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Donna Gottschalk

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Donna Gottschalk — Point de vue

Point de vue Article Le 6 avril 2023 — Par Guillaume Benoit

La galerie Marcelle Alix met à l'honneur du 6 avril au 20 mai le travail de la photographe Donna Gottschalk (née en 1949) dans une exposition exceptionnelle, sa première en Europe. Emotion, empathie et beauté absolue empreints d'une redéfinition de ce que peut constituer un activisme absolu font de ce corpus un trésor à redécouvrir.

« Donna Gottschalk — Ce qui fait une vie », Galerie Marcelle Alix du 6 avril au 20 mai. [En savoir plus](#) Il est rare que le terme authenticité résonne si fort et si intelligemment avec un œuvre. Porté par son invisibilité jusqu'à ces dernières années et sa redécouverte, d'un bloc d'une rare cohérence et d'une beauté sourde, celui de Donna Gottschalk est de ceux-là.

L'artiste documenta en effet, en parallèle de son activité militante dans les années 1970, la vie quotidienne de membres de communautés en marge et en constant danger, principalement des femmes lesbiennes mais aussi trans, sans-abri, dépendants aux drogues ou victimes de violences. D'abord destinées à enrichir ses propres souvenirs, ses photographies en noir et blanc offrent un regard somptueusement affectif mais pas moins lucide sur la condition de ces individus mis en marge dans une Amérique dont les rêves restent en trompe-l'œil pour nombre de ses habitants. Depuis sa retraite dans une ferme du Vermont, cette membre historique du Gay Liberation Front, étudiante en arts à la Cooper Union et icône de l'activisme lesbien (elle fut photographiée lors de la première marche des fiertés à New York tenant une pancarte légendaire : « I am your worst nightmare, I am your best Fantasy ») observe la réémergence de son travail depuis sa récente rétrospective au Leslie-Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art de New York en 2018 avec une joie sereine.

En 2019, la galerie Marcelle Alix invitait l'artiste à participer à son exposition *de l'amitié* et commençait à tisser, en collaboration avec l'écrivaine Hélène Giannechini, une relation qui lui permet aujourd'hui de montrer un ensemble choisi de ses photographies.



Donna Gottschalk, Chris Jimenez and Their Dog, Queens, 1969 Courtesy of the artist

Avec une volonté constante de se tenir à la marge de la mise en scène et privilégiant la véritable authenticité du portrait, Donna Gottschalk a fabriqué l'un des plus beaux hommages aux existences de ses proches et un message aussi limpide ; face à l'adversité, face à la violence et dans la difficulté, « la communauté lesbienne avait besoin de voir que nous n'étions pas toutes malheureuses ; on pouvait se développer. » ¹ Sans conservatisme, sans aigreur et avec une lucidité pleine d'empathie, la photographe dédie alors son objectif à ces vies qui n'ont de parallèle que les frontières de regards qui les occultent.

En plus d'être salvatrice, la mise en avant de son œuvre injustement méconnu témoigne d'une force plastique magnétique d'une photographie où les contrastes subjuguent dans des cadres aussi intimes que dans des scènes du quotidien. Ici, les flous et les nets valent avec une évidence qui paraît toujours épouser au mieux la force intérieure de ses modèles, déposant sur les visages endormis ou défiant l'objectif un trouble qui ouvre l'horizon d'une vie jamais figée. Les moments de calme, de plaisir et de souffrance s'égrenent avec une même attention aux visages, aux regards qui trahissent une belle confiance en la photographe. Pleines de toutes les complexités qui parcourent le quotidien d'individus qui portent par leur seule existence, le poids de l'engagement, ses images alternent les tonalités et déclinent les sentiments pour affirmer l'impossibilité de fixer l'existence dans l'essence. Une gageure pour ce corpus photographique qui, à l'image de sa forme, revit aujourd'hui avec une renommée nouvelle et porte, dans son humilité et sa discrétion, de nouvelles questions au jour.





Donna Gottschalk, Marlene Resting with a Beer, Oregon, 1974 © Donna Gottschalk, courtesy of the artist

Profondément attachée à la justesse du portrait, dépouillée de toute velléité commerciale ou communicationnelle, sa pratique empathique trouve ainsi une reconnaissance aussi belle que méritée. Car c'est précisément dans les marges que se meut son travail, mêlant au naturalisme traditionnel un fonds social dont l'intensité politique se mesure à la proximité intense de son sujet. Admirative notamment des œuvres de Diane Arbus, Irving Penn ou August Sander, la photographe intègre une dimension temporelle majeure dans son travail, se saisissant du temps pour faire évoluer la relation intime qui la lie à ses sujets, on y voit les modèles se transformer à ses côtés, ses proches (et notamment sa sœur qu'elle photographiera toute sa vie) comme ceux à qui elle venait en aide et accueillait dans les années 1970-1980.

Au-delà des postures, au-delà des symboles, c'est dans la durée même de l'intimité, dans la continuité de l'existence par-delà les souffrances, les exclusions et la mise au ban d'une société qui refuse de les voir que Donna Gottschalk dévoile la réalité d'êtres humains qui, comme tous les autres, vivent et marquent de leur empreinte l'esprit et la vie de ceux qui les croisent, évoluant de manière singulière dans une société marquée par la violence qu'elle exerce à leur encontre. Elle-même aura un parcours sinueux et riche, délaissant la photographie au tournant des années 1980 qui la verront tour à tour membre active du Gay Liberation Movement, chauffeuse de taxi, directrice d'une entreprise de tirage photographique, puis aide-soignante.



