

***ROUGH
TRADE***

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**Jeremy Brooks • Mark Burns • Wesley Harvey • Ryan Wilson Kelly
Kathy King • Matt Nolen • Anne Drew Potter • Anthony Sonnenberg
Caitlin Rose Sweet • Holly Thompson • Triesch Voelker**

curated by

Wesley Harvey • Darren Lee Miller • Ian F. Thomas

Bowman~Penelec~Megahan Art Galleries

Allegheny College

520 North Main Street

Meadville, PA 16335

ROUGH TRADE

Foreword

“Got a light?”

Three little words. The opening dialogue in the sex-hunt as individuals cruised the streets, looking for action of a dangerous kind. From the darker days of gay isolation, standing in shadows, to current iterations of the sex-hunt, trade continues. Those three little words have transformed into modern acronyms for needs and desires sought in the internet age.

Trade is alive and well. The lure of anonymous encounters has walked the streets since the Victorians. Since the years of hustler/author John Rechy in the Sixties. Since Lou Reed took us for a walk on the wild side in the Seventies. Since the Smiths reeled around the fountain in the Eighties. Since Perfume Genius sashayed by your house only yesterday. Trade survives.

The frisson of ecstasy and danger has power, as well as consequences. For some, momentary abatement of lust with no names

uttered. For some, addiction to the practice and for others, death.

Let us consider the visual side, as the artists of **ROUGH TRADE** offer that requested light. No shame in this game, just permission to look and consider a darker kind of love, uncovered.

Enjoy your stroll.

Mark Burns

Artist-in-Residence, Instructor, Ceramics Program,
Office for the Arts at Harvard University

Note: Mark Burns is one of the artists featured in this exhibition

Curatorial Statement

In gay slang, *trade* is both verb and noun, referencing an act of anonymous sex as well as the individual who seeks it out. In this exhibition, we expand the semantic geography of trade, to move it beyond sexuality and sex acts specifically, and to reconceive the word within the realm of queer art theory to broadly explore non-normative identities, power play, desire, and the allure of risky assignments. With any exchange there is a danger of being taken advantage of, stereotyped, or outed, yet the potential rewards of trade seem to outweigh the risks.

This exhibition complicates the notion that trade is necessarily a reductive power play. How, then, do we imagine interrelationships that exist apart from “rough” and its antithesis, beyond the dualities of dominant and submissive, outside the limits of consummation and exploitation? And what are some of the visual cues offered by the artists in this show? How do we conceive of love, desire, and bodies beyond binaries when language and tradition seem to constrain us? Many of the invited artists have crafted new works for this show. They used time-honored methods to make ceramic sculptures and functional wares that are anything but traditional.

[Jeremy R. Brooks](#) disrupts familiar American images in this series of plates and figurines. By taking constituent pieces apart, adding and recombining elements, recontextualizing spatial relationships between figures, and titling the new works with double entendres, Brooks emphasizes the kitschy and homosocial aspects of the imagery in Norman Rockwell’s originals. Though many individuals may see homosexuality as perfectly normal, our society as a whole still sees same-sex relationships as, literally, queer; and so, there is a lack of homosexual representation in mainstream, collectible figurines produced today. Brooks works to fill that void. Furthermore, by appropriating Norman Rockwell’s narratives in the found and re-created objects, and then changing them, Brooks undermines their wholesome narratives. The physical changes are therefore subversive, regardless of the social context of the viewer.

[Mark Burns](#) has been called the John Waters and Alice Cooper of the ceramics world. Throw in a side dish of iconic mustache, confidence, and irreverence, and you get the amalgamation that is Mark Burns. He is a master craftsperson, able to create works that are flawless in design and concept. From his recent series, *Suite of Five Plagues*, in *Plague in Lavender (HIV)*, Burns shows a common concern of homosexual men,

regardless of sero-status. A silver disco ball sits atop a vase decorated with electron-microscope images of the virus. A hooded figure, covered in blood, raises his hand. Crawling babies with their eyes X-ed out, drawn in the style of Keith Haring, adorn the base. Burns combines popular culture with kitschy imagery to create an aesthetic that is sickly sweet. The work is confident, colorful, powerful, assertive, and would be equally at home in a thrift shop as in a high-end department store.

