



I Just Want Them to Know That They Didn't Break Me

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A Master's Thesis submitted to the graduate program of School of the Museum of Fine Arts at Tufts University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Studio Art
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Chris Diani

cdiani01@tufts.edu
@chrisdiani

Advisory Committee:

Pamela Pecchio

Graduate Program Advisor & Professor of the Practice
School of the Museum of Fine Arts

Laurel Nakadate

Graduate Program Director & Professor of the Practice
School of the Museum of Fine Arts

Ian Alteveer

Beal Family Chair, Department of Contemporary Art
Museum of Fine Arts Boston

It all started with Pink Pony Pawpaw.

In a viral video posted to TikTok in June of last year – just in time for Pride - an older, grey-haired white man is seen in the crowd at a Chappell Roan concert, dressed in a pink polo shirt while bopping and singing along to Roan's hit song "Pink Pony Club." The camera pans over to the pop star, who appears to happily acknowledge him, before panning back to the older fan. Dubbed "Pink Pony Pawpaw" in the caption of the video, this unidentified man immediately captured the internet's collective imagination; comments on the original video included:

"His younger self really needed this song, but I'm so happy he has it now"

and

"Pink Pony Pawpaw makes me cry every time, thinking what he's probably been through, the people he's likely lost..."

and on separate videos referencing the original:

"I get really really emotional every time I see Pink Pony Pawpaw like I'm just constantly reminded why I don't see very many elderly gay men and how many people like him would have loved to be at that concert but can't"

and

"Older gay men who lived through the plague and lost ALL of their friends deserve this moment in gay pop. Someone find Pink Pony Pawpaw and tell him we love him!"

Even *Out* magazine did a short feature about the man, calling him "one of Chappell Roan's oldest fans" and attributing his popularity, in part, to him serving as a stand-in for "all those lost to the AIDS crisis – who never got to experience the visibility and joy of a queer superstar like Roan."

I admit, there is something both triumphant and mournful about the image of a gay elder living his best life despite decades of violence, disease, and discrimination against his kind, and it's understandable that younger generations would see him through the filter of the most prominent thing they've learned about the lives of gay men who lived through the last two decades of the 20th century: the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

It's true, HIV/AIDS decimated wide swaths of the gay community in the 1980s and 1990s. Many of those who survived experienced social stigma, fear of infection, and the loss of loved ones, and they carry that trauma with them even today. These survivors went through a kind of social death, treated like grieving ghosts, tragic figures whose continued survival invalidated the mainstream myth of total gay annihilation.

However, as much as the world wants to look at these older gay men as mere shadows of a lost generation, and as much as those well-meaning TikTok users want to cry for the wretched life they imagine Pink Pony Pawpaw lived before this magically transformative Chappell Roan concert, the reality is far more complicated.

I hit puberty just as AIDS was claiming its first victims, and it was obvious to everyone around me that I wasn't going to be straight. In junior high and high school, bullies taunted me with the question:

"Do you know what gay stands for?"

and before I could muster a guess, shouted their answer:

"Got AIDS yet? Get it, G-A-Y?"

There's a passage I think about a lot from Helen Molesworth's *This Will Have Been: Art, Love & Politics in the 1980s*, the book that accompanied the exhibition of the same name she curated for the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago. She starts with a mention of a comment by Jack Bankowsky in an old issue of ArtForum magazine in which he called the art of the 1980s an open wound.

"If the 1980s is an open wound," Molesworth counters, "then surely AIDS is largely responsible for causing it."

Yes, HIV/AIDS was to blame for much of the antipathy I experienced throughout the 1980s, but it's not as if society back then would have been welcoming if AIDS wasn't in the mix; one of the biggest hits of the decade – "Money for Nothing" by Dire Straits with guest vocals by Sting – had kids all around the world casually throwing around the f-slur as they sang along. Music critic Jim Farber shares, in his introduction to the photos of Nicholas Blair in *Castro to Christopher: Gay Streets of America 1979-1986*, "It's important to note that as often as you would hear the term faggot thrown in your direction back then, not once did I hear or read anyone use the term homophobia. There's a telling reason for that: most people didn't think there was anything in the least bit 'phobic' about finding gay people repulsive."

And yet, the 80s didn't completely suck.

I was ten years old when MTV hit the airwaves. Despite *Out* magazine and some empathetic Gen Z-ers crying over the lack of a queer superstar like Chappell Roan when I was coming of age, pop music was full of gay representation and flamboyant genderbending. We had Boy George with his long hair and flawless makeup, and Annie Lennox in a men's suit and bright orange crewcut. We had Freddie Mercury, David Bowie, and George Michael. We had Bronski Beat, Erasure, and the Pet Shop Boys.

In film, John Waters was creating queer trash masterpieces starring his outrageously larger-than-life leading performer, Divine.

Charles Busch, Holly Hughes, and Tim Miller were queering the stage while Sarah Schulman, Edmund White, and Armistead Maupin were introducing gay & lesbian characters into the annals of literature.

