’I’m really interested in making work that’s political but also joyful.’

April 1, 2015 By Visual AIDS

Michael Bailey Gates, Angels series

Michael Bailey Gates is an artist well known for his collaborative videos with Claire Christerson as the duo Mike and Claire, whose projects have been shown at venues such as MIX NYC Queer Experimental Film Festival. Mike’s thesis project for the School of Visual Arts’ Mentors show is a tribute to those who paved the way before him, and features many queer activists in New York City portrayed as angels in vivid primary colors. The photographic series is on view in the exhibition Mentors at SVA’s Chelsea Gallery through Saturday, April 4. We are very grateful that Mike will donate proceeds from sales of his work to Visual AIDS, and here he is interviewed by Visual AIDS friend Sand Avidar about his process and vision for the series.

Tell me about the process of making the work.
I was doing these drawings, a lot of them were pretty much stories that people had told me. A lot of them were just really funny stories, but then they stated to become a little more political. Something that I really love doing is cartoon illustration. Whenever I storyboard stuff for a shoot I always draw first, and then I try to make it into pictures. And that’s where I started. The process just started of me making the cartoons into real-life photographs. And I started looking at Paul Cadmus’s work to get inspiration for the images and started looking through queer history and finding some images that I really liked that helped me build...I wouldn’t say to help me build a narrative but to help me build a way that I thought other people would be able to look at it and get the references.

How long was the whole process, would you say, from start to finish?
The drawings I’ve been doing for like a year. But organizing the project was a good three months, and then the shoot took--it was all shot in a day, which was a mistake, but the pre-production was like two weeks of getting stuff organized, and I had a lot of great people helping me.

And did the end result come out more or less like you had envisioned?
Yeah, it was the first time I’ve ever made something where it really matched what the drawings looked like exactly. It was the first time I’ve ever shot something where I wasn’t open to anything on-set except making the pictures. I wasn’t like, “Oh, yeah, that looks kind of cool, let’s try that.” It was very strict, like, let’s get the shot.

How much oversight is there? Do they send you off to do your work and come back with it? How closely

do you work with an advisor?
I guess it's really about how much you want it, how much you put into it, and how much you ask for it in terms of oversight. For me, I really do what I wanted and kind of just did it. I showed Charles Atlas, my mentor, and he was like, I don't know what I can help you with in terms of this because you seem to have everything thought out already. I can be stubborn in that way though.

You work with Claire Christerson a lot under the name Mike and Claire. Is it hard to maintain your separate practice when you're used to working so closely with somebody? Of course both in Claire's video for the show and in your pictures there's a continuity between the Mike and Claire work and your own work.
Yeah, and I think a lot of that comes because we've had similar mentors. Like Kembra [Pfahler], who introduced us to body painting and availablism. And then Alice O'Malley, who kind of introduced me to the idea of photographing or documenting your friends or subcultures. That's where using those models came from. Like I think it will be really fun later on in life to look back and say, oh yeah, there's Sandy, there's Hari Nef.

Something that's really striking in your work is the use of primary colors. Can you talk about that?
For a lot of different reasons I really like the primary colors. They make me feel really comfortable. I also really like that when you look at tabloids or advertisements those are always the colors you use to get people's attention. I have synesthesia, which is the thing where you kind of mix up your senses, and those are three colors that I feel like really fit well together for me in my head. It's hard to put into words, but it's always been something that I've been able to fall back on in terms of feeling comfortable and getting a message across. Just the way you look at those colors it's so accessible, joyful--which is another thing I'm really interested in, making work that's political but also joyful, which evolves into the idea of being happy rather than super-cynical or angry.

Let's keep talking about the political angle. Obviously that's a big part of the work that you showed in the Mentor show, and the models are queer activists?
Yeah, the majority of them are, but everyone I asked to be in it is very queer. Even if they don't identify themselves as "Queer"--gay, bi, queer, trans*, everything in between, the spectrum, they're all aware and working towards something which I really appreciate and admire. It was important for me to have the people I based the drawings off of in the pictures.

