In 1978 in San Francisco, Gilbert Baker designed the prototype for what would decades later become a ubiquitous symbol for gay pride: the rainbow flag. The original design featured eight colors, each respectively symbolizing sex, life, healing, sunlight, nature, magic/art, serenity, and spirit. Queer California: Untold Stories installed a prototype of this flag as one of the first works visitors encountered in the exhibition. As the wall text explained, “In 1979, Baker sought to mass produce the design and found that flag makers did not carry pink as a standard color. He let pink go for a chance at commercial success. He also abandoned turquoise to retain the flag’s symmetry.” Curator Christina Linden presented the flag as a cautionary tale as much as a cause for celebration, installing it in a section titled “What Gets Left Out” and proximate to wall text defining the process of assimilation.

Numerous pride flags have been developed to represent different identities and subcultures—from bisexual and nonbinary to bears and leather—whereas composite flags have sought to expand the visible spectrum of queerness, such as the Progress Pride Flag, which presents black and brown stripes representing queers of color and the white and pastel pink and blue stripes of the trans flag as intersecting with the standard rainbow flag.¹ In this exhibition, the curator juxtaposed Gilbert’s original vision with artist Amanda Curreri’s Misfits 1979 (Sex and Art), a 2013 flag composed of hot pink and turquoise panels that reclaim sex and art (apparently minus the magic) as core to queer culture and expression. Both logics—of inclusion for previously underrepresented queer experiences and of reclaiming sex and art—effectively describe the exhibition’s agenda of presenting “untold stories.” Importantly, Linden’s show also refused a binary between art and historical documentation [Image 1].²

The exhibition coincided with the fiftieth anniversary of the Stonewall uprising in New York City, which has apocryphally been understood to have initiated gay liberation; this anniversary is being commemorated with a wave of books and exhibitions, many of which serve to reinforce the centrality of Stonewall and certain familiar figures and

¹. See Andy Campbell, Queer x Design (New York: Black Dog & Leventhal, 2019), 215.
images. California, however, was the site of political organizing (for example, the Mattachine Society, Daughters of Bilitis) and protests (at Cooper Do-nuts and at the Black Cat in Los Angeles, at Compton’s Cafeteria in San Francisco, that predate Stonewall. The state’s size and diversity has also fostered a broad range of communities and practices that extend beyond New York City–centric narratives. Thus, the exhibition, capitalizing on the timeliness of retrospection, sought to change the dominant narrative, refracting it into multiple stories that speak across early organizing and contemporary art. It did so with a capacious array of works by more than sixty artists and collaborators and materials from fifteen archives. In addition to works in a variety of visual art mediums and a film and video
screening series, the show effectively incorporated snapshots and documentation photos out of the archives, audio pieces and interviews, gay and lesbian newspapers and magazines, queer zines, political buttons and stickers, picket signs, costumes, board games, and panels from the AIDS quilt. Linden took a maximalist but deeply considered approach. It’s extraordinary that the show was the labor of a single independent curator, but the exhibition’s coherence does reflect a particular vision.

At the heart of the show and in many ways embodying its expansive ethos, Chris E. Vargas created a physical manifestation of his itinerant project the Museum of Trans Hirstory and Art (MOTHA, from 2013) with a focus on San Francisco Bay Area trans histories—or, as his playful piece Pronoun Showdown (2015) suggests, aestories, blackstories, brownstories, feystories, hustories, meowstories, witchstories, and beyond. Vargas’s temporary structure, adorned with neoclassical architectural decals on the exterior and bar logos on the interior walls, institutionalizes artifacts such as disco queen Sylvester’s sequined jacket and community activist Miss Major’s high heels alongside artist Nicki Green’s recreated mugs from Compton’s Cafeteria, Breaking Dishes for Trans Liberation (2016) [Image 2].

Connecting multiple legacies and forms of trans life, the MOTHA installation included artifacts from the 1950s and ’60s of José Sarria and his imperial court of drag queens; photos of the early 1970s genderfuck group the Cockettes; Tina Valentin Aguirre and Augie Robles’s 1994 video documentary of queer Latinx life in the Mission district, ¡Viva 16! (named for 16th Street); and Rhys Ernst’s video Dear Lou Sullivan (2014), a tribute to the transmale activist who died of AIDS in the early 1990s. The late Jerome Caja, a gender-radical figure in the alternative queer club and art scenes of 1980s and ’90s San Francisco, produced challenging yet comic paintings using nail polish, eyeliner, eyeshadow, and later the remains of his friend Charles Sexton. His works presented here—The Ascension of the Fruit Bowl (1991) and Ascension of the Drag Queen (1994), both in the collections of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art—canonize effeminate men and drag queens and blur the dual worlds of nightlife and the art museum.5