[Wesley Harvey](#) seduces the viewer with glitz and glamour. His works rely on traditionally imposed stereotypes (e.g. well-hung studs in jockstraps and leather chaps, and the flouncing queens who love them), and repositions them into points of power. He speaks to oversimplified notions of maleness and offers the viewer recontextualized norms, embracing, highlighting, and ultimately up-ending glittering clichés about lust, love, and decadence. The works move from the direct to the subversive as Harvey offers an unabashed view of his reality.

[Ryan Wilson Kelly's](#) work is performance art, video, sculpture, exquisitely strange costuming, intentionally janky stagecraft, calculatedly disappointing verisimilitudes, and absurd puppetry. By

referencing familiar, obscure, and imagined cultural moments and characters, Kelly creates meticulous accumulations of apparent non sequiturs to recombine bits of old stories and create new ones. The queerness in Kelly's work is in its literal strangeness and irreverence, as well as a resistance against generally received wisdom about the figures he represents. Superman becomes an balding middle-aged man wearing an ill-fitting, homemade, spandex suit and living in squalor; a 19th century paleontologist has his liver ripped out by a hungry pterodactyl; Teddy Roosevelt alternates between swinging his big stick, and cuddling with a stuffed bear. Kelly inhabits these characters, exploring different masculinities, some aspirational and some problematic or absurd. He's a bearskin rug, a wiener between two buns, a piñata. The works engender our empathy through humor, and challenge us to reconsider how we know what we think we know, especially when it comes to historical and mythical figures.

Storytelling can be a performative act, and [Kathy King](#) is the main character in her continuing novel. She addresses sexuality and gender in her vessels, platters, tiles, and sculptural installations. The clay surfaces provide King a ground upon which to employ her method. Working mainly in porcelain, she coats the surfaces in thick, black underglaze

and then reveals the precious white clay using a process called *sgraffito*, a technique of scratching or carving. The marks she makes are assertive, confident, and reveal multiple layers of narrative. King says she is, "interested in mapping the ways popular culture not only reflects women's lives, but also shapes them." Given our current political climate, King's work is a metanarrative about the nature of sex and gender, and an epistemology of inequity.

[Matt Nolen](#) pieces together vintage, found ceramic objects to re-member disparate experiences. The works tell a story of self-understanding by combining geometric shapes, eyes, faces, body parts, goblets, and collectible figurines. These amalgamations, while at first appearing to be cacophonous, are in fact a violent harmony of joined items which create an external visualization of the architecture of Nolen's psyche. His vulnerable assemblages point out the ways in which we all construct our own truths, and show tensions between internal and external representations of self. They are metaphors for the fragile notion of an immutable reality.

[Anne Drew Potter](#) engages the spaces between binaries like male and female, young and old, normal and strange in a series of figurative ceramic sculptures that reconceive typical bodily signifiers of identity, and

confront viewers with the discomfort that comes from a place of not knowing. Potter creates a "theatrical presence" in the sculptures to address traditional, historical, and popular narratives, and to remind us of the primacy of somatic experiences. The construction of the bodies references anatomy, but they depart from reality in ways that emphasize emotional spaces and point out the artifice of culturally constructed categories; but, if Potter's clay figures are protagonists, then the viewer is, perhaps, a foil. By respecting historical forms and social conventions while simultaneously undermining them, Potter encourages us to re-examine and reappraise ourselves.

The artwork of [Anthony Sonnenberg](#) is a combination of the grotesque and the beautiful. Working in ceramics, sculpture, and performance, he documents his struggle with denial, decadence, and body image using the visual language of classical statuary. He collects and appropriates found figurines and tchotchkes, especially crowns and candelabras, building stratified, layered, porcelain-coated conglomerations that borrow aesthetic cues from the Baroque and Rococo periods. These layers of kitsch are then further transformed through the firing process, leaving only the vague shapes or outlines of the original objects. In his video, *Decline: In Four Parts*, Sonnenberg, completely covered

in clay slip, assumes classical poses in front of a scaffold of drapery set in the woods. There is a haunting loneliness in his soundless performance, his body slowly moving as he is unable to hold each pose. Sonnenberg eventually lays on the ground, unmoving, expressing common fears about aging, decline, and death.

