Pacifico Silano on making art out of porn

December 21, 2016 - Though he admits that his youthful artistic ambitions were “mostly to make watercolor paintings about Tori Amos," artist and photographer Pacifico Silano has spent the bulk of his career investigating and documenting the lost histories of the LGBTQ community. His work has been exhibited in group shows, including The Bronx Museum of the Arts; CONTEXT, Miami; Oude Kerk, Amsterdam; and ClampArt, New York City. He is a winner of the Individual Photographer’s Fellowship from the Aaron Siskind Foundation and a Finalist for the Aperture Foundation Portfolio Prize, as well as being a 2016 fellow in photography with the New York Foundation for the Arts. For the past few years, he has used vintage gay pornography as one of his primary mediums and sources of inspiration.

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 3612 words.

Tags: Art, Photography, Inspiration, Beginnings.

How did the aesthetics of vintage gay pornography come to inform your work?

I was photographing people while I was in graduate school. I was styling them. I was trying to mold them so they looked like clones of the ’70s. In the past, I’d photograph one project and then, “Okay. That’s it. That’s done. All right, what am I going to do next?” It sounds really strange to say it, but I was interested in photo documentary, personal narrative work. I was really inspired by Nan Goldin as a young gay person. It just blew my mind. I needed to figure out how to explore themes and things that related to me.

I saw *Gay Sex in the ’70s*, a documentary, and that really changed me. I actually had a very visceral reaction from watching it, a very emotional reaction, because my uncle was of that generation. He lived here in New York City. He died here. Around that same time, my father and I stopped talking. I don’t have a relationship with my father, and this was my father’s brother. It was this really deeply personal moment of realization. This person who was connected to my father, who is no longer here, is like my imagined role model—an older gay role model from another generation. It’s hard to find that because of AIDS.

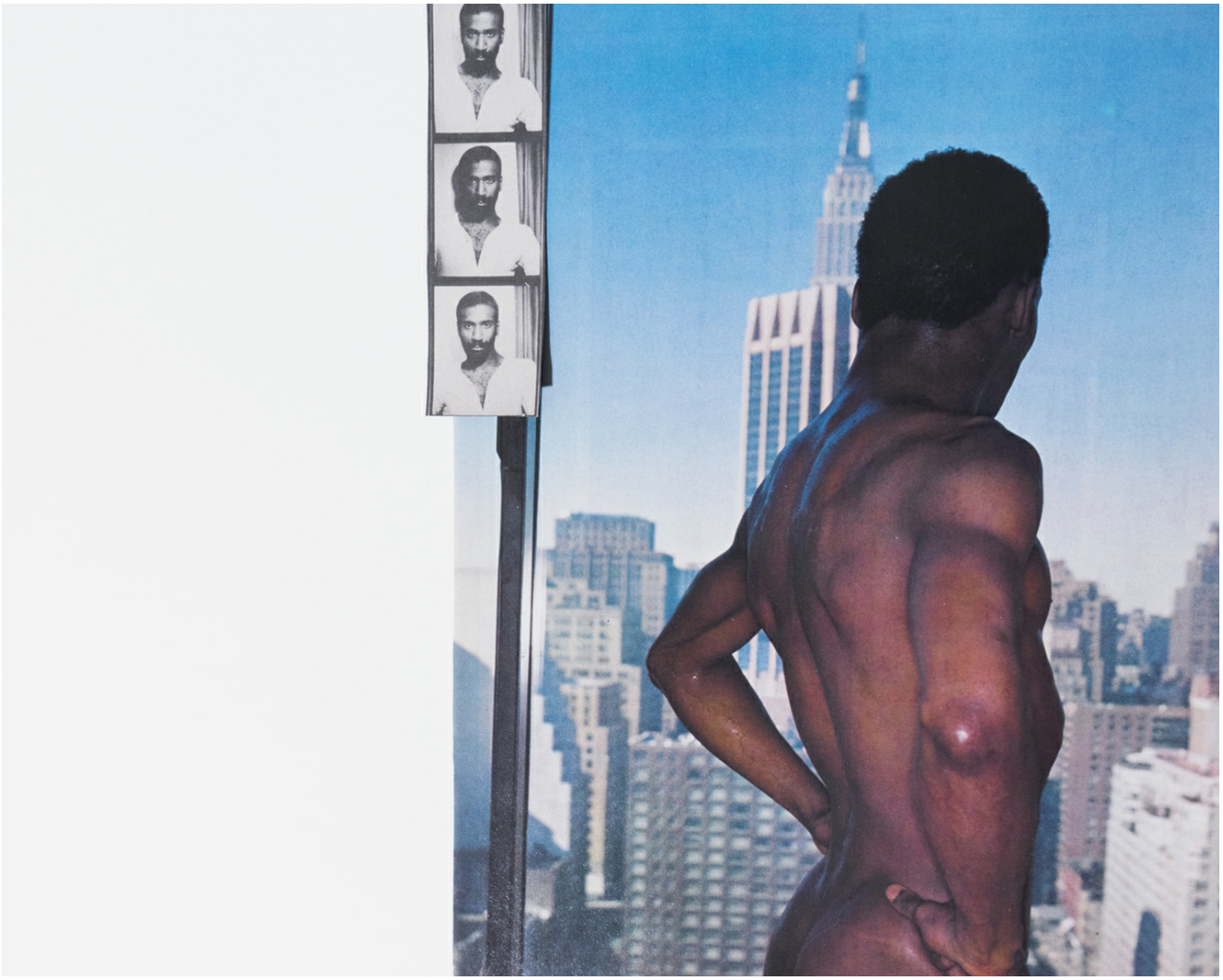
So the aesthetic of gay culture in the 1970s—it connected with me in a way I wasn’t expecting. Yeah, it’s sexy. It’s amazing and exciting and, in some ways, this really great time in cultural history, but it’s also really sad and devastating because everything would be totally destroyed by AIDS soon after. I was drawn to that. That’s when things really shifted for me. I was dressing men up to look like cool leather men, Robert Mapplethorpe bullshit. I started to look at cultural relics and archives. I just love that kind of work. That’s the kind of work that I’m drawn to, but that work always tends to be straight. It always tends to be somebody like Anne Collier, who is making work about feminism, which is really important and I love that work. Other artists like Erica Baum, these other people who are making work in that vein. I’m like, “God, I love it, but I want to see myself in it.”



