

# HYPERALLERGIC

## Joey Terrill's Windows Into Queer Chicano Life

"I want my work to have a confessional nature about my life, my identity, and who I am," the artist said in an interview with *Hyperallergic*.

 Valentina Di Liscia June 13, 2024



Joey Terrill in 2024 (photo courtesy the artist)

**This article is part of *Hyperallergic*'s 2024 Pride Month series, featuring interviews with art-world queer and trans elders throughout June.**

Joey Terrill has been a household name in the Chicano art scene for decades, but in the last five years, his Pop-laced portraits of queer friends, cheeky household still lifes, and characteristically graphic comic creations began to permeate into the larger contemporary art canon — first slowly and then with the fury of an uncontrollable blaze. Paintings by the artist were featured in the last *Made in LA* Biennial at the Hammer Museum, and I was delighted to spot editions of his iconic late 1970s *Homeboy Beautiful* publication at the [Brooklyn Museum's zines exhibition](#) last year. Suddenly, it seemed, Terrill's work was everywhere. And for good reason: The painter, activist, and health educator has transcended barriers in the distinct worlds he inhabits, pushing back against machismo while finding joy and acceptance in the Chicano experience. In his emblematic works that render the decimation of the AIDS crisis, the idiosyncrasy of Mexican-American culture, and the freedom and constraints of being a gay man, Terrill plumbs the complexity of identity. Read our interview, which took place over the phone, below.

**Hyperallergic:** *You grew up in Southern California. What was your experience of growing up, of being queer, of coming out? How did you feel that was seen in your community?*

**Joey Terrill:** I was born in 1955. By the time I was 10 years old, I knew I was gay, but at that point in time, I didn't have any references. I had no context. I would search for information in books in the library about homosexuality. In sixth grade I told my friend Javier, "I'm pretty sure I'm a homosexual." And he replied, "Really? How do you know? Why do you think that?" I told him that I looked it up in the dictionary. Unlike today, when everyone has access to any number of images and articles and television shows, back then it was a mystery to find out who I was and how I related to the world. I think I was maybe 11 or 12 when I went to church and for the first time I heard a priest talk in a sermon about the evils of homosexuality. A big flashbulb went off in my head — like, wait a minute, no, he's so wrong. He's talking about me, and I'm a good Catholic boy, you know? That prompted me to do two things: first, to really try to investigate and seek out community. And it made me start to question what else this priest was wrong about. It put me on a path of critical thinking.

I read in a Dear Ann Landers column from someone who had written in about being gay that there was a church for gay people in Los Angeles. Through underground newspapers like the *LA Free Press*, I found out about the [Metropolitan Community Church](#), and I went with my friend Terry. It really helped with my self-esteem. I met other queer teens, and it was astounding to me that we could all sit there and talk and share our stories — back at that time, you know, we were considered mentally ill. I don't know if people realize that. I was part of the youth group at the Gay Community Center and high schools would call us and ask us to speak to one of their classes — usually a psychology class on deviancy. I'd go into the classrooms and write the number for the Gay Community Center on the chalkboard and say: "Please memorize this number if you don't want to be seen writing it down, and you can get support." We had these Gay Funky Dances to fundraise for the center, held at the Troopers Hall — a hall for veterans that was typically rented out for wedding receptions, but it was an alternative to gay bars for queer youth, because we were under 21. I look back and I'm so fortunate that I grew up in Los Angeles where once I started to search, there were various resources and places where gay people and queer people could present themselves openly.



Joey Terrill, "Just What Is It About Today's Homos That Makes Them So Different, So Appealing" (2009-2011), acrylic and mixed media on canvas, diptych, 48 x 120 inches, collection of Williams College Museum of Art (© Joey Terrill; photo by Dario Lasagni, courtesy the artist and Ortuzar Projects, New York)

**H:** *There is an element of your upbringing that's related to being Mexican American or Chicano. When I look at your work, particularly paintings like "Just What Is It That Makes Today's Homos So Different, So Appealing" (2009-2011), which is a play on the iconic Pop piece by Richard Hamilton, I can also see that there were traditional ideas of home and family that you wanted to shake up.*

**JT:** The diptych was a parody of the Hamilton piece from 1959, and when I say what makes them "so different, so appealing," it's a little bit tongue-in-cheek, because in the painting itself you see two men having sex in the background. And for me, that's the appealing part. But I'm also using the word appealing as a target. Because gay people, trans people, LGBTQ+ people, we're constantly targeted by the current political zeitgeist and what is happening in this country, and it's really alarming.

