

Expressing Lesbian and Queer Identities **in the Works of** Three Contemporary Artists of New Mexico

BY LAUREL LAMPELA

Recommended for Grades 10-12

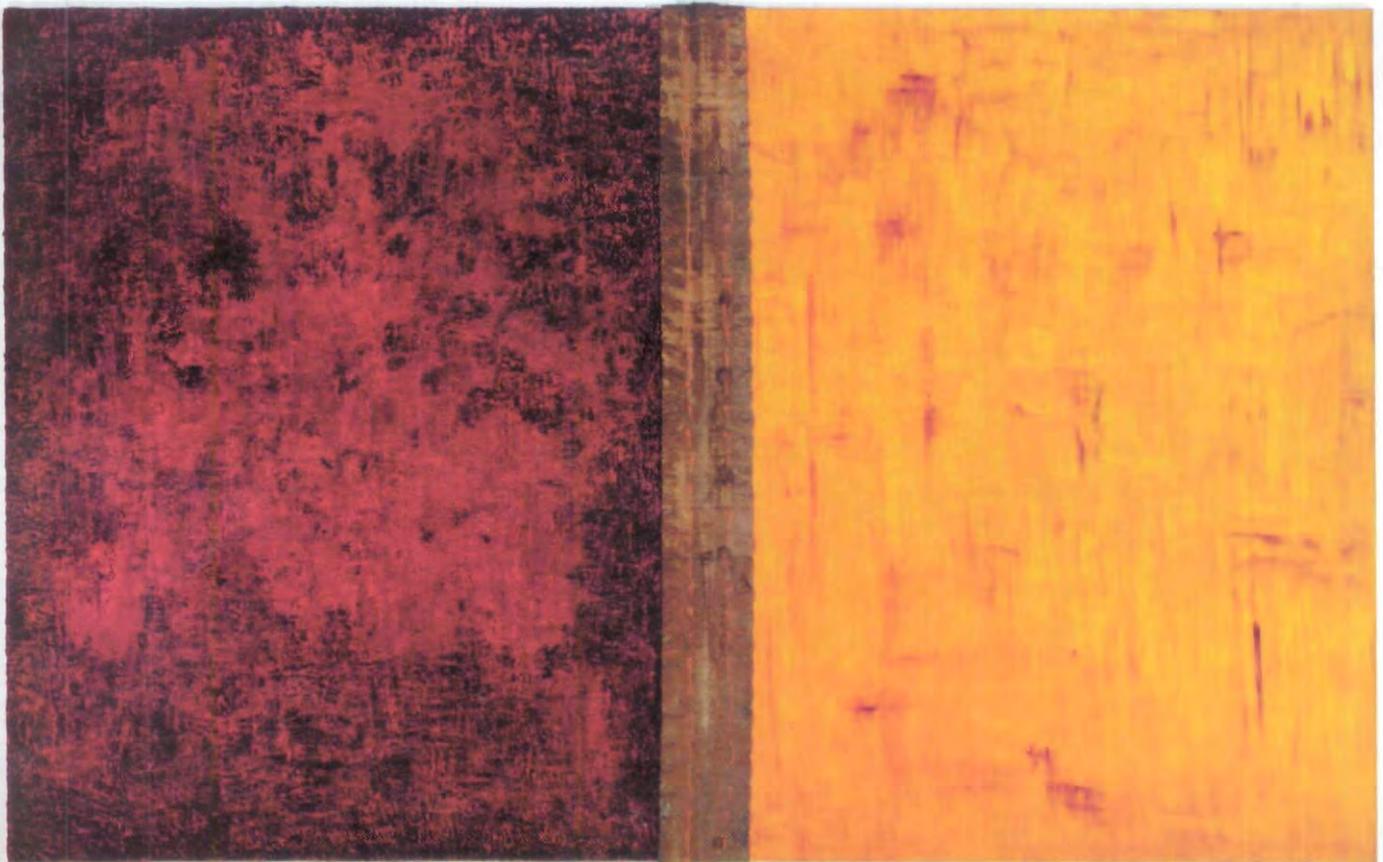


Figure 1. *Suture*, 2002, Harmony Hammond. Oil on canvas with metal, 90 x 149 inches. Art © Harmony Hammond/Licensed by VAGA, New York, New York.

Three artists from New Mexico who identify as lesbian or queer create work that is informed by their life experiences. Their works show no literal explanations but depict symbolic resolutions. Who they are and what they have experienced have had a strong impact on their work. Through specific materials and distinct color palettes they share certain elements of their identities and experiences with viewers. It is the viewer's task to try and discover what the works are about and what each artist has communicated.