Donna Gottschalk, Sleepers, Limerick, Pennsylvania, 1970 Collection of the Leslie-Lohman Museum

C'est ainsi une véritable authenticité, au sens étymologique de « vertu par laquelle l'individu exprime avec sincérité et engagement ce qu'il est profondément » qui traverse son œuvre. Gottschalk a fait de ses modèles le miroir d'une vie qu'elle a elle-même éloignée d'un activisme démonstratif (sans le renier pour autant) vers une mise en acte de la vie, une perpétuation de cette vie-même dans les marges, documentant et actualisant elle-même, cette intensité du quotidien qui infuse, en marge des attendus et des normes, toutes les existences.

Un catalogue de souvenirs à usage personnel qui réussit le tour de force de constituer le condensé d'épisodes d'une histoire de l'émotion que chacun peut s'approprier.

¹ « The lesbian community needed to see (that) we're not all miserable; you can thrive. », propos recueillis par Allyssia Alleyne, CNN.



La parole aux femmes

LE 14 AVRIL 2023

S'il est une bonne nouvelle dans l'histoire de l'art des ces dernières années, c'est la reconnaissance de plus en plus grande des artistes femmes. Ce phénomène n'est pas récent, on a déjà pu l'observer, entre autres, depuis l'exposition *elles@centrepompidou* en 2009, à Beaubourg, qui mettait pour la première fois en lumière les artistes femmes de la collection, mais il a pris de l'ampleur ces derniers temps, en particulier dans le sillage du mouvement #metoo. On ne peut bien sûr que s'en réjouir et on espère qu'il va continuer et même s'amplifier, mais force est de constater qu'à l'instar d'autres qui sont apparus à la suite ou parallèlement à lui (le post-colonialisme, la revendication écologique, etc.) et qui lui sont parfois associés, il est aussi devenu un phénomène de mode. Au point que certains musées ou certaines galeries se contentent de réunir des artistes femmes, de toutes tendances et de toutes origines, pour faire une exposition. Comme si le seul fait d'appartenir à un sexe pouvait constituer un thème suffisamment fort pour qu'il donne lieu à une exposition. Comme si une identité, quelle qu'elle soit, pouvait servir d'esthétique...

Ce n'est pas le cas de l'exposition qui est présentée actuellement au ravissant Musée de Montmartre sous le titre, *Surréalisme au féminin* ? Car en choisissant de montrer des artistes femmes qui ont été associées d'une manière ou d'une autre à ce mouvement et qui, pour un grand nombre, sont aujourd'hui presque oubliées, elle s'attaque à un bastion : le surréalisme, où régnait le machisme, dont le Père fondateur (Breton) était ouvertement homophobe et pour qui la femme était souvent considérée comme une simple muse, un tremplin pour l'imaginaire viril, mais qui n'avait pas d'existence en elle-même (la « Nadjia » du même Breton). D'ailleurs, comme le soulignent Alix Agret et Dominique Païni, les commissaires de l'exposition, les seules parmi elles à avoir eu une certaine notoriété étaient celles qui étaient les épouses ou les compagnes des peintres et des écrivains du groupe. Et encore, leurs travaux n'étaient pas considérés avec le même sérieux ou la même attention que ceux de leurs collègues masculins.



Pourtant, le surréalisme, qui était en prise avec l'imaginaire, qui ne séparait pas l'art de la vie et qui prônait le dépassement des cadres et des contraintes, était un terrain propice à l'épanouissement des femmes. Il ne privilégiait pas les compétences enseignées par les grandes institutions auxquelles celles-ci n'avaient toujours accès. Et par sa pratique du détournement de l'objet quotidien, de l'art du collage ou de la broderie, il se développait dans des secteurs que l'on pourrait qualifier de « féminin ». C'est ce que montre cette remarquable exposition qui se déploie dans un espace relativement restreint (il faudrait un lieu d'une autre ampleur pour vraiment redécouvrir le travail de toutes ces artistes). Elle rassemble ainsi une cinquantaine de noms, venant de nombreuses nationalités (le mouvement s'étendait bien au-delà de l'Europe, même si l'exposition se concentre sur celle-ci), sur une période allant de 1930 aux années 2000, c'est-à-dire bien au-delà de la dissolution officielle du groupe qui eut lieu en 1969 (peut-être aurait-il valu mieux, d'ailleurs, s'en tenir à cette date).

C'est ainsi que, dans le sillage de la dernière Biennale de Venise, *Le Lait des songes*, qui balayait le terrain, on retrouve ici les artistes les plus « repérées » du surréalisme au féminin : Leonora Carrington, Lee Miller, Dora Maar, Dorothea Tanning, Meret Oppenheim, Toyen, Jacqueline Lanmba, qui fut l'épouse de Breton et dont la galerie Pauline Pavec défend désormais le travail (il y avait des pièces d'elle sur le stand d'Art Paris), ou encore Judith Reigl, dont il a été question dans un récent post ([Judith Reigl et le corps masculin – La République de l'Art](#) (larepubliquedelart.com)). Mais c'est aussi tout un ensemble d'artistes que l'on découvre et qui



avec Ithell Colquhoun, entre bien d'autres, la note est trop longue pour les citer toutes. Et l'exposition les regroupe par salles, qui présentent autant des techniques différentes (il faudrait dire, par exemple, l'importance de la photographie) que des thèmes fédérateurs (la nature, les chimères, les féminités plurielles, les nuits intérieures, etc.). Au bout du compte, comme pour l'exposition *Les Amazones du Pop*, au Mamac de Nice, qui faisait découvrir les femmes de ce mouvement lui aussi très masculin, on ne peut pas dire que le travail de ces femmes surréalistes soit supérieur à celui de leurs confrères masculins, ce qui serait absurde. Mais ce qui est sûr, c'est qu'il ne leur est en rien inférieur et qu'il mérite tout autant de place dans la nouvelle manière d'écrire l'histoire de l'art.



