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- [justoutpersonals](#)
- [Business Directory](#)
- [BLOG OUT](#)
- [Photo Gallery](#)
- [Resources](#)
- [Calendar of Events](#)
- [Reader Submissions](#)
- [News Headlines](#)
- [Arts & Culture](#)
- [Page 3 Commentary](#)
- [Columns](#)
- [Classifieds](#)
- [Community](#)
- [Archives](#)
- [Advertising](#)
- [Subscriptions](#)
- [Paper Locations](#)
- [Publication Schedule](#)
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Feature Story

Queer Art Returns to City Hall

Annual exhibit reflects community's diversity

by Julie Sabatier

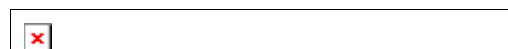
For the second year in a row, Portland City Hall will showcase a Gay Pride-themed art exhibit inside commissioners' offices featuring an array of work from more than two dozen artists.

"I think it reflects the diversity in the gay culture," said local artist Chris Haberman, who helped curate the show along with Pollyanne Birge, community outreach coordinator for openly gay City Commissioner Sam Adams.

Haberman got involved with organizing for this year's exhibit after Adams bought one of his paintings featured in last year's premiere Pride show at City Hall.

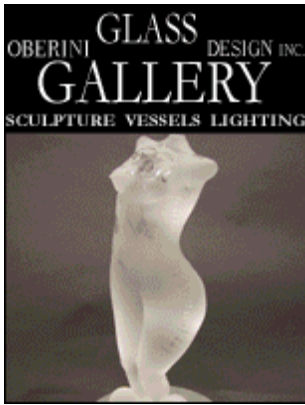
Haberman says he put together the list of artists from a combination of personal contacts and ads on Craig's List. The 34-year-old Portland native appears to have a finger on the pulse of the city's art community. He has included established Stumptown greats such as poet and painter Walt Curtis, mixed-media artist Mar Goman and photographer Paul Dahlquist alongside emerging talents like abstract painter Angela Gay and QuArt collective members Terra Wilcoxson and Tony LeTigre, whose work also appeared in last year's show.

Haberman says Curtis was



Ainsworth House & Gardens

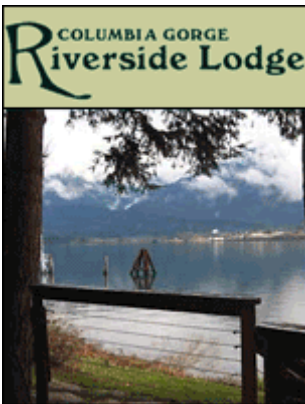




among his top choices for the City Hall exhibit. "He's a revolutionary. I think he brings a lot of history and energy to the show."

Curtis, 65, is perhaps best known for his autobiographical novel *Mala Noche*, which inspired Gus Van Sant to make his 1985 film of the same name. Also an accomplished visual artist, he describes himself as a "romantic realist" and something of a "gay pioneer."

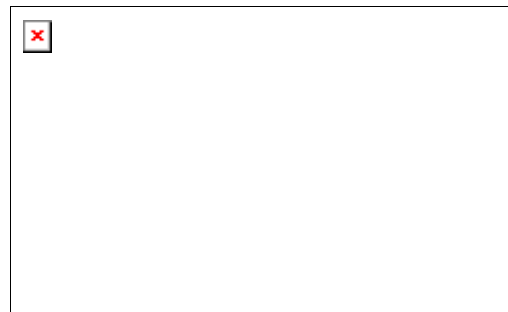
"I've always been out," he says. "I faced off my draft board in 1966 with telling them I was gay and resisting going to the Vietnam War." He didn't end up serving, although he says the military's official reason for exempting him was the missing joints on the middle finger on his left hand, which he got caught in a sawmill.



Curtis will have three paintings in the show, although he's had to choose them carefully, as much of his work includes nude male bodies, and City Hall has some restrictions about content. "It's a public building," explains Birge. "We don't show nakedness, nudity, penises, nipples, anything like that."

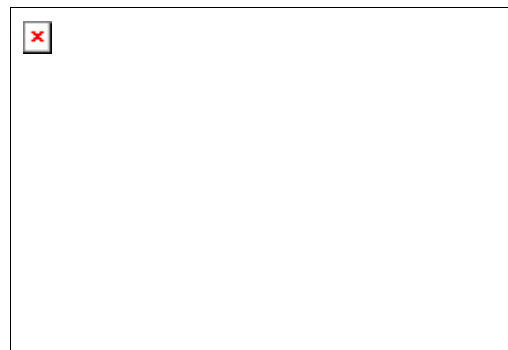
Haberman has worked closely with Curtis to select pieces that are appropriate for the space. "There's a lot of homoerotic art and things that sometimes shed maybe some negative light on gay culture," he says. "There's a lot more to gay people than sex and nakedness."

Curtis says he's open to compromises, but he sees the male form as integral to his work. "The point of my entire life has been to what? Normalize, romanticize male relationships, particularly young males," he says, gesturing toward a painting titled "Let the Waves Take Me" depicting two naked men back to back with swirling blue and green brushstrokes. "So here we are in 2007, and why can't something like that be in the show? This is not hardcore sexual or anything. It's just the sweetness of human bodies and being close."



The three pieces Curtis and Haberman picked out span 16 years of Curtis' painting career and do not include "Let the Waves Take Me." All acrylic on wood, they incorporate male and female figures, but no explicit nudity.