Knowing about artists can help us to understand their art. Just as art teachers discuss the lives of artists who identify as straight, they can also include information about the lives and works of artists who identify as lesbian, gay, or queer. **Often students only see depictions of heterosexual identity in the curriculum. Including artists that represent other sexual identities can not only help lesbian, gay, and queer students develop a positive sense of self when they see such representations in the curriculum, but can also help all students understand the meaning of living in a democracy.**

This instructional resource will focus on the lives and works of three contemporary artists from New Mexico. Two of these artists, Harmony Hammond and Helen Cozza, identify themselves as lesbian, and another, Erin Forrest, identifies herself as queer. Defining oneself as queer or lesbian is a personal choice. The term "queer" is used by some as an "umbrella covering multiple gender identities," and can include such oppressed communities as "lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, intersexual, two spirited, curious, and supportive ... peoples" (Cosier, Lampela, Moreno de la Garnica, Sanders, Smith-Shank, Rhodes, & Whitehead, 2005, p. 76). In addition, queer theory "calls attention to the ways gender, race, class, and sexualities are perpetually performed and perceived by performers in different spaces, cultures, and times" (Cosier et al., 2005, p. 82). Although the work of Hammond, Cozza, and Forrest may not overtly reference their sexual identity, it is definitely informed by it. Recognizing how an artist's identity can be symbolically or metaphorically conveyed in his or her work can help all students better understand how their own experience of life can inform their art.

Harmony Hammond

Hammond, who identifies herself as queer lesbian, is a first-generation lesbian feminist artist. She was born in 1944 in Chicago, Illinois and grew up in a lower middle class housing project on Chicago's south side. She received a Bachelor of Arts in painting from the University of Minnesota in 1967 and moved to New York City just months after the Stonewall Riots¹ in 1969. During the late 1960s, Hammond was married for a short time and later gave birth to a daughter. During the 1970s, she met weekly with a group of feminist artists to discuss each other's work. In 1973, she came out as a lesbian and initiated several lesbian art projects. Furthermore as a pioneer of the feminist art movement, Hammond is well known for her wrapped fabric sculptures of the 1970s and early 1980s. During the 1990s, Hammond focused on large-scale, mixed-media installation paintings that combined the tradition of oil painting with assorted materials such as human hair and corrugated roofing tin (Lampela, 2007). Her works from 2000-2009 are near-monochrome paintings that both engage with and subvert the history of modernist painting, particularly their fugitive color and surface, constituting what might be called queer space (Hammond, personal communication, March 13, 2009). Hammond has been praised as one of the big hitters of modernist abstraction (Reed, 2005). Hammond retired as a Professor of Art at the University of Arizona in 2005 where she had taught for 17 years. Moreover, Hammond (2000) is the author of the pioneering book *Lesbian Art in America: A Contemporary History*, which won the Lambda Literary Award and is considered the primary text on contemporary lesbian art. She currently resides in Galisteo, New Mexico, where she teaches workshops and writes, curates, and lectures on feminist, lesbian, and queer art.

Helen Cozza

Cozza was born in 1956 in Auburn, New York. She received a Bachelor of Science in Art Education from the State University College at Buffalo, New York in 1978 and a Master of Fine Arts in Studio Art, Printmaking from the University of New Mexico (UNM) in 2007. Cozza is currently an Adjunct Professor of Art at UNM and has also taught art for the elementary through high school levels at public and private schools. Cozza knew at a young age that she was a lesbian but was aware that her mother disapproved. To appease her family she tried to fit in by having boyfriends in high school and marrying a man. Once the 4-year marriage ended, she allowed herself to act on her romantic feelings for women. She met her partner of 18 years in Cleveland and they now make their home in Albuquerque, New Mexico. (Disclosure: We are partners.) Cozza's work was featured on the cover and accompanying article of *LGBT Youth* in 2007 (Lampela, 2008). Inspired by architecture and shadow, Cozza's art alludes to buildings under construction or deconstruction and the resulting shadows that are cast under a sunlit sky. As a child, the house she lived in was always in a state of flux with exposed lath board,² unpainted drywall, and scaffolding. Since moving to New Mexico, she has been greatly influenced by the sharp contrast of light and shadow. Cozza constructs sculptural prints by adhering her lithographic and intaglio prints onto three-dimensional surfaces. The prints illustrated here serve to reinforce the sculptural elements and to offer a narrative.