Dans ce vaste travail de redécouverte, on pourrait aussi citer les œuvres d'Elga Heinzen et de Louise Barbu, ces deux peintres abstraites, adeptes de formes sinueuses et sensuelles, qu'Iris Clert avait montrées dans les années 70 et que la galerie Françoise Livinec remet à l'honneur actuellement. Mais on ne peut surtout pas passer à côté du travail photographique de Donna Gottschalk qui n'a quasiment jamais été montré en dehors des Etats-Unis et à qui la galerie Marcelle Alix consacre tout son espace. Donna Gottschalk est une militante féministe lesbienne née en 1949 et qui a véritablement commencé son activité artistique au moment des émeutes de Stonewall, en 1969, en photographiant les groupes gays et lesbiens qui voyaient le jour. Mais elle a aussi fixé sur l'objectif les personnes bannies par leur famille qu'elle recueillait dans son studio, parce qu'elles n'avaient plus d'autres endroits où aller, ou ses proches comme sa sœur Myla, née dans un corps d'homme, et dont elle montre la transformation physique jusqu'à sa mort prématurée, à peine âgée de cinquante ans (une photo la montre, peu avant son décès, dans un corps tellement abîmé qu'on lui donnerait vingt ans de plus).

En fait, Donna Gottschalk n'a jamais vraiment vécu de ses activités de photographe. Pour gagner sa vie, elle a aussi été un temps chauffeuse de taxis, puis aide-soignante dans le Vermont où elle vit encore et son travail relève plus de l'archive, du témoignage que de ce qu'on a appelé la « photographie plasticienne ». Mais dans ces petits tirages, le plus souvent en noir et blanc, où se joue un travail très sensible sur la lumière (on pense parfois à certaines photos sur l'intimité de Guibert), c'est toute une époque qui revit et une manière d'être au monde. Loin de nos actuels réseaux sociaux gonflés de haine et d'insultes, un monde de fraternité, de tolérance, de douceur, de tendresse, de bienveillance, de violence parfois (certaines images de visages tuméfiés par les coups sont difficiles à regarder), et qui va droit au cœur.

–*Surréalisme au féminin ?*, jusqu'au 10 septembre au Musée de Montmartre, 12 rue Cortot, 75018 Paris (www.museedemontmartre.fr)

–Elga Heinzen et Louise Barbu, jusqu'au 20 mai à la galerie Françoise Livinec, 24 et 30 rue de Penthièvre, 75008 Paris (www.francoiselivinec.com)

–Donna Gottschalk, *Ce qui fait une vie*, jusqu'au 20 mai à la galerie Marcelle Alix, 4 rue Jouye-Rouve 75020 Paris (www.marcellealix.com)

Images : Ithell Colquhoun (1906-1988), *La Cathédrale Engloutie*, 1952, huile sur toile, 130×194,8 cm, RAW (Rediscovering Art by Women) © Stéphane Pons ; Valentine Hugo (1887-1968) *Le Rêve du 21 décembre 1929*, 1929, Mine de plomb sur papier Collection Mony Vibescu, ADAGP, Paris, 2023, photo © Gilles Berquet ; Donna Gottschalk, *Myla in Mary's dress*, 1973, gelatin silver print on paper, 12 x 18 cm, 21,6 x 26,8 cm unique



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Ariel Goldberg on Donna Gottschalk



Donna Gottschalk, *Marlene, E. 9th St.*, 1969, gelatin silver print, 20 x 16".

“LESBIANS TORTURE DRAG QUEEN” reads the headline of a tabloid that once hung on a wall in Donna Gottschalk’s apartment. As captured in her photograph *Marlene, E. 9th St.*, 1969,





her subject, Marlene, turns away from this clipping as if refusing its absurd sensationalism, challenging the dominant narrative of lesbians as vicious. She looks directly into Gottschalk's camera with her arms crossed against her bare chest, her pants slightly unzipped to reveal a shoreline of pubic hair. She smiles widely without showing her teeth, barely containing her pleasure in being seen in all her butch glory. One of thirty-five works by the artist featured in "Brave, Beautiful Outlaws: The Photographs of Donna Gottschalk" at New York's Leslie-Lohman Museum of Lesbian and Gay Art, this image, and the exhibition as a whole, confronts the *Daily Mirror*—read as a proxy for compulsory heterosexuality—for its phobic, divisive stance toward lesbians, queers, and trans people who in the late 1960s and early '70s were in the incipient years of fighting for a language with which to name themselves.

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Gottschalk was only nineteen when she first photographed Marlene. As a newly out lesbian on the verge of joining the Gay Liberation Front, she had just begun renting her own apartment on Manhattan's Lower East Side, where she grew up, one of four children of a supportive but overworked Irish-Italian single mother. The caption for this portrait of Marlene—transcribed from memories Gottschalk shared with the show's curator, Deborah Bright—reveals that Marlene, having survived juvenile detention and foster care, arrived on Gottschalk's doorstep at the recommendation of a mutual friend. Gottschalk was known to rent a spare room to young lesbians who had no safe place to live. At the time, Gottschalk was preparing to graduate from the High School of Art and Design and taking night classes at Cooper Union, all while juggling odd jobs like life-modeling and horse-carriage driving. In the early '70s, her photographs of the movement circulated in *Come Out!*, the GLF's newspaper, as well as in the print manifesto announcing the GLF's separatist offshoot, Radicalesbians. But as her involvement with lesbian feminist activism waned in the mid-'70s and the demands of supporting herself and her younger siblings became greater, she turned her lens on her private life. Since then, she has kept her photographs out of the public eye, as if preserving a personal album.



