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# Making things perfectly queer: art's use of craft to signify LGBT identities

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Smith, Matt (2015) *Making things perfectly queer: art's use of craft to signify LGBT identities* Doctoral thesis, University of Brighton.



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## Abstract

This research explores how queer culture and theory can be communicated through crafted objects and curated exhibitions. It interrogates whether it is possible to identify queer characteristics, aesthetics and themes in crafted objects and develops the idea of visual polari - based on Polari, the slang language used by gay men in England predominantly in the mid twentieth century - as a methodology. The research then examines how art related to queer lives has been curated in art organisations and how different curators have approached creating queer taxonomies. It also examines the use of craft techniques by artists addressing queer topics and argues that the marginalised positions of craft - the decorative and the domestic - have been adopted by queer practitioners. Marginalised groups can often be excluded from representation in cultural organisations, and museums and galleries have traditionally shied away from the emerging discipline of queer theory. Although Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) Month acts as a focus for queer recognition in museums and galleries, many organisations are unsure how to explore or tackle the subject. The core of this research examines practical case studies that explore how this can be achieved. The research was informed by four exhibitions where I was both the artist and curator. The first - Queering the Museum at Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery - drew on artist intervention methodologies that had been used to address race within museums, but had not been applied to marginalised sexualities. The second was Other Stories: Queering the University Art Collection at the Stanley and Audrey Burton Gallery at the University of Leeds and used oral histories from gay men and women to reposition objects in the art gallery collection. The last two installations were at National Trust properties - Nymans House and Gardens and The Vyne - and examined the queer lives of their former occupants. The exhibitions used artist interventions to disrupt any single interpretive narrative and move away from the centring of the houses' histories

on heteronormative family trees. Queer is a contested term and LGBT encompasses a wide variety of experiences. Although the research strives for inclusion, not all experiences that come under the banner term LGBT are explored equally. Rather, this research aims to move the ideas about how cultural organisations can represent queer lives and to generate debate in the fields of museums, galleries and historic houses.

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