Erin Forrest

Forrest was born in 1972 and grew up in Pacific Grove, a small tourist town on the central California coast. She received a Bachelor of Fine Arts from the California College of the Arts in 1995 and a Master of Fine Arts from the University of New Mexico in 2008. (Disclosure: I was on her MFA Committee.) Forrest lived in the Oakland/San Francisco Bay area for over 10 years, working in museums and teaching art classes for youth, as well as being active in many political projects. In New Mexico, she has continued her involvement with art and social justice. She has been a self-defense instructor, an outreach coordinator for a domestic violence shelter, an advocate with local rape crisis centers, and a harm reduction provider with Healthcare for the Homeless. Forrest believes these actions directly inform who she is as an artist. She sees her production of art as her filter, her chance to process the pain, strength, and resiliency she has observed in the world. Forrest's artwork grows out of a deep fascination with the things we do to look after one another and ourselves. One of her ongoing series is a project called the *Heart Protector*, comprising a felt sash that wraps around the wearer and provides the heart with extra warmth and shielding. As a sculptor, Forrest uses a variety of materials such as fabric, steel, cast aluminum, sticks, rubber, beeswax, honey, and blood. Her work investigates everyday struggles to find recognition, intimacy, protection, or wholeness, individually and collectively. Forrest credits her supportive family, the DIY/punk ethos,³ and friends in and out of the queer community with helping her to speak out, push the limits of desire and gender, and live consciously and creatively. She currently lives in Albuquerque, New Mexico with her partner and their two amazing dogs.

Figure 1 (p. 25)

Suture

2002, Harmony Hammond.
Oil on canvas with metal, 90 x 149 in.
Art © Harmony Hammond/Licensed by VAGA,
New York, New York.

Employing symbolic substances and images, Hammond creates abstract art that makes subtle statements about body politics and the southwest desert. Her work is a metaphor for the private and sexual body and for the harsh realities of the desert. She balances the tensions between thick and thin and the raw feelings that

are created through the layering of paint that suggests bodily substances. **The work becomes a dialogue of human relationships and survival.** *Suture* is a large painting with heavily layered and impastoed canvases that are joined by a vertical piece of corrugated metal roofing. The trampled roof ridge serves as a patch that surgically binds together a wound separating the two large and contrasting canvases. The left canvas with its scab-like red and black thick paint is joined to a smooth golden flesh-like right canvas (Reed, 2005). Regan (2002) suggested the work is a metaphor for the destruction of the western environment and violence against women.