That’s really where it started to take off for me. It seems kind of obvious, but making art didn’t really click for me until I figured out how to harness my obsessions in a way that was also very personal. I’ve been doing work about this lost generation of gay men for about six years now. It’s only become really refined, let’s say, in the last two years or so. It’s only recently that I’m like, “No, I can talk about this work. I understand it.” I’ve spent enough time with these ideas and these clichés and tropes, these things that I’m constantly fragmenting and reconstructing and reconsidering, to really understand what I’m doing with them. I use a lot of pornographic magazines, just because that’s a really easy representation. Actually, I shouldn’t say easy—it’s actually a very complicated representation—but a readily available one.

During the ’70s and ’80s gay culture is still mostly considered a subculture. Looking in magazines like *Blueboy*, *Torso*, *Honcho*—any kind of these brown paper bag magazines—you’ll see a little glimpse of a lifestyle, a way of living. It’s like a peek into this other world. It’s also still very narrow, because it’s a small scale, but they were still mass produced. It’s magazines with these very specific representations of this idealized gay white man, each that looks very similar to the next and perpetuates that clone mentality of the West Village and The Pines and Fire Island. It’s fun to play around with that because things quickly get really complicated.

Looking at a magazine from 1976 through the lens of 2016, I’m going to see a very problematic representation of gender, sexuality, identity in general. It’s still really cool though. I get excited by complicated imagery. I just like the look of the images too. When I started this project was basically when I stopped photographing actual people. It became about assembling these collages and photographing them—photographs of photographs. Images of images.



What does looking at these images from the ’70s say about the way the aesthetics of desire have changed over the years?

The aesthetics of porn vary wildly if you are talking about ’70s versus the ’80s, ’90s or the 2000s. In the ’90s, it was all about appearing hairless and pumped up. Because of AIDS, there was this thing where men needed to look virile and not at all sick, so they are hitting the gym. I’ve tried to work with those images—to say something using the aesthetic of early 2000s internet pornography for example—and it just doesn’t work. It didn’t feel the same to me.

Speaking to gay culture just before the advent of AIDS is very complicated. It’s a balance of total freedom, what seemed like total liberation, balanced against immediate devastation. For a lot of artists who survived that time, it became very hard to talk about sex simply as pleasure.