I went to an all-boys Catholic school. When people hear me say that, they tend to assume that it was a very strict, doctrinaire place, but it wasn't always. It was the early '70s. The Christian Brothers who ran the school were at the forefront of progressive theological thinking and liberation theology. There were a couple of Chicano brothers that took me under their wing and mentored me, thankfully, and I got involved as a volunteer with *la huelga*, the grape boycott for farm workers. There, and in the Chicano Power Movement, I came to realize that there were a lot of gays and lesbians, but they were secretive, they were on the down low. I would go out to the Gay Funky Dances, or to clubs when I started to get a fake ID, and I was living in two worlds: one in Hollywood and one in the Eastside. And I was determined to confront and blend the two in my art. In the '80s, I was able to see an exhibition of Frida Kahlo's work at La Plaza de la Raza in Lincoln Heights. This was way before Fridamania, and I was putting my face, like, two or three inches from her little paintings and looking at them, and I was blown away. I was moved to tears. Her pain, her birth, her romance, her heartbreak — I mean, she put it all out there in these tiny paintings. And I thought to myself: That's what I want to do. I want my work to have a confessional nature about my life, my identity, and who I am.

At a certain point, since I was doing work about the gay community, it was inevitable that I would start to do work regarding or about HIV and AIDS. I had so many friends dying and getting sick. In 1989, I tested positive, and I got involved with advocacy around HIV and AIDS for years thinking that I would someday join my friends in death. That was a really troubling time. My last solo exhibition, at the Mark Selwyn Gallery in Los Angeles this year, was titled *Still Here*. Because that is my theme: I am still here.



Joey Terrill, "When I Was Young" (1995), Xerox collage and acrylic on canvas, 54 x 48 inches (photo by Tim Doyon, courtesy the artist and Ortuzar Projects, New York)

**H:** *We published a [review](#) of that exhibition, and one of the works that caught my eye was titled "Summer Became an Endless Round of Parties, Said the Clone" (2023), which is described as a kind of utopian vision of life pre-AIDS. In this work and others, you seem to be drawing a temporal line, a before and after.*

**JT:** You know, in October I'm turning 69, and it's all new to me — I've never been this age before. I know that sounds silly, but thinking that I was never going to live to see the age of 40, it's still astounding to me. Back in the '90s, I illustrated a small comic book in Spanish called *Chicos Modernos* that was geared toward Spanish-speaking hustlers and sex workers in Hollywood, many of whom were doing this work for survival. Many of them did not identify as gay, they were obviously at risk for HIV, and they didn't have access to the information that the White community did. So we made this book for them, about their journeys and being there for one another when one of them tests positive.



Joey Terrill, "Chicos Modernos" (1990), acrylic on canvas (courtesy the artist, Ortuzar Projects, New York and Marc Selwyn Fine Art, Los Angeles)

Now, at this point in my life, in this century, I think what I'm gonna do is a continuation of *Chicos Modernos* and those characters I made in the '90s. I'm going to update them so that now, they're aging. It's going to be a cartoon of us elders, perhaps engaging with some of the younger folks. One thing that will be different — and I'm glad about this — is that back then, the project was funded by the [Ryan White CARE Act](#) and federal funding for HIV, we were subject to the [Jesse Helms Amendment](#). So while this was all about sexually transmitted disease and hustlers and this community, I couldn't show anything that promoted or related to homosexuality.

**H:** *What are some other works or projects you're working on now?*

**JT:** I'm working on a series titled *Mi Casta Es Su Casta* (a play on "mi casa es su casa"), and for those folks that are not familiar with the casta genre from the 18th and 17th century in Mexico and Latin America, these were paintings done for a European audience to show what the "New World" was, and how exotic it was. They depicted individuals, typically a man, a woman, and their children, and they were "rated" ethnically, with the most valuable people in society being Español or European, then Mestizo, Indio, all the way down to the very lowest one on the ladder, which was Negro. They would actually write the ethnicities on the painting themselves. When I first saw these works in the 1990s at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, I was stunned. I was horrified at the role that artists have played in establishing this categoric caste system based on race and ethnicity, but at the same time, I found the paintings beautiful. Inspired by that, a couple of years ago now, I started to paint individuals whom I know today and ask them how they identify — instead of categorizing them myself — and adding their sexual orientation to the paintings as well, if they want.

**H:** *To that point, do you think the art world has become more open to LGBTQ+ identities?*

**JT:** Yes, it has become more open. The thing is that political history, and the history of advocacy, are not linear. And I think that's true for every movement — it's never a straight progression to finally reaching one's goals. You take two steps forward and then three steps back. The fact that you can have open conversations about being LGBTQ+ now also brings with it all of the vitriolic hatred and targeting by the right. I think with the Black Lives Matter movement, the #MeToo movement, all of that, there came a recognition that the art world and museums have to check themselves. I was rejected by at least three or four galleries over the course of 20 years, even within the Chicano community. My work was "too gay." And then, in the White-dominated art world, my work was Chicano, and institutions didn't do that kind of art. Today, my gosh, I'm so thrilled that there is interest from institutions that want to engage with queer people and people of color and the queer community. It's just astounding to me that the art world is catching up, because it also parallels the journeys of other artists like Suzanne Jackson, who is African-American and used to exhibit in LA, and my late friend, the photographer Laura Aguilar.



