

THE LGBTQ ISSUE

San Francisco

RAINBOW PRIDE

HOW A FLAG
FROM THE
BAY AREA
BECAME THE
GLOBAL
EMBLEM FOR
GAY RIGHTS



QUEE ROES

A NEW FILM BY VIGOR
WILLIAMS EXPLORES THE
EMPOWERING CHARACTERS
IN—AND BEHIND—FOUR
DECADES OF GAY AND
LESBIAN COMIC STRIPS.

BY ANDREW GILBERT

LIKE MANY A LESBIAN OF HER GENERATION,

the Emmy Award-nominee documentary filmmaker Vivian Kleiman followed Alison Bechdel's groundbreaking comic strip, *Dykes to Watch Out For*, throughout much of its quarter-century run. Kleiman has been in the vanguard of chronicling gay life since the 1980s, but as a self-described "effete snob," she admits to feeling leery when Justin Hall, who edited the first major anthology of queer comics, *No Straight Lines: Four Decades of Queer Comics*, approached her about taking over a documentary-in-progress focusing on the art form's pioneers.

"My impression of the phrase 'queer comics' was gay men having funky sex, and that wasn't what I was going to spend my time working on," Kleiman says. Though there's no shortage of hot sex in the queer comic book universe, instead of erotica,

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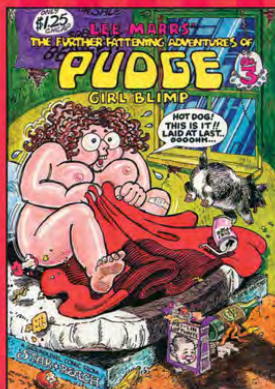
Hall introduced Kleiman to a creatively charged underground scene that tracked perfectly with her calling. At a time when gay bars were still being raided by the police, comic artists started capturing the details of a rapidly coalescing community in all its multifarious glory.

"I was completely overwhelmed," Kleiman says. "Here were queer people telling the stories of our lives. They were creating work about concerns of the day, AIDS, gender politics, coming out. But also universal stories about looking for love, looking for sex, looking for friends, a bad hair day."

After years of filming and a successful Kickstarter campaign that raised nearly \$42,000, Kleiman and Hall are in the home stretch, refining a rough cut of the documentary *No Straight Lines: The Rise of Queer Comics*. Rather than trying to encompass Hall's entire 2012 tome, the film zooms in on five pioneering artists from the 1970s and '80s: Bechdel, Howard Cruse, Mary Wings, Jennifer Camper and Rupert Kinnard. The artists have given the director free rein to use their creations and the characters come to life on screen via animations, bounding



From top:
Documentary filmmaker Vivian Kleiman; *The Further Fattening Adventures of Pudge, Girl Blimp* by Lee Marrs



from static black-and-white panels into colorful, kinetic motion.

Using the personal stories and artwork to examine four decades of queer history "is a way to show a new generation that may be struggling with identity or family," Kleiman says. "These are people who have struggled and come through as creative individuals—artists who have worked with their own demons and found a voice and medium to express their lives. It becomes a shared experience."

One of the featured artists in the film is Oakland-based Ajuan Mance, a professor of English at Mills College, who has created numerous zines and comics that vividly represent the experiences of queer people of color, particularly of African descent. Other artists in the film are also well known beyond the world of

"Oppressed Minority Cartoonist" by Alison Bechdel, who is known for groundbreaking comic *Dykes to Watch Out For*.

comics, particularly Cruse and Bechdel, the latter a MacArthur Genius Award recipient whose acclaimed 2006 graphic memoir, *Fat Home: A Family Tragicomic*, became something of a sensation, eventually inspiring a Tony Award-winning Broadway musical. The contributions of other artists have long been overlooked. Kinnard created the first comic strip devoted to queer African American characters: the fabulous teenage superhero Brown Bomber and his witty sidekick, Diva Touché Flambe. He conjured Brown Bomber as a college student in the mid-1970s, but his *Cultural Comics* strip earned an avid new following in the Bay Area and beyond after he moved to San Francisco in 1986 and started producing it for the *San Francisco Sentinel* and, later, *SF Weekly*.

In the film, Kinnard speaks about the power of seeing one's self represented on the page, "telling the story of being in love with comics as a kid and idolizing the popular superheroes like the *Fantastic Four*," Kleiman says. "He'd copy them and make up his own stories with those kinds of characters until, one day, at 14, he realized that all of the characters were white. His heroes were strong black figures like *Mt. K*, *Malcolm X* and *Muhammad Ali*. His life changed at that point, and he goes on to create the first out black comic characters."

In many ways, the story of queer comics illustrates the cultural frisson generated by San Francisco's overlapping alternative communities. Reflecting various waves of leftist political organizing and bohemian artist enclaves, underground publishing flourished here throughout the 20th century, infrastructure that made the city ripe for the rise of a brash new comics movement. With gays and lesbians arriving in increasing numbers at the close of the 1960s, it's hardly surprising the city also played an outside role in the rise of queer comics. It's also not a shock to discover that alt-comic patriarch R. Crumb was in the thick of the action.