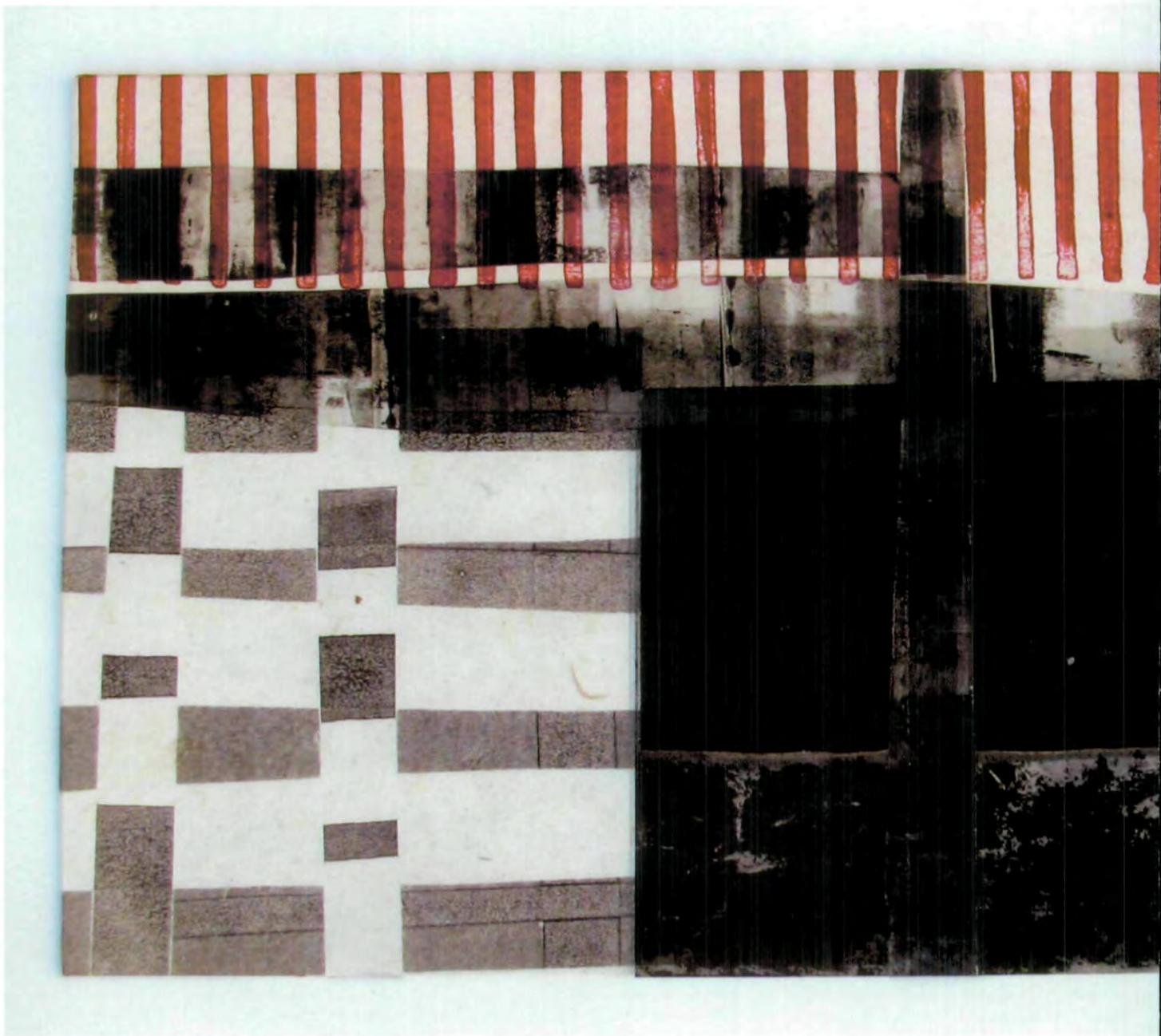


Figure 2. *Red Spill I*, 2009, Helen Cozza. Lithograph, collagraph, embossing on rag board, 19 x 27 inches. Copyright permission of the artist.

Figure 2 (above)

Red Spill I

2009, Helen Cozza.

Lithograph, collagraph, embossing on rag board,
19 x 27 in.

Copyright permission of the artist.

Cozza's work metaphorically speaks to the rebuilding process. Strongly influenced by the literal rebuilding of a house she witnessed as a child, she references construction and deconstruction—the bare bones of buildings act as metaphors for the rebuilding of self. Because she had no model of what it meant to be a lesbian, she was always trying different ways to construct herself. The constant upheaval in her house became a symbol for the confusion she felt when she recognized she was different. In *Red Spill I*, we can see the reference to both upheaval and architecture. The hard edges of grays and blacks intertwine around the strong and

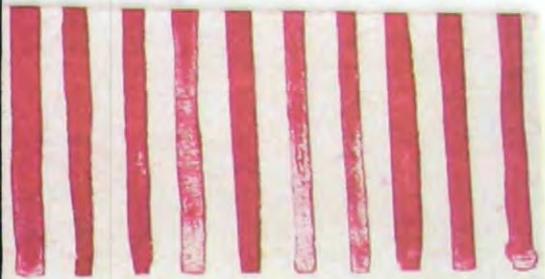


Figure 3 (p. 30)

Scab-Blue, from Scab Studies II

2008, Erin Forrest.

Bandage tape, crochet, beeswax, 4 x 4 x 3 1/2 in.
Copyright permission of the artist.

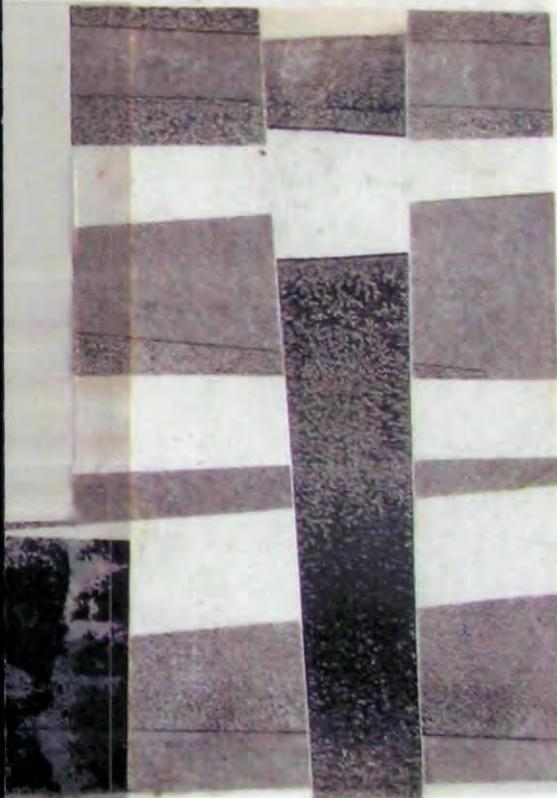


Figure 4 (p. 30)

Scab-Red, from Scab Studies II

2008, Erin Forrest.

