

Intimately Preserved

Interview with artist Emmett Ramstad

-You have programmed a lot of events in conjunction with *Intimately Preserved*. Can you talk about how you chose events and what you are hoping the audience gets from them?

Absolutely. Because the exhibition is open for three months, I saw event programming as an opportunity to bring as many people as I could both to the exhibition and to the archives. Exhibitions usually have the most visitors on opening night and archives are often quiet unknown rooms. I would like to change those trends in this exhibition and I would like to bring more attention to the amazing resource of the John J. Wilcox Jr. Archives that we have right here at William Way. Additionally, I love collaborating- most of my art ideas include at least one other person. The events that are happening are a tour of the archives from Bob Skiba, the historian behind the scenes, a community printmaking event with Eli VandenBerg, who also got an Art and Change grant from The Leeway Foundation, a talk about Sam Steward by academic and writer Aren Aizura with artwork by me, and a series of art classes that I am teaching in the archives for youth and elders to meet and make archive inspired artwork. And, of course, an opening and closing party. Who doesn't love free events? I hope lots of people come!

What inspired the artwork in *Intimately Preserved*?

In this body of artwork, I was inspired by visits to three different archives – The John J. Wilcox Jr. Archives in Philadelphia, The Kinsey Institute in Bloomington, Indiana, and The GLBT Historical Society in San Francisco. The themes that emerged from the archives were about how saving particular objects, arranging them just so, and disposing of other items marks us as both similar and unique from each other. Each collection had a different thing that drew me to it. In San Francisco, I researched the pubic hair collection of playwright Robert Chesley; in Bloomington, I researched the academic, tattoo artist and sexual renegade, Sam Steward, who kept a file of his sexual exploits called The Stud File; and in Philadelphia, I researched a rather ordinary couple, James T. Caulfield and Rafael Suarez, who started an organization called Philamigos and whose 5 boxes I volunteered to catalogue for the archive. The artworks in the exhibition are all connected because they all emerge from the experience of sitting in an archive, looking at materials, taking notes, mulling for a while, and then making artwork.

What makes this exhibition artwork versus history?

Well, there are certain methods that historians use when they are presenting historical exhibitions, there is a certain amount of “truth” they are trying to present. Whereas, as an artist, I feel like I can make artwork about anything and I am not worried if it is a truthful representation. When the *Pop Up Museum of Queer History* visited Philadelphia, most of the artworks or exhibition pieces were much more historically based or “accurate” than mine. Not to say that mine were farce, but more that I was making work based ON the research not ABOUT the research. Bob Skiba, the man behind the LGBT Archive at William Way, gave me a lot of flack for a piece that I made inspired by love letters I WISH I would have found in the archive. In other words, I had fabricated love letters between the two men I am researching, and he felt like I was being inaccurate. I said “Bob, I am an artist, I can do whatever I want.” He laughed, Bob is a great guy!

Has doing archival research made you think differently about life and death?

Definitely! In fact, I think a large part of this work is about life and death. I keep asking myself what it means to be alive, to do little mundane things, to display items that we touch daily like receipts and undergarments. In the Philly archive I am sorting through boxes that belonged to two Philadelphians and I am primarily inspired by their notes and blank papers – things that a professional organizer would have told them to recycle. The experience of going through these papers also makes me think a lot about the formation of gay archives and this idea that we need to preserve our history. Sure, this happens in most archives, but I think a push with LGBT archives has to do with both an interest in the past, and a kind of fear of being wiped out, undocumented, or forgotten. I know I will not forget James Caulfield or Rafael Suarez, and I never even met them. This makes me wonder about my life. Were I to die tomorrow, what would a researcher say about my ephemera? Would they be able to find out clues about who I am as a person?

Would you donate your belongings to an archive?

That is a tricky question. Part of me says, absolutely yes, the other part wonders what I would donate. My daily planners? My attractive objects? My sketchbooks? It is trippy to think about what objects or papers have value and to whom. There is a lot of guessing and a lot of secret hoping I think- hoping that someone will be interested in you and your things when you die. As an artist, I hope that my artworks will be in collections, or shown when I die. Maybe I will donate my Robert Chesley inspired pubic hair jars to the GLBT Historical Society in San Francisco, my pubic hair drawer to the Kinsey Institute in Bloomington, and my paper pile artworks to the John J. Wilcox Jr. Archive in Philadelphia. That way, some random researcher (most likely the person indexing the archive) will derive pleasure from the clear reference to their collection. A double collection, if you will.

-What do you hope the audience will walk away from your show feeling or thinking?

Um, that they love it! Besides that, I hope that the show makes them think about little things like how they fold their socks, pile their papers, or dispose of their pubic hair – and really, how all these things are unifiers – as in, we all do them, but also they are what makes us unique. I guess I want them to think about micro things, like how we do different things, and also about macro things, like how we are all connected. That would be dreamy. But if nothing else, I hope they have some kind of feeling or thought that they weren't

expecting that day. Or maybe that they want to volunteer at an archive or take a class or something like that would be great too. It is hard to expect too much from an audience beyond liking it.

-There is a lot of pubic hair in this show, can you talk about it?

Sure. The art in this show with pubic hair is inspired by Robert Chesley and Sam Steward, both of whom collected pubic hair as mementos of sexual experiences. My intention in these works was to tip my hat to Steward and Chesley, but also to diversify their collection of hair by representing pubes of trans people, women, and various queer identities other than gay male identities. For the framed prints, I was inspired by Victorian hair art. In the Victorian age it was in vogue to keep locks of hair as mementos and also out of mourning for loved ones passed. People made jewelry like watch chains and locketts, as well as large framed portraits. This was well before photography was invented, so imagine a portrait that is snippets of hairs, tied with ribbon all decoratively arranged. I heard about two lesbians who, in 1820, clipped each other's pubic hair and had it made into locketts that they wore under their clothing, in mutual remembrance. I love that story. It is this beautiful mixture of dirtiness or sexiness with sentimental impulse to save a relic from the body of a lover. So, the framed prints I made are bundles of pubic hair tied and then monoprinted and framed.

-How do archives help us understand what it means to be human? How do these collections bring us to a greater understanding of ourselves?

Good question. I think archives highlight parts of us. I don't think they can really get to the bottom of what it means to be human, but I think they can help us reflect on universal or individual experiences. For instance, looking over the insurance papers of James and Rafael at the John J. Wilcox Jr. Archive doesn't tell me a whole lot about their personal lives, but it does tell me about people who lived in a capitalist society in a city with a lot of fires in the 1950s. Did they intend to have these papers kept forever? Or was this just their habit to file these papers away as record keeping? I think there is a lot of commonality amongst archival holdings, insofar as what they tell us about what people keep or donate. There are certain things a lot of people find precious, or worth keeping, such as personal letters, photographs and journals. And then there are collections that are more unique, like Chesley's pubic hair collection. I feel connected to archives because I am a sentimental person and because I keep particular things, so I relate to the impulse to save. I am both unique in my methods and habits, and tremendously the same as other people. And I think that is what makes us human.