[Caitlin Rose Sweet](#) calls her work “conceptual crafts for gay times.” Using processes traditionally associated with femininity, Sweet pushes beyond campy craft with an adaptive, performative approach to materials usage and art making. Sweet combines ceramics with yarn, fabric strips, plastic bags, found objects, and sequins, creating sculptures that are grotesque and sublime. A mangled, purple hand holds a flower that dissolves into mucus and drips down a wrist that is deformed by many protruding fingers; red lipsticks poke out from a torso that’s really a vessel with handles; free-standing, crooked fingers with long fingernails look like alien beings. The uncanny, abject bodies correspond to the complex web of pleasure and pain that is human existence. Sweet resists essentializing, reductive notions of identity in favor of intersectionality and complexity, projecting radical queer femininity into the future in an effort to ensure its (and our) survival.

Ambiguous and frozen in time, [Holly Thompson’s](#) sculptures question binary notions of identity, emphasizing the fluid nature of embodied gender. Thompson is interested in what is at the edges of acceptability, the outer-rim of understanding, and the many non-normative, messy, layered ways people identify themselves. Like the concepts at hand, Thompson’s works do not fit into tidy categories. Color and texture speak to stereotypes, playing on our preconceived ideas, memories, and predilections. Drippingly seductive surfaces, a candy coating of saturated smooth or crackled color, may allude to postcoital entanglements, innocence lost, the process of aging, or something else. The titles of the pieces use the multivalent connotations of language to suggest they can mean many things at once. Thompson says, “it is the subversively sweet quality of the work that allows me to explore queer theory, philosophy, and language in a way that is simultaneously tongue-in-cheek and demanding.”

[Triesch Voelker’s](#) utilitarian and functional pieces invite voyeuristic pleasures, allowing us to participate (in thought if not in deed) in the intimate experiences depicted within. Focusing on traditional ceramic forms such as plates, platters, vases, and containers, Voelker uses the surfaces to explore an intimacy among men that is often

hidden in plain sight. He says that “desire comes from the unknown of the moment,” and so he employs the male gaze to create illustrated narratives of same-sex love and lust. By putting men’s bodies on display as objects of male desire and pleasure, Voelker raises questions about power and consent, and implicates the viewer as a willing participant in a system of objectification.

The works in this show are diverse, but a common thread is the challenge to traditional ideals of decorum. Some may ask, *Why is it important to mount an exhibition that deals so frankly with human sexuality?* Some may even argue that images and ideas about gay sex should remain private or unspoken, and that “mixed company” is not the place for such lines of inquiry. What reveals this argument as *politeness-masquerading-as-heterosexism* is the underlying assumption that we should not acknowledge that sex is something most people do for reasons going far beyond reproduction; and yet, there is a history of taboos and violence against people who have non-procreative sex. Sodomy (as it was called) is still stigmatized, but many heterosexual people engage in manual, oral, and anal sex, and all kinds of people seek-out anonymous hook ups for thrills as well as intimacy. To those who say we shouldn’t show homo-eroticism in movies, TV, Art, and popular

culture (realms in which hetero-eroticism has been uncontroversially ubiquitous), and that we cannot have age-appropriate public conversations about the informed, consensual, respectful choices we make with our own bodies, we have to ask, *Who benefits from silence? And who suffers?*

Circling back to Mark Burns’ foreword in this catalog, instead of asking for a light of our smoke while walking in the Brambles, we now locate potential partners via GPS-enabled apps like *Tinder* and *Grindr*. American pop musician, *LaTour*, reminded us in his [1991 hit single](#) that “people are still having sex.” While some things have changed since then -- *importantly, HIV is now treatable and can be prevented simply by taking a daily pill* -- much remains the same. It is a gay thing, a straight thing, and everything in between. Ask anyone under 30 to decode this text message: “*DTF?*” While gender is increasingly non-binary, and trade-topia has become disembodied via the internet on smartphones, our passions remain as corporeal as ever. What will you trade to get what you want?

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MARK BURNS



WESLEY HARVEY



RYAN WILSON KELLY



KATHY KING



MATT NOLEN



ANNE DREW POTTER



ANTHONY SONNENBERG



CAITLIN ROSE SWEET



H.M. THOMPSON



TRIESCH VOELKER



STATEMENT OF PRINCIPLES ON ACADEMIC FREEDOM

1. Teachers are entitled to full freedom in research and in the publication of the results, subject to the adequate performance of their other academic duties; but research for pecuniary return should be based upon an understanding with the authorities of the institution.