Bandage tape, crochet, beeswax, 3 x 3 x 3 1/2 in.
Copyright permission of the artist.

Figure 5 (p. 31)

Scab-White, from Scab Studies II

2008, Erin Forrest.

Bandage tape, crochet, beeswax, 2 1/2 x 4 x 3 1/2 in.
Copyright permission of the artist.

Forrest investigates how individual and social bodies approach the act of healing. In *Scab Studies II*, she uses the literal act of crocheting with thread to make connections across a form made of beeswax and bandage tape. The title clearly helps the viewer see her work as a metaphor for healing. The sculptures reference the web-like process that takes place in the blood when a wound occurs. Upon seeing the work and accompanying title, the viewer may have a very automatic, visceral response when confronted with the textures and colors of dried blood. Scabs remind us of our injuries. We may even pick at our own unsightly scabs to rid ourselves of them but the scabs in Forrest's work remain. **As objects they are beautiful constructions but they speak about the injuries suffered by people, possibly even the artist, while serving to remind us of the healing process.**

Activities

Learning Objectives for the Secondary Level

Students will do the following to further their understanding of the function of art:

- Describe and explore the meaning of art objects within cultures and geographic locations;
- Examine and analyze works of art from a culture and place them in a context;
- Identify the similarities and differences in the ideas and art of others;
- Use an original creative writing piece as motivation for a visual work; and
- Create a visual work that demonstrates the effect of personal experience.

seemingly stable structure in the middle. The massive structure created from a collagraph of organic, cloudy shapes, possibly representing the soul, pushes upward toward the red verticals in an effort to release itself from the chaos of the intertwining gray forms. Cozza uses layers of subtle color variation and lithographic and collagraphic prints that add to the complexity of the imagery. Her work speaks to the urge to emerge out of the controlled chaos and organized clutter, and resurface. The artist gives us a clue with the title; perhaps the red references the bruises and cuts that were received while trying to make sense of the chaos.

Figure 3. *Scab-Blue*, from Scab Studies II. 2008, Erin Forrest. Bandage tape, crochet, beeswax, 4 x 4 x 3½ inches. Copyright permission of the artist.

