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Jeff Solomon's Speech on *HIDE/SEEK: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture*

Jeff Solomon

University of Puget Sound, jsolomon@pugetsound.edu

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Jeff Solomon

Hide/Seek

On March 17, HIDE/SEEK: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture will come to the Tacoma Art Museum. HIDE/SEEK originated at the Smithsonian, in the National Portrait Gallery. Then it went to the Brooklyn Museum, and now it's coming here. Though there have been other exhibits that feature same-sex desire in the United States on campuses and in community art spaces, none have been so prominent, and certainly none have been in the Smithsonian, our national museum, and the largest museum complex in the world. This not to say that gay and lesbian and bisexual and transgendered and otherwise queer artists have not consistently been included in museums. Of course we have been. But mention of our sexuality, and of how our sexuality and gender identity may inform and illuminate our work, has been suppressed. For such an exhibit to receive federal funding and go on tour is a sign of considerable social progress in the United States, and I congratulate the Tacoma Art Museum for hosting the exhibit, and I appreciate the chance to discuss the exhibit here, in this forum organized by Amy Ryken and others, in the company of my colleagues.

I am sorry to say that I am *not* surprised that it has taken this long for an exhibition overtly organized around same-sex desire to go on national tour. Nor am I surprised that the exhibition was heavily attacked, and that the curator, Jonathan Katz, was forced to remove artworks due to political pressure, though, between you and me—really, now: there is nothing particularly scandalous in the exhibition. Nor am I surprised to discover that the terms “lesbian” or “gay” or “queer” do not appear in the exhibit's title, in what was no doubt a defensive strategy against those who would seek to prevent its appearance. It bears repeating that sexuality is one of the few identity categories still legally discriminated against in the United States, and that U.S. citizens and institutions are still comfortable with public homophobia. Yes, the governor of Washington has signed a gay marriage law, but who amongst us doubts that there will soon be a public referendum on the issue—a referendum, that, as in California, may invalidate legal gay marriage in Washington. All the discriminations that we have seen contested in the last decade—the right of lesbians and gay men to serve in the military—the right to marry—the right to not be discriminated against at work—both of these last two by no means secure through the nation—are, at heart, about gaining legitimacy in the American public. If queers serve in the military, if we can get married, then we are respectable: we are seen as part of public life. We are not shameful, and as such, are not appropriately censored. That's why this exhibition is so important—because it's the open, unashamed acknowledgement of the contribution of gay men and women to the arts. Not that homophobes don't think that homosexuals are in the arts; after all, they often resort to the traditional stereotype of the frivolous, sterile homosexual who eschews “real life” in favor of decadent pleasures, including art. But homophobes do want overtly homosexual content, as well as any notion that the queerness of an artist is relevant to the art she produces, to be censored. Even more, they want that censorship to be internalized—for us to be ashamed.

I want to consider here the primary place of censorship and its cognate—shame—both historically and at present in gay life. One of the primary differences between queer men and women and members of other identity groups is that we are born of straight people. Think about it: by the best stats currently available, queers are about 3% of the American population. That means that if every gay man and woman had a child—which we do not—then—well, I don't do math, but my understanding is that 3% of 3% is—well, I have no idea. But I do know that almost all queer children are born to straight parents. And of course, all those agitating against gay marriage, and