In a parallel but different method and form, Kaucyila Brooke offered a long-term project that positions the artist as historian. Since the mid-1990s, Brooke has been documenting

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5. I admit that I did not appreciate Caja or his work until I read Duets: Jerome Caja: Nayland Blake and Justin Vivian Bond in Conversation (New York: Visual AIDS, 2018).
lesbian spaces in San Diego, Los Angeles, and the Bay Area (as well as in Cologne, Germany). *Queer California* presented Brooke’s large-scale blackboard installation of *The Boy Mechanic/Los Angeles* (2005–19) with a chalk-drawn map and snapshots of heritage venues in Los Angeles, as well as her series of photographs of San Francisco and East Bay bars and text pieces comprised of San Francisco bar names. Linden juxtaposed Brooke’s visual documentation with audio installations of Kate Clark’s oral histories of cruising and public sex in San Diego’s Balboa Park, *Queen’s Circle* (2016–19). Two distinct and opposing video rooms sharing a wall likewise staged the tensions of public and private sex, as well as gender separatism. Constructed so that the rooms, projections, and experiences were experienced separately but abutting, Linden presented the recently passed Barbara Hammer’s lesbian experimental film classic *Dyketactics* (1974), with its instantly recognizable music and ebullient imagery of nude women communing with nature and each other in Berkeley on one side of the wall. On the
other side was William E. Jones’s *All Male Mash Up* (2006), a video comprised of his compilation of incidental moments in gay porn videos that construct the numerous spaces of male-male sex.

As an exhibition that spanned not only spaces but also generations, a number of the standout works included were created by younger artists. Craig Calderwood’s intricate pattern-on-pattern pen-on-paper works imagine transspecies intimacies. In *This World Will Soon Be Ours* (2015), Calderwood presents a couple posing for a portrait but refuses normative coupling associated with the genre: an androgynous figure in florals and sunglasses sits with their fingers interlaced with a reptilian partner standing behind them; the two pose with a kind of self-confident dignity, and the background figure’s scaly eyelashes look like daisy petals. Calderwood’s *Spring Bottom* (2015) presents a colorful explosion of flora as a figure seductively assumes a position on all fours, shoes untied for ready removal. Offering comparably ornate fantasy queer spaces—as opposed to figures—Edie Fake’s *The Friends of Dorothy* and *The Free School* (both 2015) render drawings rooted in queer histories of place but that imagine what might be with an aesthetic somewhere between architectural draftings and lo-fi videogame mise-en-scènes. Young June Kwak’s *Brown Rainbow Eclipse Explosion* (2017) suspended an exploded disco ball in a sculpture that mutated shapes, refracted light, and cast multifarious shadows, but it also simultaneously celebrated and undid the iconography of the queer nightlife past. The effect seemed to be a both/and of commemoration and intergenerational disruption [Image 3].

I close this review as it began: with a rainbow. Julio Salgado’s series *Because Frida Told Me So . . .* (2017) features six color-coded prints corresponding to the now-standard colors
of the LGBTQ+ pride flag. Each work is titled for its predominant color (Give Me All Your Purples, Give Me All Your Greens, etc.) and represents evocative comics-style illustrations of queer Latinx culture—the sacred heart for red, Jarritos soda for orange, elotes for yellow—and a central figure who stands in for the artist. My favorite in the series is Give Me All Your Blues, which features the central figure in a message tee with the statement “Illegally fagging since 1995” under a shower of ejaculating bottles that might be either poppers or lube. The titular blues speak to the emotional weight of Salgado’s experience as an undocumented queer migrant, but the image also asserts a stand (if not exactly normative pride) and refuses to forego sex any more than it does art. This piece, like Curreri’s, reclaims the significance of Baker’s lost stripes. But Salgado’s work also suggests, in the context of a show that is so rooted in the archival, that the future of queerness is as yet undocumented [Image 4].

On a final note, my primary disappointment in the exhibition is that the museum did not produce an accompanying catalog. Although I can speculate about the financial reasons a publication was not pursued, these untold stories deserve to be reproduced and made more accessible, and the likely accompanying critical essays could have been significant and teachable contributions. On the upside, the Oakland Museum did commission a series of four Queer Spices by 2peasinapothecary for the gift shop. The Transblend—featuring cayenne, cinnamon, cloves, cumin, and ginger in the mix—smells the sweetest.

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