 16 (\$40).

“The resurgence of the work has been a big surprise,” Fischer says. “I didn’t know we’d have the potential to re-edition the work or it would have the kind of resonance and this kind of appreciation from a whole new generation of gay people. This is a very special period, post-Stonewall, pre-AIDS.”

The book isn’t Fischer’s only recent resurgence: In addition to shows at Art Basel and in London and Glasgow, he’s also one of the subjects of “Thought Pieces: 1970s Photographs by Lew Thomas, Donna-Lee Phillips, and Hal Fischer,” opening at SFMOMA in January.

Gallery 16 founder Griff Williams, who published “The Gay Seventies,” says that at the time of its publication, and for years after, “ ‘Gay Semiotics’ was this thing that was like a little legend among art students coming from a small press in San Francisco. Then Hal stopped working; he had this career early in his art-making life, got into museum work, then stopped working as a visual artist. He made these seminal photographic books in the ’70s, then kind of called it quits. Most artists don’t really do that.”

Fischer calls his decision to stop photographing “truncated by design,” and says it was partially because he wanted to pursue the text he used in his photo books more fully as a writer. A new essay by Fischer, “At the Center of the Gay Universe,” is included in the book.

In “Gay Semiotics” and other works by Fischer, the use of text, diagrams and social decoding of the images feels extremely contemporary in the world of blogs and photo-diagram magazine features. Even many of the fashions and hairstyles — especially the mustaches — feel of the present moment. What surprised many at the time, Fischer says, was that his text imbued the images with a type of humor, simply by explaining the images and their social relevance in the gay community. For him, the words were always as important as the images, and perhaps became even more important as the photo books progressed.

“I think the body of ‘Gay Semiotics’ is really celebratory,” Fischer says. “I think that’s a big part of what separated me from other people photographing in that period.”

Williams thinks of the documentary aspect of the work as “almost an anthropological study of somebody outside the scene looking in, but he was a part of it.”

Putting the book together with Fischer “was part archive, part publishing project for us,” says Williams. “The idea of making a context for all these projects that were kind of uniquely San Franciscan, dealing with a gay community he had started to investigate and document in a way that was groundbreaking and kind of hilarious,” was too attractive to pass up.

While “Gay Semiotics” has never really disappeared from certain parts of photography and gay culture, Fischer says the renewed attention to his other work, and to the work of his peers, has been rewarding.

“What’s really exciting about the show at SFMOMA is it’s me, my mentor Lew Thomas and my colleague Donna-Lee Phillips who designed the original ‘Gay Semiotics’ and the original ‘Castro St.’ book,” Fischer says. “It’s really nice to be seen in that context. I’m thrilled about this because I’ve talked to people about this photography and language — I don’t even want to call it a movement exactly, what this phenomenon was in the ’70s. This is really the first show that’s going to be looking at it contextually.”

Because at the time of publication his books were disseminated around the country, he says a lot of people were potentially influenced by the photography and language genre: This is a moment where it will get its due.

But back to that original moment Fischer was talking about: Does he think he could have done his work in any other city with a large gay community?

“No,” Fischer says. “The Castro was unique because it was gay 24/7. In New York there’s community, but at that time it was constructed in a different way. Here, one aspect of community at that time was really about place and what you saw in that place. I think that visibility is what gave me the sense this is all fine to do.”