Keith Haring jumped from subway graffiti outlaw to blue chip artist, Robert Mapplethorpe was packing galleries and giving conservative Congressmen nightmares, and David Hockney painted portraits of his lovers acquired by the most prestigious museums in the world.

As much as I was terrified of being gay – certain I would die of AIDS or fall victim to a violent gay bashing – I was also thrilled to be living in such candy-colored chaos. I loved Polaroid cameras and parachute pants, Swatch watches and Rubik's cubes, Scooby Doo and Afterschool Specials. That strange, electric blend of joy and fear that was growing up gay in the 1980s shaped not only who I am, but the work I create.

Today, I explore queer identity through a pop culture lens— one steeped in camp, nostalgia, and personal mythology. I often grapple with the idea of community, and many of the ideas I initially explore from a personal perspective ultimately transform into projects I use to connect with my own social circle and beyond.

In thinking about my complicated feelings about the 1980s, I wonder:

Am I alone? Did my gay Gen X friends also love the 80s while simultaneously being desperate for them to end?

I Just Want Them to Know That They Didn't Break Me is my attempt to answer that question.

By creating an immersive installation that combines nostalgic, "school picture day"-style portraits of gay men who lived through the 1980s with audio recordings of their recollections, then adding vintage photos, ephemera, and physical objects, I hope to share a glimpse of what it was like to be alive back then and the various ways we have navigated the decades since.

As Audre Lord told us, "Survival is an act of resistance." There is value, in this age of deadly outbreaks and political turmoil, in looking back at a similar era and learning how people resisted, survived, and thrived.







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Thesis Participants

Charles Baldwin
John Biebel
Daniel Byrnes
Michael Coleman
John Connolly
Herb Fox
Jack Moody
Arthur Snow
José Luis Suazo

Original Music

Scott House

Research Assistance

Alexandra Bush
Chao Chen
Darin Murphy
Carrie Salazar

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Matthew Higgs
Erin Chaeyeon Kim
Gracie Korstjens
Yining Lee
Cathy Lu
Chris Maliga
Vinny Martin
Megan Mcmillan
Kimberli Meyer
Rick Moody
Rachelle Mozman-Solano
Zora J Murff
Ethan Murrow
Dr. Alessandra Nappo
Alonso Nichols
Queer Britain
Laura Beth Reese
Arsenio Silva
Tate Britain
Kenson Truong
Liangsi Wang
MiJung Yun

Hand-Aid
Team
Mr. T
Pursuit
Hudson
Mercury
Simon
Glasnost
AIDS
MTV
Erasure
Rubik's Cube
Atari 2600
Hair Rock
George Bush
Less Than Zero
Pac-Man
Weird Al
Geraldine Ferraro
Jimmy Carter
Ridgmont High
Wall of the Berlin Wall
Family Ties
Men's Health Crisis
The Brat Pack
Where's the Beef?
The Cosby Show
Murder, She Wrote
David Wojnarowicz
Heavy Metal
Men Don't Eat Quiche
Mikhail Gorbachev
Robert Longo
Max Headroom
New Coke
Hip Hop
Macintosh

Finger
Jelly Bracelets
Leather Jacket
Jean Jacket
Acid-Wash Jeans
Cabbage Patch Kids
Cassette Tapes
Jellies Shoes
Boomboxes
"Just Say No"
Nancy Reagan
Gag me with a spoon
Trapper Keeper
VCRs / VHS Tapes
Blockbuster Video
Scrunchies
Parachute Pants
Reebok Sneakers
Lunchboxes
California Raisins
Polaroid Cameras
Merlin
Viewmaster
Rollerblades
Cordless Phones
Ronald Reagan
Margaret Thatcher
We Are the World
WarGames
Sony Walkman
Nuclear War
The Cold War
Preppies
Valley Girls
New Romantics
British New Wave
Keith Haring
Jean-Michel Basquiat
Warhol

Pet Shop
Memphis Group
AIDS Memorial Quilt
General Hospital
Luke & Laura
Heathers
Do the Right Thing
Madonna
Michael Jackson
Prince
Whitney Houston
Boy George
Cyndi Lauper
ET: The Extra Terrestrial
David Bowie
Eurythmics
Duran Duran
Bon Jovi
Robert Mapplethorpe
Def Leppard
Motley Crüe
Van Halen
Bruce Springsteen
Brooke Shields
Miami Vice
Vanessa Williams
Atlanta Child Murders
Sandra Day O'Connor
Tylenol Poisonings
Test Tube Babies
Breakdancing
Spuds MacKenzie
The Preppy Handbook
The Color Purple
Diet Coke
Sally Ride
Karen Carpenter
Bright Lights, Big City

The Challenge
The Handmaid's Tale
Tammy Faye Bakker
Iran-Contra Affair
And the Band Played On
The Golden Girls
Black Monday
Bonfire of the Vanities
Princess Diana
Hole in the ozone layer
Rev. Jesse Jackson
Moonstruck
A Brief History of Time
Frankie Goes to Hollywood
The Wonder Years
Roseanne
Coca Cola Clothes
Wham
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Andy
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