I think everybody handles trauma differently. I think oftentimes it’s just that you shut down to protect yourself. Whenever I’m making my work it’s this fine balance. I’m making work that’s a memorial in some sense. It’s an image, it’s a record of maybe this model who’s no longer here, or it’s a memorial to the person who originally consumed the imagery. That’s sort of how I think about it, it’s the people who originally consumed the images and where they are now, but there need to be to be these moments of levity, right? There have got to be playful elements to it, because there has to be pleasure. It’s not just, okay, everybody is dead. There needs to be that balance and striking it… sometimes that’s really hard to do.

You are also making work for a generation of people who may have never experienced AIDS firsthand. We live in a time when many gay men in their twenties have never actually known anyone who died of AIDS. How do you address that?

I’ve definitely had talks before with people who will look at my work or do a studio visit, and be like, “Oh, this guy is so fucking hot!” I’m like, “Oh! Oh, *that’s* how you’re going to

read the work.” I definitely am pushed up against this idea sometimes. As I see it, I’m taking pornography and I’m turning it into art. It’s about recontextualizing—making something new out of something old. As that happens, there’s a lot of things that I crop out, both literally and metaphorically. The one thing you’re not going to see a lot of in my work is a dick. You’re not going to see a hard cock. It’s not going to happen, because you can get that anywhere. I’m so desensitized to it now, it’s almost more shocking to not see it.



By removing the overt sexual explicitness of an image, where you’re left to sort of contemplate and look at somebody as an actual person—or perhaps even as a stand-in for a person—I’m asking you to do something you normally wouldn’t do with pornography. That being said, I realize that my relationship to pornography might be different than most people. I just have a really long history with it. My mom and dad ran a porn store when I was growing up. I’ve never seen it as something that’s bad.

I’ve never seen it as something that’s dirty, so the culture wars of the ’90s were kind of funny to me. I walked around our house and there’d be boxes of bullwhips in the living room, or dildos that my dad was giving out to people in the neighborhood, which I realize is very unusual. My undergrad thesis project involved photographing my mom and dad as they were separating, but still running an adult sex toy store together. It’s kind of interesting to think about my relationship to pornography. I’m amazed it took me this long to realize this is the work that I am really passionate about making, when I was always around it in a weird way.

Not that your work should be required to bear this responsibility, but I wonder if one of the successes of your work also involves educating people about a specific aspect of gay history that doesn’t generally get talked about all that much now.

Obviously, I have to meet the work where there's enough room for interpretation, so when people come to the work they can draw their own conclusions from it. I don't want everything to be so on the nose. I can't help but look at vintage gay pornography from this era and see it through the lens of AIDS, because these men are frolicking, they are having fun. There is this innocence and naiveté that is so beautiful to witness, especially knowing everything that was just about to happen to this culture, which is so devastating and heartbreaking. It's so complicated, all these dueling and conflicting images and messages. The way that a 22 year old might read my work is probably a bit different than the way I read it as a 30 year old man, versus you as a 42 year old man. I've seen that. As an artist, you don't always have control over that… and that's fine.

I recently showed the work to Joe Lovett, the director of *Gay Sex in The '70s*. Seeing his reaction as an older gay man who lived with that generation and also lived through AIDS was very interesting. Sometimes they're a little bit caught off guard by it. Why are you making this work? What is your reasoning behind this? Once I explain what my point of entry is, which is deeply personal, things change a little bit… but there is often still a wall. Sometimes people see themselves in this work, especially people who survived that period in gay history.



I'm often really shocked and mostly pleasantly surprised by people's reactions to the work. I think a lot about what the work means and the responsibility that I have. It's not all fantasy. It's not all just, "Oh, this is a really hot guy. Let's memorialize him." These are representations in photography, and photography as a medium in itself is also a subject in the work. It's about how images exist within time and how their meaning can change over time. The work I'm making from this material is wildly different from that original source material that was created in 1976. What's it going to look like to us in 2036? It's going to look so much different than it looks now. We're going to read it through an even more