Joey Terrill, "Tom Gutierrez" (2001), acrylic on canvas, 36 x 48 inches (photo by Tim Doyon, courtesy the artist and Ortuzar Projects, New York)

*H: I think sometimes it's easy to be cynical and to forget how much has changed, even if there's so much left to be done.*

**JT:** We do tend to forget that. It was a revelation to me when I was talking to Jonathan Katz, a co-curator of the [2016] exhibition *Art AIDS America* to which I contributed a piece, and he was telling me how difficult it was to find museums that would even consider the show. I mean, when you think about the impact that AIDS has had on the artist community, it seems that a museum would be interested. The fact that the show was never exhibited in San Francisco — wow. As it toured, it opened in Tacoma and it made it to Georgia as well as other cities, but there wasn't a museum in the Bay Area that was willing to take it on, which I found really troubling, to say the least. So I recognize that even in cities that we consider to be liberal, for lack of a better word, some of the decision-makers on the boards and the funders of certain institutions in the art world can be very conservative. I think that's changing, slowly.

*H: Your artworks often depict or directly reference other artists that you admire or who have had an impact on your work, and I was wondering if you had any artists you considered queer mentors.*



Joey Terrill chatting with Don Bachardy at an exhibition of Joan Quinn portraits (photo courtesy Joey Terrill)

**JT:** One of the first names that pops into my head is the portrait painter Don Bachardy, who was the partner of Christopher Isherwood. For years, they were the world's most famous homosexual couple, so I would read stories about them here and there. But then we became friends, and what that did for me as a Chicano artist, as a queer artist based in East LA — to have a friendship with Christopher Isherwood and Don Bacardi, who were world-famous and famous for being homosexual artists and writers! — I mean, that was a level that I certainly didn't get in my neighborhood, so to speak. They instilled in me the idea that as artists, but more specifically as gay or queer artists, we are all connected, and that regardless of where you come from, you can be part of this community.

I've seen that now explode and blossom in the 21st century, where there's so many young, queer artists of color who are all doing work about identity. I'm going to be really curious to see, 10 years down the road, where some of these young artists that I'm following are. Since a lot of my work has been about HIV/AIDS and loss, I've thought to myself several times, "Gee, if Teddy Sandoval, my collaborator, my best friend, were alive today, what would his art look like? If Robert Mapplethorpe were alive, what would he be photographing today? If Laura Aguilar were alive — who did not die from AIDS but other medical issues — what would she be photographing?" I'm always thinking about all of the artists who were lost to AIDS and the impact that had on the art world. Now seeing these young people, because I'm older, I'm looking forward to seeing what they're going to do in the future.



Joey Terrill, "A Bigger Piece" (2008), acrylic and mixed media on canvas, 36 x 60 inches (photo by Steven Probert, courtesy the artist and Ortuzar Projects, New York)

*H: As you were speaking just now about seeing certain subjects addressed as our societies change, it occurred to me that it must have been so wild for you to see AIDS being talked about in a different way decades later.*

**JT:** When I think about AIDS as a phenomenon, I think there's different ways I look at it. It's sad to me that so many people, especially young people, aren't familiar with the [NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt](#), which to me is one of the greatest examples of collaborative folk art ever. That was an instance of art galvanizing folks coming together and supporting each other in their grieving process, in their political process. Sociologically, before AIDS, there was a big division between the women and the men. A lot of lesbian feminists were saying they were done with gay men because they're just as sexist as the greater culture, et cetera, and they were separatists, and I understood that from their perspective. But when AIDS hit, these same women were there taking these men to their doctor's appointments, feeding them meals, changing diapers. That had an impact in terms of relationships between gay men and lesbians. The other impact that I think it had was that the general public saw our humanity. And I think it did make it easier for the general population to recognize that, you know what, these are people. Also, the idea of talking about sexually transmitted diseases really changed dramatically. I've been in HIV advocacy for almost 30 years, so maybe I was in a bubble, but the fact was that people did not talk about these things. It was considered shameful. There was judgment. And that has changed.

*H: You spoke very poetically about envisioning the future for artists and being curious about what's to come. Is there a message that you would want to send to future Joey Terrill? Where do you see yourself?*

**JT:** To my future self — which is, like, tomorrow — I'm going to continue documenting my autobiographical strategy of my community, friends, both alive and those who have passed. That's a journey I'm going to continue. But now instead of being 25 years old, I'm approaching 70. And truthfully, I'm not quite sure what it's going to be like five years from now. When I'm 75, I'm not sure what my art will look like, but it intrigues me and I'm thankful that I'm here, I'm alive, and I'm able to make those decisions about my art. Hopefully I can inspire younger artists and the LGBTQ+ community in my own way.