Ariel Goldberg on Donna Gottschalk - Artforum International



Donna Gottschalk, *Donna and Joan, E. 9th St.*, 1970, gelatin silver print, 11 × 14".

Gottschalk's relationships with her friends, lovers, and siblings provide the narrative of the photographs on view, spanning from 1967 to 2012. Marlene appears in five of the photographs. In *Marlene and Lynn in their yard, San Diego*, 1972, captures her with her girlfriend Lynn in the sand, leaning against the open passenger door of an old car. Marlene was an auto mechanic who, because she was openly queer, lost many jobs. Two more pictures show her in action. In *Marlene working on Donna's car, Eugene, OR*, 1974, she is crouched below the undercarriage, smiling, tools in hand. In *Marlene resting with a beer, Coney Island*, 1974, she proudly sits on an automobile's bumper, its engine splayed out on the gravel below. Twenty years later, in *Marlene and Vincent, New York*, 1993—the last photo Gottschalk took of her close friend, who died in 2005—she stands in a park in New York City behind her youngest brother, Vincent, as if she were an honorary sibling.



Joan E. Biren (JEB), *Donna in her kitchen, E. 9th St.*, 1970, digital silver halide C-print, 14 × 11".

Images of Joan E. Biren (who goes by JEB) also appear throughout “Brave, Beautiful Outlaws.” JEB and Gottschalk became lovers after JEB followed Gottschalk into a bathroom at the 1970 Revolutionary People’s Convention, organized by the Black Panther Party, in Philadelphia, where fellow gay women of GLF had been invited to speak by Angela Davis. In an early self-portrait, *Donna and Joan, E. 9th St.*, 1970, Gottschalk and JEB spoon in bed, their hair messy from rolling around together. Gottschalk had set the timer on her recently acquired 35-mm camera and counted down the seconds for the shutter to release: “It was like waiting for a firecracker to go off . . . every exposure was full of apprehension and wonder.”¹ Over the course of their approximately year-and-a-half-long relationship, the power of the camera to record their intimate world galvanized them both; JEB went on to devote her life to photographing lesbian and queer life and activism. In fact, it was JEB who introduced Gottschalk’s work to Leslie-Lohman in 2016, bringing her photographs out of obscurity.



The exhibition maps the tender outer limits of Gottschalk's political and cultural context, but the essential theme is her enduring love for her family and for the friends who became family.

Gottschalk was also not afraid to pose before other photographers' cameras at a time when being documented as queer was dangerous. A wall-size print of Diana Davies's 1970 portrait of the artist welcomes visitors to the exhibition. Gottschalk stands at the first Christopher Street Liberation Day Parade, which memorialized the Stonewall riots that happened a year earlier; a hand-written sign around her neck proclaims to the straight world, i am your worst fear / i am your best fantasy. It remains one of the era's most widely circulated images. Three vitrines filled with ephemera—from a typewritten list of NYC's pre-Stonewall lesbian and gay bars ("The Love Cage," "Snookies") to a rumpled T-shirt that Gottschalk silk-screened with the words lavender menace²—offer additional historical texture. One five-by-seven-inch black-and-white photograph, taken by JEB in the early '70s, provides a glimpse into Gottschalk's editorial process, capturing her with three friends sitting on a couch in her Ninth Street apartment. Behind them, below high shelves stacked with books and art supplies, a lopsided grid of photos is tacked to a wall. The group is entranced, poring over Gottschalk's contact sheets as she sits perched on the arm of the couch, affectionately looking toward JEB. In her own apartment, she received feedback more freely than she did in art school, which had been hostile to her work.



Donna Gottschalk, *Alfie*, San Francisco, 1972, ink-jet print, 16 × 20".

The exhibition maps the tender outer limits of Gottschalk's political and cultural context, but the essential theme is her enduring love for her family and for the friends who became family. Perhaps the most moving of her photographs are those she took of her younger sibling, Myla. Displayed as a show within a show, the portraits of Myla depict her from age eleven until just months before her death, at fifty-six, in 2012. Myla was a trans woman; these pictures bring to the fore for a contemporary viewer the way in which common language impedes the process of one's gender being recognized. The task of aligning the past with the present moment—of properly honoring and remembering the life of a trans person via historical images, especially when the person cannot speak for themselves—prompts tangled questions regarding representation.

In the exhibition's captions and wall texts, written by Bright and approved by Gottschalk, Myla's birth name is used for the seven pictures on view that were taken before her medical transition. As Bright explained, "I wasn't willing to erase that long journey from identifying as a gay boy-man to becoming a woman."³ We also learn from the wall text that Myla battled



drug addiction and aids, her struggles a further testament to the ways in which our world is bent on destroying transgender people. As if to make this harsh reality more vivid, the photographs of Myla are the only images in the show taken with color film. In *Alfie, San Francisco*, 1972, a portrait suffused with natural light, shot in the apartment Myla shared with her older sister during their stint on the West Coast, she leans against a yellow wall while lounging on a bed with mint-green and pastel-pink sheets. She looks saintly, as if still dreaming after a disco nap. The most visceral record of physical violence in the exhibition, *Alfie after hate bashing outside a club on the Upper East Side*, 1976, shows Myla and her friend Teddy after the pair were beaten up by white teenagers. When Gottschalk met Myla at Bellevue Hospital, she photographed her sibling's swollen eye and gashed nose in uncharacteristic close-up. It appears almost as though she were gathering forensic evidence for a restorative-justice task force.



