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Giard Fellowship Evokes Enthusiastic Response

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GIARD FELLOWSHIP EVOKES ENTHUSIASTIC RESPONSE

BY SHAWN TA SMITH

In his 1997 book, *Particular Voices: Portraits of Gay and Lesbian Writers*, Robert Giard captures nearly 200 photographs of his contemporaries. Giard's compilation of these portraits of lesbian and gay writers, carefully accompanied with textual excerpts, led this coffee-table monograph to stand as a supreme example of what Giard himself describes as "the autobiography of one gay reader." In her Foreword, photography curator Julia VanHaften defines what Giard presents as "his visual history." These mirrored perspectives of Giard are formed by portraits of Mark Doty, Adrienne Rich, Jonathan Ned Katz, Joan Nestle, and Achy Obejas, to name but a few. Also included are those who have passed, and are truly missed, like Audre Lorde and Allan Bérubé. Collectively, these writer portraits, captured through the lens of one picture 'historian,' are an example of documentary authority.

This documentary authority also stands for something that can truly be called art.

It was on a June evening in 1985, after viewing Larry Kramer's AIDS play, *The Normal Heart*, that Giard came to the measure of his true art. In his introductory essay, "Self-Portrait of a Gay Reader", he writes, "By the end of the evening, I had arrived at a decision about my work: that it should be of use to other gay people by recording something of note about our experience, our history, and our culture."

With Giard's instructions to himself in mind, twenty three years later the Robert Giard Foundation has joined with CLAGS to administer the Robert Giard Fellowship. An award of \$7500 goes to an emerging or mid-career artist for a project in photographic media, video, or short-form film that addresses issues of sexuality, gender, or LGBTQ identity.

In its first year, the parameters were broad enough to encourage and attract artists with or without the autobiographical/portraiture direction of Giard's work. The range of media that is allowed -- from photography to film to video -- has produced a large applicant pool, and the multiple genres also speak to the fluid, ever-changing, and limitless queer community. If Giard were a genre, our winner would have tremendous shoes to fill.

Applicants appear to come from the full spectrum of an artistic Kinsey scale! Over ninety submissions filled the CLAGS mailboxes with work samples and letters of recommendation. Once opened, the artists' visual histories were as distant geographically as they were stylistically. We have seen the work of lesbians from South Africa who sometimes photograph gender variants, sometimes bloody images, but always portraits; or New York-based artists with video diaries using still images as multilayered textiles coupled with words and audio to define one's transition from being woman-identified. We have received porn that challenges the confines of sex and bodies; images of sex-workers in Calcutta; depictions of Jamaican homophobia; and we've also received a great many images of the male nude. Furthermore, the emergence of video art and digital photography, along with traditional photography and film, helped blur the lines of format, thereby allowing content and context to reign.

It was also impressive that whole-hearted letters of recommendation poured in, many from the very writers that Giard featured years ago in *Particular Voices*. We were happy to hear from them and to receive their graceful and enthusiastic letters of support. Thanks to them for continuing to build a queer historical future with us at CLAGS and with the Robert Giard Foundation ... and for 'recording something of note' in tribute to Robert Giard.

The winner of the Robert Giard Fellowship will be announced on our website in April 2009 and featured in our next Newsletter. The fellowship recipient will use the \$7500 award in academic year 2009-2010 with the expectation that she/he will present her/his final project at the end of Spring 2010. An equivalent schedule will be followed in each of the following two academic years.

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