

A Room of Their Own: Pawtucket gallery puts queer artists at the forefront

The **Queer Art Collective**, set in the historic Exchange Street District of Pawtucket, is open to all visitors. There is no sense of exclusion upon walking through its doors, and the artwork of the current exhibit represents a very diverse collection of voices and views, from **Joe Welch**'s evocative, prolapsing sculptures to the surreal and timeless photographic images by **Darrion Rose**. But the gallery has an unusual submissions policy: Queer Artists Only Need Apply.

Gallery owner and director **Taylor Davis** takes a decisive stand in her mission statement at the company website: "Here, at The Queer Art Collective, we put queer artists at the forefront and refuse to have their true stories silenced. It's our mission to break down heteronormative art culture and create a space that doesn't tokenize sexuality for means of diversity. Queerness is not a performance to be commercialized and capitalized upon."

What makes this space truly unique is that in her quest for an LGBTQIA+ sanctuary, Davis has also managed to create a space where everyone who enters feels welcome.

"I opened during the pandemic - because of the pandemic," Davis told me. Admission was by appointment only at first. "It was for COVID at the time. People needed to get out of the house, they were getting so depressed, lonely and isolated. Here, they could come in, walk around and see art. One thing a lot of people have said to me was, 'I haven't seen art in person in over a year!'"

I asked if there had been any protest from straight artists or accusations of discrimination. This is something that Davis readily admits. "That's right, they'd be correct in that." She added, "It's not our intention to discriminate against heterosexuals. However, it is making the statement that this is our space." Davis has seen a general lack of representation for queer artists, and sees this gallery as a step toward balance. "How often do you hear about places that discriminate and only hire straight people? And if you aren't straight, they will treat you poorly. Well, this is a space where LGBTQIA+ artists don't have to feel that way."

Davis is amazed at the support she has found since moving to RI. "I feel like I have a community here now - I'm meeting all these other people with stores and galleries. I've never seen so many workers' unions, cooperatives and collectives as I've seen here, and it's really exciting to be a part of that. It's like finding your people. And now I have a company that I am bringing others into; it's changed me as a person along with my perspective on what community is and what I want to do here."

The current exhibit runs through October 5 and has an intriguing theme: *When The Colors Fade: A Queer Riot Against Corporate Pride*. Davis explained, "It's in response to the companies that don't support LGBTQIA+ people normally, but they want to capitalize off of us, so they've come out with gay pride rainbow merch to cash in."

The gallery is booked through January, which is when their current lease is up. But Davis has big plans for the future. "I'd like to get a license for a wine bar; hopefully we can open the gallery portion and keep that going during construction. We're looking at property now in Providence proper. I do love Pawtucket, but I don't get a lot of foot traffic, so I need a place that's more centralized for people who

just walk in. Things are really opening up.”

As the world struggles to find its way back from COVID, Davis has established her own new normal for a group that has too often been targeted or marginalized. “As human beings we all experience classism in different forms; this gallery is about my own community and what I can do for them. Queer people deserve to have safe spaces. They deserve to have companies that care about them and their voice.”

This is one company that does.

The Queer Art Collective is at 172 Exchange St, Pawtucket. To reserve your tickets for the July exhibition open house visit thequeerartcollective.org/upcoming-events or go to fb.com/TheQueerArtCollective for more info.