gays in the military, and gay art exhibitions supported by the Smithsonian, have children—and they therefore agitate against the 3% of their children who are queer. A curious attribute of sexual minorities is that—unlike those who identify according to their race, ethnicity, or religion—we are not raised by our own people. Instead we are raised by those who, until very recently—very, very recently—considered it not only appropriate but also in the best interests of a child to stamp out any evidence of queer behavior. Historically in our country, mothers and fathers were told that they were not being good parents unless they stamped out any signs of queerness, from gender-inappropriate behavior, to, oh, an unwelcome interest in art. And it is really fairly recently—and it can still by no means be assumed—that parents do not necessarily view their transgendered child, or their intersex child, or their lesbian child, or their gay male child, as a terrible misfortune—and of course children sense even a minor discomfort on the part of their parents, and seek to censor the behavior that causes such displeasure, both inside and out. Even the most accepting parents tend to have difficulty at first accepting that their child belongs to a sexual minority, and best practice calls for those who come out—and I know that many of you out here can speak to this—to give their parents a year to get used to it, to have temper tantrums and otherwise deal with their missed expectations and their association through their children with a degraded population. For those who are not fortunate enough to grow up in an only moderately hostile situation—a situation where they feel comfortable coming out after 22, or after 17, or after 14 years of self-censorship—the statistics are grim. That’s why, though only 3% of teenagers are gay, 20-40% of teenage runaways are queer, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures. That’s why a U.S. government study—the Report of the Secretary's Task Force on Youth Suicide—found that LGBT youth are four times more likely to attempt suicide than other young people. I could go on with the depressing statistics, but I think you take my point.

Art aside, the Hide/Seek exhibit is important because the more that queerness is normalized, the less that queers of all ages will be stigmatized, and will therefore be forced to censor their behavior, their thoughts, and even their very sense of self. The script available for gay youth until recently was skimpy, and the lines were not good. Many of the artists whose work I hope you will be seeing at the Tacoma Art Museum grew up in such hostile circumstances that they didn’t have a word or concept for themselves besides “monstrous.” Homosexuality and transgenderism were understood as illnesses to be resisted if possible and to be ashamed of if not. Nonetheless, these artists were able to affirm their identities through their work, often by joining a larger gay community that allowed them not to censor themselves both inside and out. But for every productive gay artist of the 1920s—and 1950s—and 1970s—and 1990s—and now, there was and remains a flock of gay or proto-gay men and women who were never able to resist their internal and external oppression and lived lives of unnecessary misery and shame. We are fortunate to live at a time where there are a considerable number of GLBT role models for children, and as importantly, for their parents, whom I hope no longer reflexively seek to censor not only their kids’ behavior but also their consciousness.

It is a convention to end such speeches on a hopeful note—and I do think that it’s fantastic that the Hide/Seek exhibit came into existence, and that the Tacoma Art Museum was one of only two museums willing to host it on tour—and the fact that the university has organized events around it supports its reputation as a school that is unusually friendly to queers—a reputation which I believe interested and continues to interest many students in the University of Puget Sound. And I am glad to be living during a decade where such substantive strides are being made against institutional and legal homophobia. But I believe that an easy hopefulness—a lazy sense that things are getting better, look, wow, yay—is disrespectful of the considerable pain that I know many people in this

room endure today, both inside themselves and in the world outside them. I also think that it lets non-queers off the hook all too easily. To repeat a fact that cannot be repeated too frequently, queers are one of the last legally discriminated-against minorities in the country and one of the last that ordinary citizens are comfortable disparaging in public. An accepting, immediate environment does not change any individual's history of discrimination, or the fact that said individual still lives in a culture that, overall, does not afford the rights to queers that are available to straight people, to our considerable psychic and material detriment. And in my view, one the most damaging forces arrayed against queers is censorship—and the most profound censorship is often the censorship of omission. Yes, it is shameful that David Wojnarowicz video was removed from the Smithsonian's exhibition—but it is more shameful—and more damaging to my people—that exhibitions like this one so seldom get mounted at all, that they are censored before they are even proposed, that the lack of acknowledgement of the contributions of lgbt individuals in all fields of knowledge, not just art, creates a silence that diminishes the expectations of other lgbt people for what their lives might be and of the whole culture for what lgbt people can and do contribute. Such censorship also occurs in our personal and work life when we fail to acknowledge the existence and concerns of queer people and allow silence and absence to prevail instead of creating a space for all individuals and their relationships to become visible and accepted. We as a country honor and support diversity—but we are not entirely certain that queers should be included in that diversity. This despite, and perhaps because, with every pregnancy, each one of us could be intimately related to the queer population. Thank you.