Donna Gottschalk, *Myla in her apartment*, 2010, ink-jet print, 20 × 16".



Gottschalk's images both amplify and complicate the history of LGBTQI liberation, documenting how lesbians, trans, and gender-nonconforming people have lived both inside and outside the rigid enclaves history allocates for them. Gottschalk, who once claimed lesbian separatism as a temporary tactic to undo patriarchy, always maintained a close relationship with Myla, deviating from the ideologies of cis lesbians who espouse biologically driven trans exclusionism. Marlene, Gottschalk recalls, was also ostracized from groups of "normal gays," and later in life "was simply taken for a man,"⁴ often passing as a way to self-protect.

The haunting temporality of Gottschalk's photographs is also a product of the daunting conditions under which the artist struggled to make art while supporting her family. Gottschalk never "left photography"; she worked for over thirty years producing other people's photographs as a printer in commercial photography labs. To frame Gottschalk as "unsung" or finally achieving "fame," as certain mainstream critics have done, fails to admit her resistance to normative culture.⁵ The commercial art world's appetite for "queer images" in the service of the market's relentless feasting on the new has already led to Gottschalk being labeled as a "discovery." To characterize her thus is to risk dispossessing her of the nuanced relationships and communities she captured in her images. As her loved ones featured in "Brave, Beautiful Outlaws" generously reveal themselves to Gottschalk's camera, they ask that we cultivate a richer, more detailed narrative of their lives. In that way, we might not congratulate ourselves for rescuing them from obscurity, but instead focus on the way history erases society's most vulnerable.

"Brave, Beautiful Outlaws: The Photographs of Donna Gottschalk" is on view through March 17 at Leslie-Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art, New York.

Ariel Goldberg is the author, most recently, of The Estrangement Principle (Nightboat Books, 2016). They are currently working on Heavy Equipment, a book on how LGBTQI photographers related to their subjects before digital photography.

NOTES

1. Donna Gottschalk, email interview with the author, November 2, 2018.
2. Gottschalk silk-screened the LAVENDER MENACE T-shirts at Cooper Union, where she



was a student. They were worn by lesbian activists participating in the “Zap” of the Second Congress to Unite Women in New York on May 1, 1970.

3. Deborah Bright, email interview with the author, November 27, 2018.

4. Donna Gottschalk, email interview with the author, November 26, 2018.

5. See Kerry Manders, “The Most Famous Lesbian Photographer You’ve Never Heard of—Until Now,” *Lens* (blog) *New York Times*, August 14, 2018, www.nytimes.com/2018/08/14/lens/donna-gottschalk-photography.html; and Allyssia Alleyne, “The Unsung Photographer Who Chronicled 1970s Lesbian Life,” CNN.com, September 21, 2018, www.cnn.com/style/article/donna-gottschalk-lesbian-photography-leslie-lohman-museum/index.html.

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The Brave and Defiant Warriors — Suited Magazine

11–14 minutes

On June 28, 1970, a year after the LGBT community rebelled against the New York Police Department in the infamous Stonewall riots, the city's gay and lesbian groups walked north on Sixth Avenue together in the first march for gay pride, despite fears of violence from the police and the public. It was a sunny day, and photographer Diana Davies snapped a picture of a 19-year-old activist named Donna Gottschalk, who was proudly holding a sign that read:

I AM YOUR WORST FEAR
I AM YOUR BEST FANTASY

Gottschalk spent her early adulthood as a lesbian activist and photographer in New York, San Francisco, and Washington, D.C. Recently, Davies' photograph popped up when Gottschalk, from a rural farm in northeast Vermont, searched her name online. She reconnected through social media with a number of women who had once made an indelible impact on her life, including photographer Joan E. Biren, or JEB, one of the most noted lesbian photographers of the 1960s and '70s. But Gottschalk had an archive, too, which she had kept to herself for the better part of four decades.

Biren would later introduce Gottschalk's negatives to board members of the Leslie-Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art, leading the museum to acquire a photograph for its permanent collection and exhibit it in the spring of 2017. Now, Gottschalk's own solo exhibition, *Brave, Beautiful Outlaws*, is on view at the museum.

Curator and board member Deborah Bright was in awe of Gottschalk's work when Biren showed it to her. Gottschalk had put love and care into her documentation of the years she lived in lesbian separatist communities in San Francisco. "The images



were beautiful, and it was clear that they had been made with a very sensitive and engaged eye," Bright says. "They weren't intended to be journalistic, but deeply felt personal documents."



"Most of the people I photographed didn't get much sympathy in the world, and I wanted to make viewers stop and really look at them. — Donna Gottschalk"

Bright and Riya Lerner, the museum's creative content manager, spent six months making silver-gelatin prints from Gottschalk's



negatives in the darkrooms of Brooklyn's Pioneer Works. The scope of the project was a first for Lerner, and she says she grew close to the work. "I felt very connected to them, and I felt like they were sort of my own work, in a way, because I would spend four to eight hours a day looking at them," Lerner explains. "These are all iconic lesbian activists who we look up to in the queer community, and being able to see them when they were young and just starting out ... that was incredible."

