

Fifty years on from the riots in New York that sparked the start of the gay liberation movement, a new book celebrates the photographers whose work flourished amid new freedoms

After Stonewall

On June 28 1969, a little more than an hour after midnight, police raided the Stonewall Inn in Manhattan’s Greenwich Village. As officers began to arrest patrons, the crowds swelled and energised. They had had enough. A riot began, sparking decades of change.

The novelist Edmund White described that night’s events in a letter to friends the next week: “...a mammoth paddy wagon... pulled up to the Wall and about 10 cops raided the joint. The kids were all shoed into the street; soon other gay kids and straight spectators swelled the ranks to, I’d say, about a thousand people... A drag queen is shoved into the wagon; she hits the cop over the head with her purse. The cop clubs her... But the crowd doesn’t disperse... something’s brewing.”

Fifty years on, Stonewall’s symbolic importance, and the role the riots played in the emergence of gay liberation, is clear. Before, two women or two men might hold hands in public; gender nonconforming individuals could walk around the city. Some did. But in the context of a homophobic society, this would elicit extra (usually unwanted) attention. Today, in some parts of the world, it is possible for identifiably queer people to move about without their sexual or gender identity making them subject to scrutiny. Within the realm of photography, too, this makes a difference.

In earlier times – if, say, Diane Arbus had photographed the same pair – an image like Joyce Culver’s “Marianne & Eva Gilleran, NYC” (1994) would have attracted critical attention for its depiction of two lesbian sisters embracing. Today, we pay just as much attention to their intense bond and the artist’s use of a traditional studio portrait format as we do to their sexuality.

In Robert Kalman’s portraits of gay couples of many ages, colours and genders, several with young children, the subjects are allowed to just be. John Paul Evans, whose framed portraits of same-sex couples hang on walls or are tenderly placed on side tables, generates a similar sense of family and domestic warmth.

James Bidgood, whose work is the earliest represented in this catalogue, sits on the cusp of pre- and post-Stonewall photography. The shots of his model and friend Bobby Kendall, from the mid to late 1960s, are stuffed with signifiers of the classical and the painterly. Yet the frankness with which they project their blatant homoeroticism is very much of the post-liberation world. Bidgood describes them as an attempt to inject aesthetic idealism into the black-and-white minimalism of the physique photography of that time. With greater distance, we can appreciate the beautiful melodrama and clever use of outmoded queer codes in his work.

Later, Aids was a battering ram that seemed to blunt the increased tolerance and booming sexual culture that came out of Stonewall. Photographers responded with anger and activism – as well as mourning. In Sunil Gupta’s diptychs, shots of the artist receiving treatment for HIV are juxtaposed with quiet images of the daylit exteriors of gay bars and clubs – an unsentimental yet resilient approach to living with the virus.

The multitude of photographic practices reflects the heterogeneity of the gay liberation movement; the riots were, after all, started by a coalition of trans women, people of colour, lesbians, drag queens and street youths. It also serves as a reminder of how much has been achieved – and how much remains to be done. **FT**

This is an edited extract from an essay by Nicholas C Morgan in “Photography After Stonewall”, edited by Bill Travis and Larry Davis, New York. An exhibition runs at Soho Photo Gallery, New York, from June 5-29



**‘BLUE BOY’,
FROM PINK NARCISSUS,
BY JAMES BIDGOOD, 1960S**
Born in Wisconsin in 1933, Bidgood moved to New York when he was just 18. ‘Most of my work was done before gay rights really started moving,’ he says. ‘I hardly noticed prejudice, or I simply accepted it and worked around it’

‘VAPOR’, BY DAVID HILLIARD, 2015

In a body of work chronicling ‘the masculine condition’, Hilliard’s large panoramic images function as ‘a visual language, shifting panel by panel. This is what interests me: the convergence of a static moment with something slightly cinematic,’ he explains



‘GAY AND LESBIAN COUPLES’, BY ROBERT KALMAN, 2018

Depicting couples of different ages and races, often with children, Kalman’s documentary portraits reflect the narrative of LGBTQ civil rights, which, he says, ‘simply told, draws a straight line from the Stonewall riots to a person’s liberty to love whomever they wish today’



‘MARIANNE & EVA GILLERAN, NYC’, BY JOYCE CULVER, 1994

This portrait of twins Marianne and Eva was taken at a women’s dance celebrating the 25th anniversary of Stonewall. Marianne, on the left, has a protective arm around her sister. ‘Recently, I spoke to Marianne, who told me Eva passed away in January 2018,’ says Culver



**'BLOOD' AND 'FORT',
FROM FROM HERE TO ETERNITY,
BY SUNIL GUPTA, 1999**
Gupta's diptychs juxtapose shots of his HIV treatment with exteriors of gay clubs. 'I felt liberated from the hesitation of showing my sick body, and from adding HIV to my already overburdened identity mix of gay and Indian'



blood



fort

**'JEAN & ELAINE, SANTA FE',
BY SAGE SOHIER, 1988**
In 1986, Sohier began focusing on gay couples in tender, domestic settings. 'Looking at these pictures now,' she says, 'I realise it took a good deal more courage to stand up and be photographed as a same-sex couple in the 1980s than it does today'



**'CENTERFOLDS',
BY PACIFICO SILANO, 2018**
Silano's images recontextualise gay erotica from the pre-Aids era. 'My work addresses the emotional and physical voids felt as a result of the Aids crisis, the complicated nature of photography, and our constantly changing relationship to the past,' he explains



**'BE CAREFUL WHAT YOU WISH
FOR - HOME SWEET HOME',
BY JOHN PAUL EVANS, 2015**
Evans, who grew up in Wales, explores the concept of the family album. Here, a staged picture shows Evans with his now-husband Peter. 'I was always critical of what the "family album" represented in terms of normality,' he says