2. Teachers are entitled to freedom in the classroom in discussing their subject, but they should be careful not to introduce into their teaching controversial matter which has no relation to their subject.¹ Limitations of academic freedom because of religious or other aims of the institution should be clearly stated in writing at the time of the appointment.²

3. College and university teachers are citizens, members of a learned profession, and officers of an educational institution. When they speak or write as citizens, they should be free from institutional censorship or discipline, but their special position in the community imposes special obligations. As scholars and educational officers, they should remember that the public may judge their profession and their institution by their utterances. Hence they should at all times be accurate, should exercise appropriate restraint, should show respect for the opinions of others, and should make every effort to indicate that they are not speaking for the institution.³

(These principles have been excerpted from a joint statement from 1940 by the American Association of University Professors and the Association of American Colleges. To see the entire statement, please click on the link provided above, or go to this URL: <https://www.aaup.org/report/1940-statement-principles-academic-freedom-and-tenure>)

1 Second 1970 comment: The intent of this statement is not to discourage what is “controversial.” Controversy is at the heart of the free academic inquiry which the entire statement is designed to foster. The passage serves to underscore the need for teachers to avoid persistently intruding material which has no relation to their subject.

2 Third 1970 comment: Most church-related institutions no longer need or desire the departure from the principle of academic freedom implied in the 1940 “Statement,” and we do not now endorse such a departure.

3 Fourth 1970 comment: This paragraph is the subject of an interpretation adopted by the sponsors of the 1940 “Statement” immediately following its endorsement:

If the administration of a college or university feels that a teacher has not observed the admonitions of paragraph 3 of the section on Academic Freedom and believes that the extramural utterances of the teacher have been such as to raise grave doubts concerning the teacher’s fitness for his or her position, it may proceed to file charges under paragraph 4 of the section on Academic Tenure. In pressing such charges, the administration should remember that teachers are citizens and should be accorded the freedom of citizens. In such cases the administration must assume full responsibility, and the American Association of University Professors and the Association of American Colleges are free to make an investigation.

Paragraph 3 of the section on Academic Freedom in the 1940 “Statement” should also be interpreted in keeping with the 1964 “Committee A Statement on Extramural Utterances,” Policy Documents and Reports, 31, which states inter alia: “The controlling principle is that a faculty member’s expression of opinion as a citizen cannot constitute grounds for dismissal unless it clearly demonstrates the faculty member’s unfitness for his or her position. Extramural utterances rarely bear upon the faculty member’s fitness for the position. Moreover, a final decision should take into account the faculty member’s entire record as a teacher and scholar.”

Paragraph 5 of the “Statement on Professional Ethics,” Policy Documents and Reports, 146, also addresses the nature of the “special obligations” of the teacher:

As members of their community, professors have the rights and obligations of other citizens. Professors measure the urgency of these obligations in the light of their responsibilities to their subject, to their students, to their profession, and to their institution. When they speak or act as private persons, they avoid creating the impression of speaking or acting for their college or university. As citizens engaged in a profession that depends upon freedom for its health and integrity, professors have a particular obligation to promote conditions of free inquiry and to further public understanding of academic freedom.

Both the protection of academic freedom and the requirements of academic responsibility apply not only to the full-time probationary and the tenured teacher, but also to all others, such as part-time faculty and teaching assistants, who exercise teaching responsibilities.

ALLEGHENY COLLEGE STATEMENT OF COMMUNITY

Allegheny students and employees are committed to creating an inclusive, respectful and safe residential learning community that will actively confront and challenge racism, sexism, heterosexism, religious bigotry, and other forms of harassment and discrimination. We encourage individual growth by promoting a free exchange of ideas in a setting that values diversity, trust and equality. So that the right of all to participate in a shared learning experience is upheld, Allegheny affirms its commitment to the principles of freedom of speech and inquiry, while at the same time fostering responsibility and accountability in the exercise of these freedoms.

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Erie Arts and Culture, erieartsandculture.org

Society for Contemporary Craft, Pittsburgh, contemporarycraft.org



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