Gottschalk kept her negatives to herself, in short, because she didn't intend to sell them; she only gave prints to her subjects and for the Gay Liberation Front—GLF for short. But her reasons for keeping her archive under lock and key run much deeper.

The first thing to know about Donna Gottschalk is that she is fiercely protective of those close to her. She grew up on the Lower East Side in Manhattan, in low-income tenement housing with her mother and three siblings: Mary, Alfie—who, in adulthood, would transition and take the name Myla—and Vinnie. Gottschalk often assumed a parental role. Her mother had a giving heart, she says, but she worked long hours, struggled to make ends meet, and frequently dated mafiosos. Gottschalk's father, a merchant seaman, was a complicated man. He had an untreated mental illness and a drinking problem, and he was often physically abusive. He was not allowed in their home, but Gottschalk remained close with him, explaining, "[I] learned that the people you love can have terrible weaknesses."

Gottschalk knew she was attracted to girls by the time she was 14 years old, but it was a man named George who introduced her to the arts scene and beatnik bars in the city and who bought her her first camera. In high school, Gottschalk began hanging out at lesbian bars, which were mafia-controlled. "I had no illusions about what my future as an out lesbian would be like," she says. "My friends and I always lived looking over our shoulders." She calls those years in New York as "a fucking nightmare" because of the city's high crime rate and corruption.

Gottschalk was first introduced to GLF at age 18 when she saw an ad for it in *The Village Voice*. "I had witnessed how the gay bars



were completely controlled by the mafia and the police, and I never fit into the middle-class, private-party scene where women would meet in their homes to drink, dish, and sleep with each other but stay tightly closeted in straight company," she told Bright. By contrast, GLF was taking action and fighting for a cause.

In the early days of GLF, the number of queer women were few, and the men often dominated the conversation. The women began meeting separately and, as their numbers grew, they planned protests and established new social events, such as dances, to give queer women somewhere to socialize outside of the bars—risking blowback from the mafia for taking away their business.

Gottschalk began to notice which members had aspirations for fame or power, and by 1970, when Biren started galvanizing the women to move to D.C. to be closer to the White House, Gottschalk wanted to actively avoid political drama. "I only wanted to take photographs, for the most part," she says. She did follow Biren to D.C., however—they had history, and Gottschalk found her irresistible—and she took a job in a print shop while photographing for radical feminist publications. The shop owner eventually became her lover, and together they drove out to San Francisco in 1971 to get away from the political infighting and begin a new life.

San Francisco was eye-opening for Gottschalk. "Every other person on the street was gay, so that was a tremendous relief," she says. The lesbian bars were run by women and, she adds, "the city itself was teeming with women from all over the country." Gottschalk rented a three-bedroom apartment in the Mission District and reached out to her siblings to join her. Myla, who at 15 years old was still known as Alfie, and Mary, who was 21, arrived first, and both came out as gay. Vinnie, 12, followed, but he could not read or dress himself due to what Gottschalk believed was neglect. She spent six months teaching him to read by buying him comic books, and he became more self-sufficient under her care.

"Occasionally we put up gay radical women visitors from the East Coast in our apartment," Gottschalk recalls. "Sue Katz was one of these women and the whole family hit it off with [her]. She also



became one of my most photographed subjects." Gottschalk drove a taxi using a fake license to make ends meet and joined an activist group founded by Katz.

Gottschalk's photography during this period was informal, almost snapshot-like, documenting her friends and lovers. But the aspects of her images that make the work feel so contemporary today didn't draw positive feedback from her subjects at the time. "One of my lovers, I took her picture and she goes, 'But I look so tired, I just look so haggard,' and I said, 'Well, you are,'" she recalls with a laugh. "They weren't used to having anyone who wanted to take their picture, and they weren't used to what they saw, I guess."

Sue Katz, for example, was known for her radical, controversial opinions, Gottschalk says: "She was an absolute political firebrand." But in an early photograph of a 25-year-old Katz, she looks to be barely a teenager. "What was so shocking was that, in truth," Gottschalk says, "she was a tiny, frail girl."

But despite having found a real home in San Francisco, Gottschalk started observing cracks on the surface. At 18, Myla wanted to undergo gender reassignment surgery. Gottschalk said no—at the time, there was no government support for trans people. The costs were prohibitive, and she knew Myla would have to turn to prostitution to pay for it. Gottschalk already suspected she had begun stepping into that world, and she didn't want that life for her. Myla didn't broach the subject of surgery again until late adulthood. "For thirty years," Gottschalk says, Myla was "never really happy."

Mary and Myla both developed drug addictions, and around 1974, Gottschalk lost the lease to her apartment. She was burnt out from life in San Francisco, so she took Vinnie and drove back to New York City. It wasn't any better there, which led Gottschalk to eventually take refuge in Connecticut, where she opened a photo lab with her partner, Tony. They ran it for 38 years before moving together to their farm in Vermont. Today, Gottschalk works in nursing homes; after Tony became ill and required round-the-clock care, she became a caretaker at home, too.



Tragedy has made its mark on Gottschalk's life. Her sister Mary was diagnosed with Hodgkin's Lymphoma and died from medical complications in 1993, while HIV and drugs took a heavy toll on Myla and she died, too, in 2013. Many of the women close to Gottschalk in her youth also met early deaths, and with each passing, she became more and more protective of her negatives. She didn't share her work earlier when it was still dangerous to be an out lesbian; later, it became too painful to revisit her memories, and she didn't want to hear any criticism of her photographs.