A very charged and central element of contemporary queer politics is race. And one of the effects of the primary color body paint is that the whole place of race in the tableau and in the political message shifts entirely. Was that deliberate?
That's something I had a conflict with when I was doing the work. Something that I really wanted to be aware of and to work towards was to have a lot of different body types in it, and that worked out in some ways. Some people weren't available, and some people weren't interested in the project because they thought that I was creating an orgy scene and they didn't want to do that. But at the end of it all for me covering up people's bodies with paint so you can't see what specifically their color or race or where they're from, that wasn't a part of it. I'm not one of those people that's pro being colorblind...that's kind of like the easy way out and it's backwards in terms of social change, to say you're "colorblind." The work wasn't really meant to be about that; it is meant to be about the actions happening in the scenes. Body paint can help people perform with anonymity and that's comforting to most people. The angel characters act as anonymous ghosts and the body paint really gets people in to this character.

A really wonderful aspect of your thesis show and the reason that we are sitting here today is that you

decided to donate profits from it to Visual AIDS. How did you first learn about Visual AIDS, and how did that decision come about?
I think the first time I learned about Visual AIDS was probably through Stephen Kent Jusick at MIX Film Festival. Claire and I made costumes for MIX our first year, and we did the trailer last year and Visual AIDS was always talked about, always a part of it. And then I really started looking at it a lot when I was starting to describe my project to my thesis classes. And everybody was like "I don't get it," or "I think you should try something else." It just really was hard for me to talk about queer folklore, because that's something that seems so far-fetched to people. And I got really frustrated, and I went on Visual AIDS's website one day and one other website that just really listed the whole history of queer artists, and I just broke it down a lot and made my own list, and it was really useful. And I realized that in school people don't really want to talk about queer history and art or queer folklore unless you're looking at Mapplethorpe's asshole. Visual Aids was preserving this history of so many different queer artists and talking about it, and that felt very important.

Who are some of the favorite artists you found through Visual AIDS's online Artist+ Registry?
Chloe Dzubilo…but I always just say "Chloe" because she was really good friends with Alice, it was always just "Chloe." Right when I moved to New York I remember Chloe had just died and she was one of the first queer artists that I was introduced to that I didn't really know at the time how important she was, or I didn't really even know what she was talking about, but I really loved the work. I loved the aesthetic of it not being perfect, that was really great, that was really getting across the message that made it feel like anybody could be an artist. David Cannon Dashiell and Tom Bianchi.

You posted a picture on your Instagram recently of the book that VA put out.
The Alice, Che and Chloe DUETS book. Yeah, Alice would always mention that she was working on the project, but she's very modest. I really wanted to get my hands on it right away so I ran up there and I got copies for all my friends, too. And I got two copies for Claire. I really like it. It's funny reading it because I've never heard Chloe's voice before but I've heard Alice's voice, so it's interesting hearing Alice's voice in my head and then hearing the voice of somebody I never met.

I really like the term "folklore" for the kind of connections that you're talking about.
Yeah, these pictures, like I said before, it comes from scenes of queer history that I've been taught. Stories of prevention, and scenarios that probably would have really ended poorly for me if I hadn't had people in my life warning me about things. If it wasn't for like, my friends Bizzy [Barefoot] or Jack Waters and Peter Cramer who told me stories about when they were younger…that's really what the project was about: these angels but also people who aren't perfect. A strong need to help other people [by sharing experience and information], done in a way that was really joyful.

Are there any particular mentors or teachers that you want to give a shout-out to that you haven't mentioned yet?
I think the people I've learned the most from are people outside of school. Alice O'Malley, Stephen Kent, Bizzy Barefoot. Charles Atlas has been really helpful to me. I've only met with him twice but those have been really long, good conversations. Josef Astor.

What's next for you, now that you're done with school?
That's what I've been fumbling with a little bit too. I'm still going to be making work. I want to continue the Angels series. I might be going to Japan to work for a little while. Still making work with Claire. I guess I'm just playing it by ear right now. I want to work with Visual AIDS more, do some projects with them if they're interested. I love what they do and I feel like it's the right place.

Michael Bailey Gates is a New York-based artist from Rhode Island.

Sand Avidar is a writer and scholar living in Manhattan. He can be found on Twitter at @sandavidar.

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