The publication of the first issue of *Zap Comix* in 1968 kicked open the door for Crumb and fellow comix artists like S. Clay Wilson, Robert Williams, Spain Rodriguez and Rick Griffin to let their freak flags fly. "Initially, it was very male and very straight," says Hall, a renowned comic artist himself. "There were disturbing elements of misogyny and homophobia, particularly with R. Crumb, and some of the first queer comics were created in resistance to that."

The insular nature of the queer and comix worlds was embodied in the person of Sandy Colorado, Crumb's younger sister, who followed him to San Francisco and ended up coming out as lesbian, a tale documented by Trina Robbins in *Women's Comix No. 1* in 1972. While Colorado collaborated on the piece, the fact that Robbins was straight incensed Mary Wings, who was inspired to create the first comic book by an out lesbian, *Come Out Comix*, in 1973.

One reason queer comics are only now starting to get their due is that the art form was long dismissed as ephemeral juvenilia—throw away product for lowbrow consumption. For queer artists, "it



means you're marginalized within the marginal—even the underground scene rejected gay comics," Kleiman says, while noting that the complete lack of commercial prospects served to unshackle the artist's imaginations. "Queer cartoonists had no expectation of getting published by anyone except themselves or of generating any revenue, which meant they could create completely uncensored, with a freedom they might not have had otherwise."

No one has done more to raise the profile of queer comics than Hall, who has doggedly carved out space for the artists among their peers at alt-comic

conventions since presenting the first panel of queer comics artists at an indie comics convention in San Francisco in 2003. Through his position as assistant professor of comics at the California College of the Arts, one of only a handful of comics programs in the country, he's helped mentor new generations of queer comic artists while making sure their forebears aren't forgotten.

"I've been obsessed with comics since I learned to read," Hall says. "I didn't come into it as much as never grew out of it. There's a lot of potential for expression, and we're still experimenting wildly

No Straight Lines: Four Decades of Queer Comics (\$25, Fantagraphics), an anthology of queer comics, edited by Justin Hall, with cover art by Maurice Vellekoop

"I DIDN'T COME INTO IT AS MUCH AS NEVER Grew OUT OF IT. THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT THE STATIC NATURE OF IT—THE WAY YOU CAN MANIPULATE TIME AND SPACE LIKE YOU CAN'T IN ANY OTHER MEDIUM. THERE'S A LOT OF POTENTIAL FOR EXPRESSION, AND WE'RE STILL EXPERIMENTING WILDLY WITH THE FORM." —JUSTIN HALL



NO STRAIGHT LINES ILLUSTRATION BY MAURICE VELLEKOOP; BACKGROUND DESIGN BY KAYLA BREEDEN



A yellow-tinted caricature of a man with a large nose and a speech bubble saying "I'M COMING IS A".



From top left: A work by cartoonist Justin Hall; a self-portrait of Hall, who worked with Vivian Kleiman on forthcoming documentary *No Straight Lines: The Rise of Queer Comics*.

More than a historical study, *No Straight Lines* sets up a dialogue between generations, with a Greek chorus of young artists whose commentary is woven throughout the film. One of the artists is 24-year-old Emeric Kennard, a trans man who studied with Hall and Cruse at California College of the Arts. Growing up in rural Oregon, Kennard found refuge in comic book series like *The Sandman* by Neil Gaiman, the straight artist who has long included queer characters in his work. Kennard speaks to the sometimes disorienting speed with which the ground continues to shift for queer comics, where works that broke ground yesterday are seen as problematic by young trans and queer artists today.

"I'm so grateful for the queer comics community, and feeling supported by elders is a huge part of that," Kennard says. "What I'm seeing in the national culture is that there seems to be this cognitive dissonance between people of my generation and people who still remember living through the AIDS crisis. I'm only 24, but, even in my lifetime, there have been some pretty dramatic shifts."

Kleiman's career as a documentarian provides a telling gauge of the distance traveled by the queer community. She's spent much of the year flying around the world to screen the seminal films she

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From left: Ajuan Mance's self-portrait; "Hattie and Half Size" by Mance.



worked on with Marlon Riggs, the black gay filmmaker responsible for classic works like *Ethnic Notions*, *Black Is...*, *Black Ain't* and *Tongues Untied* (which was denounced by the late U.S. Sen. Jesse Helms, a Republican from North Carolina, and sparked a major battle in the National Endowment for the Arts culture wars of early '90s).

In much the same way, and on much the same timeline that queer culture has moved to the center of American life, comics have come to dominate our cultural landscape—like it or not. Comic-Con inspires media coverage once reserved for the Super Bowl. The ever-expanding Marvel Universe keeps a fair amount of Hollywood's stars in the limelight. And superheroes occupy the high ground in discussions around identity (see: Panther, Black). Not long ago taking comic books seriously was as unthinkable as, well, gay marriage.

Ultimately, *No Straight Lines* is a tale of triumph, "a trajectory from the margins to the reaching mainstream audiences, and getting acclaim on international stages," Kleiman says. "It's a story about these individuals on a personal journey, struggling for authenticity, and, as luck would have it, there's a payoff." ■

"StrutFoxes" by Ajuan Mance



ILLUSTRATIONS BY AJUAN MANCE; BACKGROUND DESIGN BY KATYA BREIDEN



Mary Wings' "Child Labor," which appeared in *Gay Comix* No. 2

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THE END

... OR IS IT?