After Biren showed the negatives to the Leslie-Lohman Museum, an institution that would not have been able to exist when Gottschalk was photographing, Gottschalk agreed to let her work be seen. "Most of the people I photographed didn't get much sympathy in the world, and I wanted to make viewers stop and really look at them," she says. The exhibition will also include a body of work on Myla from age 11 up until a few months before her death. Of those, Gottschalk says, "I need the pictures to show, to explain, because I can't explain [it]."





Robin Chaia Mide, 1968, Donna and friends on the fire escape, E. 9th St., silver gelatin print/ 2017, 20 x 16 in. Collection of the Leslie-Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art.

Gottschalk's photographs add an underrepresented voice to photography, because while there were plenty of images of gay men at the time, there were relatively few of lesbian women. "I think that her work is really important and significant in that way," Lerner says. "It shows this world that didn't get a lot of representation." Equally, her portraits of Myla, and of other trans people, Lerner says, remind people that "queerness is not a new phenomenon."

Despite the strides that have been made toward inclusiveness of queer voices in contemporary art, there's still work to be done. In the art world, Lerner says, that means "[to not be] pigeonholed as like, 'Oh, this is queer work,' but just, 'These are photographs.'"

For Bright, the pointedness of Gottschalk's decades-old work can be found in the current political atmosphere, "how bigotry and prejudice are always under the surface and can rear their heads when political winds change," she says. "There are still many parts of the country where LGBTQ people are stigmatized, bullied, and intimidated into closeted silence."



That tenacious spirit lives in Gottschalk's photographs of her queer community. As she told Bright: "They were brave and defiant warriors who insisted on being, whatever the consequences."



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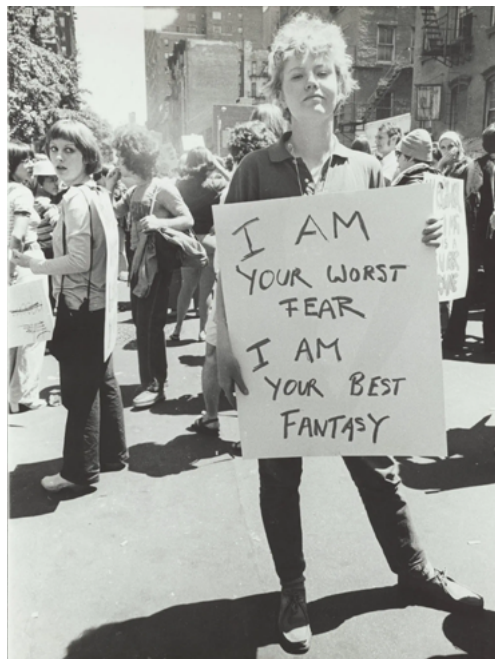
The Most Famous Lesbian Photographer You’ve Never Heard of — Until Now

By Kerry Manders

Aug. 14, 2018

I hadn’t known Donna Gottschalk’s name, but for years I’ve had an image of her tacked to my bulletin board — a perfectly anonymous, beautifully bold lesbian forebear.

The portrait was made by Diana Davies at the 1970 Christopher Street Gay Liberation Day rally. It’s an image of pride, playfulness and promise at the beginning of the Gay Rights movement in North America. Gottschalk holds up a sign that reads: “I am your worst fear / I am your best fantasy.” Its unevenly printed all caps black marker on plain white poster board is deceptively simple. Gottschalk’s slightly raised chin and upturned mouth project an air of unabashed confidence and confrontation.



Donna Gottschalk at the Christopher Street Gay Liberation Day rally in 1970. Diana Davies

This image of Ms. Gottschalk will hold pride of place among works by her in “Brave, Beautiful Outlaws,” opening at Leslie-Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art on Aug. 29. While Ms. Gottschalk doesn’t identify as a documentary photographer or a photojournalist, she has been making pictures since she was 17. Photos selected from her 50-year personal archive will be made public for the first time.

“Donna Gottschalk is the most famous lesbian photographer you’ve never heard of — until now” said Deborah Bright, the exhibition curator.

Ms. Gottschalk’s work documents her closeness with her biological family (poorer-than-working-class N.Y.C. stock)



and her involvement with the radical lesbian, sometimes separatist, communities in the late '60s and '70s.

Only a few of these images were published in their time — in the Gay Liberation Front newspaper, for example. Moving from New York City to San Francisco (where her three siblings eventually joined her and two came out as gay) and back again, Ms. Gottschalk paid the bills by working various jobs, from artist's model and topless bartender to a driver of horse-drawn carriages and cabs. Later, she became a master technician, becoming one of the owners and the operator of a photo lab in Connecticut. Home is currently a small farm in rural Vermont.

"Brave, Beautiful Outlaws" focuses on her early work, during the time of her most intense political activism. Ms. Bright identifies Ms. Gottschalk as a "talented and sensitive visual storyteller," whose work comprises a "vital contribution to the historical record." Part autobiography, part ethnography, Ms. Gottschalk's work counters the gross elision of the lesbian in the annals of queer history. Hers is a community of the socially and politically marginalized, fellow "freaks" and "outcasts" — many of whom were first cast out of their families of origin — those invisible to or rejected by the mainstream.