Joining Curtis in the City Hall exhibit is Jennifer Billig, who also deals with the human body, although in a much different context. She's established herself as one of the city's most sought-after tattooists, specializing in flowers and plants (including a pair of figs that resides on my upper back). Billig, 36, works in inanimate



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media as well. Some of her series of woodcut prints of agriculturally invasive weeds will adorn the walls of city commissioners' offices.

"These images are sort of single plant portraits," she says. "The concept of 'weed' kind of depends on who's defining it. Whether a plant is a weed or not depends on your perspective and what you're trying to grow and what you're trying to accomplish."

Asked why she chose these particular pieces for the Pride show, Billig says it came down to a question of size and what she had framed. "I don't feel like my gayness defines my work or vice versa," she explains. "Obviously, it informs my life and it's part of who I am, but I don't do art about being gay."

Although she holds a degree in printmaking from New York's Pratt Institute, Billig has been working with wood for more than 20 years. "I like woodcut because I can take it with me to work on it. I don't have to be stuck in a studio to be doing it," she says, adding that she worked on the mahogany plywood cuts for this series of prints on campsites near Detroit Lake and Middle Santiam.

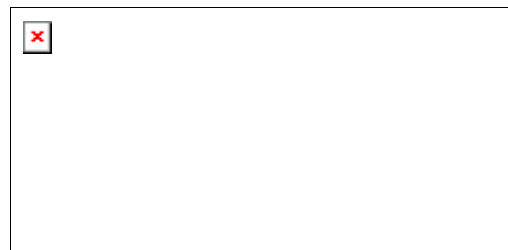
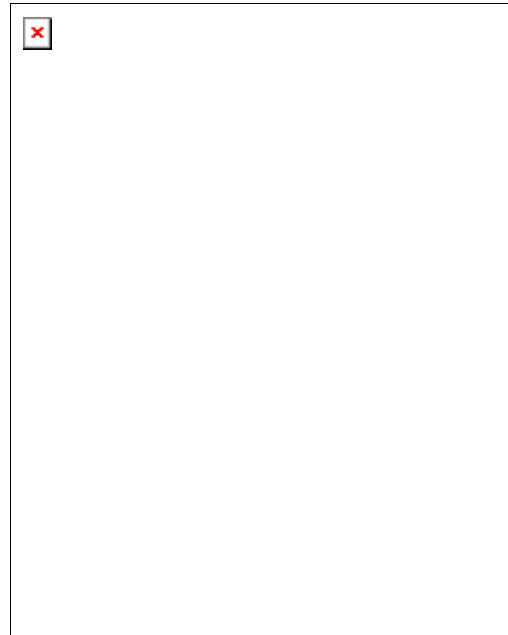
This show might be bittersweet for Billig, however, because she and her partner will be leaving Oregon after nine years in the fall to relocate to Billig's home state of Arkansas so she can be closer to her family.

"It's going to be really interesting going to Pride somewhere small," she says. "[But] being around my family is important to me, more so than being in a cultural comfort zone."

Collage artist Gregory Carrigan, 55, is also a Portland transplant. He came to Oregon from his native Las Vegas in 1979 and says he's here to stay.

"The longer I stayed, the more I fell in love with Oregon," he says. "I couldn't leave now; it's my home."

Carrigan says he's a painter at heart, but collage work allows him to tell stories. The piece he's chosen for the City Hall show is one you might want to stare at for a while. In the foreground is a shirtless man Carrigan identifies as a Cuban



wrestler posing in front of a red car. Fast food, bunny suits and a big green dinosaur are just some of the images in this teeming composition.

"There's a lot of little stories you can make up in there that are kind of fun," Carrigan says. "It has a gay theme. It's not an in-your-face gay theme. If you start to look at it, you realize that there's gay plots in it that you can kind of read."

Carrigan's artistic career has been sporadic since he was diagnosed with HIV/AIDS in 1987. "Thanks to the medicines and all the help I got from Project Quest and stuff, I feel like I got a second chance and I do get to do it all over again and I kind of relish life itself," he says. "I want to put something that I did back into life in that way, and art is my way of doing it."

Carrigan says he doesn't show his work often, although he was just featured in the Alberta Art Hop and has a solo show premiering next month at the Tea Zone. His partner, Tabor Porter, also has art in the City Hall exhibit.

Another piece to look out for is mixed-media artist Mar Goman's. "I make art out of everything that doesn't move," the 59-year-old says. For this particular piece, Goman cut painter's linen stained with wax into the shape of a dress and sewed on shell buttons of varying hues from very dark at the center to soft, pearly shades as they fan out from the center of the piece. Also sewn to the dress are delicate shell beads that spell out the words "Radiating the pain."

"Everyone experiences pain in their lives," Goman explains. "It's sort of a part of the human condition, but I think gays and lesbians, particularly those growing up in my generation, and still, I mean it's not over yet, they have a lot of pain... I mean, figuring out your sexuality and figuring out what to do with it in this culture and, at my age, realizing that as you and your partner retire, you don't have any fucking rights! That pain keeps coming back in different ways."

Goman says she and her partner are eager to file for a domestic partnership under the new Oregon Family Fairness Act. She sees the City Hall art show as an important element in the movement toward full equality.

"Last year was the first time this show happened, and they sort of decided that June would be queer month because it's Gay Pride and everything. So, I'm assuming and hoping that it will happen every year," she smiles.

Portland City Hall celebrates Pride Month with an exhibit of queer artists June 7 to 30 at 1220 S.W. Fourth Ave. An opening reception will be held from 5 to 7 p.m. June 7.

Julie Sabatier is a Portland freelance writer and radio producer.

[back to top](#)