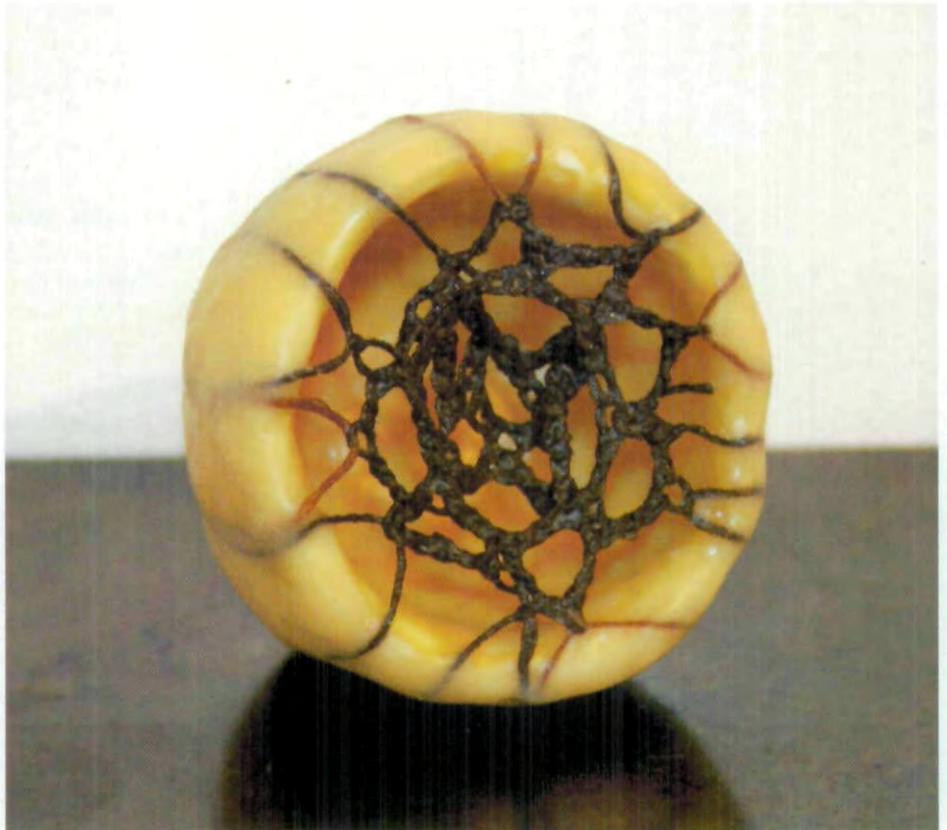


Figure 4. *Scab-Red*, from Scab Studies I. 2008, Erin Forrest. Bandage tape, crochet, beeswax, 3 x 3 x 3½ inches. Copyright permission of the artist.





Figure 5. *Scab-White*, from *Scab Studies II*. 2008, Erin Forrest. Bandage tape, crochet, beeswax, 2½ x 4 x 3½ inches. Copyright permission of the artist.

Inquiry

To help students engage closely with the works and to better understand the art and the artists, use these questions for discussion:

- Each artist used a particular color palette in her work. Why do you think each artist chose those colors?
- What might those colors represent?
- Read about the artists in the short biographies that accompany this lesson. What connections can you make between what you know about the artists and what they have produced that is featured here?
- All three artists create work that is framed by experiences many people might find uncomfortable to think about. How might these artists use these uncomfortable issues to reveal aspects of their lesbian or queer identities?
- How might the sexual identity of these artists affect how they see the world?
- How might Hammond's choice of colors and textures in her work reflect both living in the southwest and women's survival?
- How does Cozza's interest in architecture and her lesbian identity correlate with what you see in her work?
- Forrest has worked at a domestic violence shelter and a rape crisis center. What connection do you see in her life and her artwork?

Related Studio Activity: Thinking Conceptually

Students can create conceptual work about their lives. Helping students to think conceptually will take time. In this lesson, students may first need to re-live positive memories for the pleasurable experience or rewrite harsh memories to change the outcome. Students can be instructed to create work that is informed by their memories and can be encouraged to refrain from the literal interpretation to a more symbolic or metaphoric interpretation. Here is a list of suggested activities to help students in this process:

Think about something that has happened to you in your life that was very significant and memorable. This would be an event or memory with strong, emotional content that affected you deeply and either filled you with longing to have it again or left you wanting something different.

- Write a short paragraph about that event describing in detail what you remember.
- If the memory evokes a pleasurable experience, re-live those positive memories.
- If the memory evokes an unpleasant or uncomfortable experience, change the outcome.
- Think of ways to symbolically or metaphorically represent that memory through color, image, texture, and/or materials.
- Make an artwork that captures your memory and uses symbols and metaphors to articulate the social significance of the event.

Assessment

The class can be divided into small groups of three or four students where they will display their works and share the process they went through to create their individual pieces. Each student can verbally describe the memory that inspired the work and what symbol(s) and/or metaphor(s) were used to depict these memories. If time permits, the entire class can meet together as a whole and take the opportunity to hear another student's interpretation of their work.

Conclusion

The work of all three artists references memory, the body, and/or the human condition. Through art, Hammond continues to suture ruptures, Cozza rebuilds structures, and Forrest heals hurtful situations. Such work allows students to see how life experience frames artmaking and how we are all connected to a shared humanity.

For more information about the artists, use the following links:

1. <http://www.harmonyhammond.com/>
2. <http://www.helencozza.com/>
3. <http://www.erinforrest.com/>

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ The Stonewall Riots occurred in June of 1969 in reaction to the New York City police's raid of the Stonewall Inn, a popular gay bar in Greenwich Village. Raids of gay bars were routine at the time but on this summer night, the patrons fought back. For the next four nights, the riots continued in the streets (Duberman, 1993). Hammond (2000) notes that the following year "the first Gay Pride parade was held in New York on the anniversary of the Stonewall Riots," (p. 16), and many have since come to view this time as the beginning of Gay Liberation.
- ² Lath is a building material consisting of thin strips of wood that provide a foundation for a coat of plaster.
- ³ This term refers to a "do it yourself" ethic, where one is self-reliant.

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