Donna and Joan, E. 9th St. Donna Gottschalk



Marlene resting with a beer, Oregon, 1974. Donna Gottschalk



Self-portrait with striped wallpaper, New York. Donna Gottschalk



Sleepers, Limerick, Pa., 1970. Donna Gottschalk

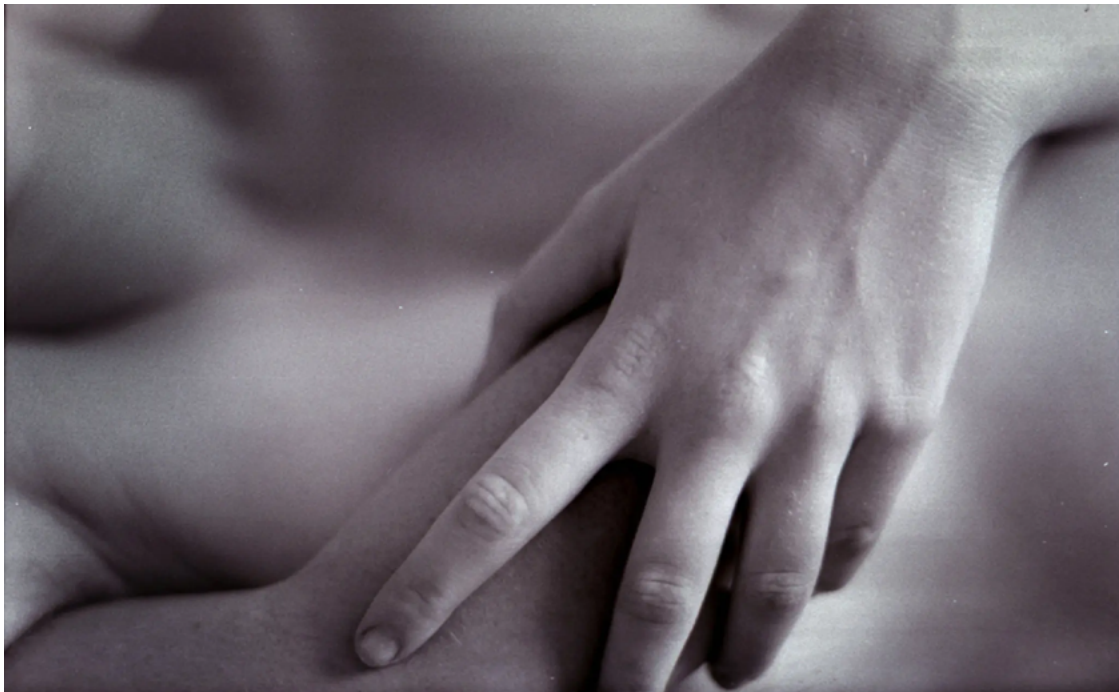
Compare Davies's protest portrait of Ms. Gottschalk to Ms. Gottschalk's "Self-Portrait, Maine" (1976); here, Ms. Gottschalk lounges atop a wrinkled bed tucked cozily in the corner of a log cabin on a rural commune. She looks directly at the camera, with an attitude of profound self-possession and resolve, as if to say, "I'm here, I'm queer, get used to it." She emphasizes the inextricable connection between sexuality and activism for lesbians: To live and to love is protest.

The image of women asleep in a single bed in "Sleepers, Limerick, Pennsylvania" (1970) illustrates the point: Above the bed, half-visible at the margins of the frame, hangs a political poster declaring "Lesbians Unite!" A statement and an imperative, it's a perfectly cheeky double-entendre. In public and in private, in the streets or between the sheets, Ms. Gottschalk reminds us that the personal is always and necessarily political — and vice versa.

It is surreal to speak on the phone with someone who has existed photographically for me since my own coming out in the 1990s. We talk about queering time and the renewed intensity of activism in the current political climate; the need for yet more Marches on Washington; the sisterhood of the #MeToo movement; the persistence of social and structural indifference, intolerance and violence. We talk about what has changed since she took these photographs and what hasn't, about the necessity of "witnessing our own histories."



Donna and friends on the fire escape, E. 9th St. 1968. Robin Chaia Mide/Courtesy of Donna Gottschalk and Leslie-Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art



Bodies, 1970. Donna Gottschalk



Revolutionary Women's Conference, Limerick, Pa. 1970. Donna Gottschalk

Ms. Gottschalk's subjects are friends, family, partners: loved ones, all. I ask her what compelled her to pick up her camera at particular moments. She talks about being drawn to the beauty, bravery and mystery she saw in those around her, especially in an era when coming out came at great cost.

Photography was her way of understanding, her "attempt to fathom." Her photos are personal, domestic and intimate; most are set in interior, domestic spaces, and always in natural light (her friends would not abide flash!). Too many of her loved ones met early, tragic deaths, including two siblings, one of whom is a major protagonist in the exhibition. We see the life of her sibling Alfie as a childhood brother, as a gay man, as the newly transitioned Myla just before her death from an AIDS-related illness in her 40s.

The photos are tinged with mourning and mystery. She's been holding their memory for decades, "fiercely protective" and unwilling to "subject them to scrutiny, judgment and abuse" from the outside world.

"Understand, people didn't care about them or my pictures of them back in the day," she said. "*I had to.*" Seeing her own death on the horizon, she doesn't want her queer comrades to die with her. This exhibition invites us to fathom their beauty, their bravery, as well as her love.

"These people were all very dear to me," she said. "And they were beautiful. These pictures are the only memorial some of these people will ever have."



Alfie in Mary's dress, 1974. Donna Gottschalk



Marlene, New York, 1969. Donna Gottschalk



Helaine on her girlfriend's lap, Provincetown, 1974. Donna Gottschalk



Chris Jimenez and their dog, Queens, 1969. Donna Gottschalk

“Brave, Beautiful Outlaws” opens at Leslie-Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art on Aug. 29, and the opening reception with Donna Gottschalk will be held on Sept. 29.

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