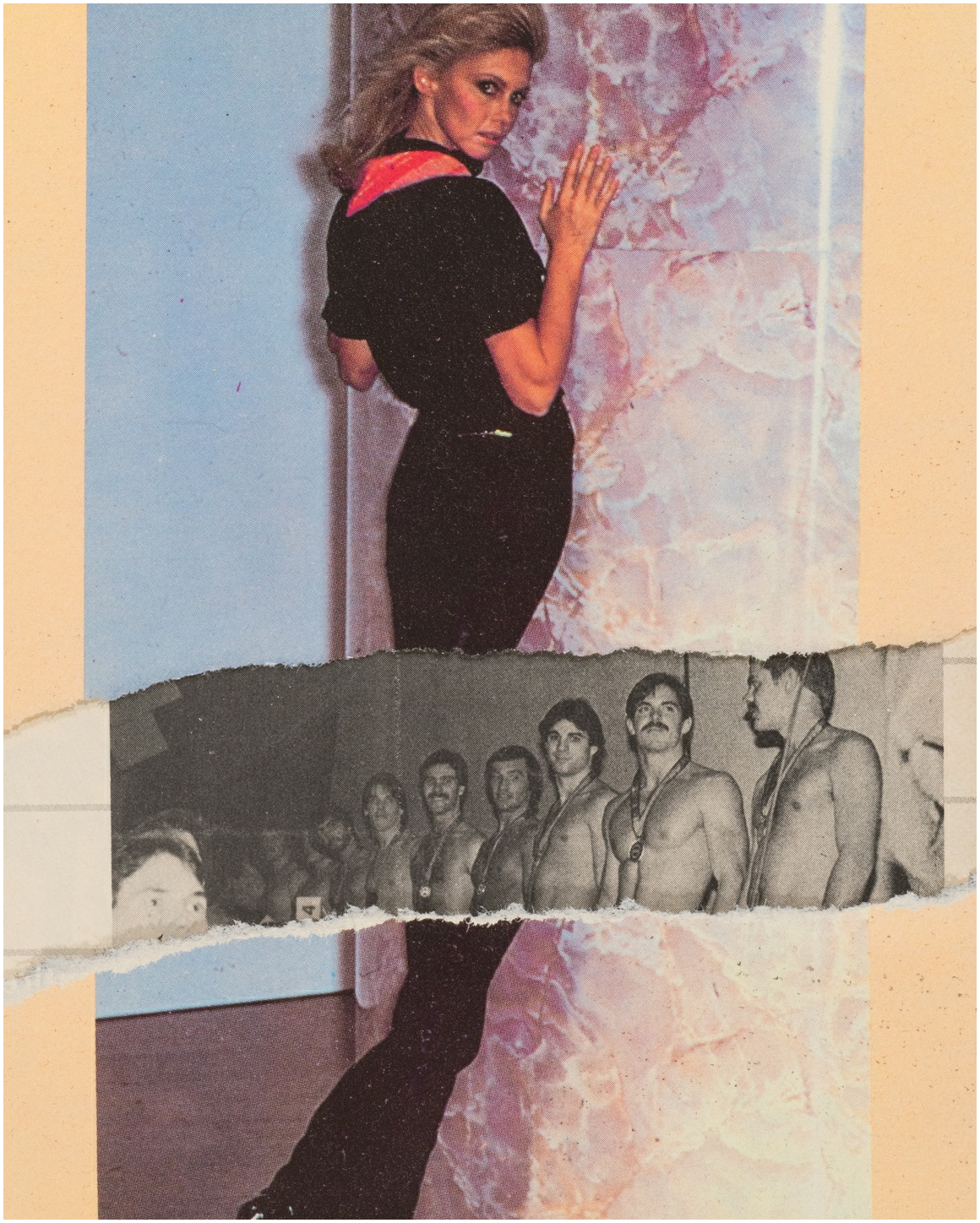
different lens. I hope I'm lucky enough to live that long and see how the imagery changes, because photography has that amazing ability to shift and redefine itself. That's so exciting to me. I think that's why I'm so drawn to photography and, specifically, to complicated imagery. It might get even more complicated in 20 years time. Representation is a huge problem in the work—there's a lot of gay white men, there's not a lot of people of color in the work. When they do appear, they generally appear in a very fetishized way, so I have specific pieces that talk about that. I think that's important. It's important to acknowledge that. I don't work from magazines like *Black Inches* or *Latin Inches*, because even the titles alone are so problematic that me as a white person making work about that would be, I think, really horrific.

Still, I find these issues of representation interesting and I try to address those things. It's important. I want people to feel like they can connect from the work and they're not alienated from it, even though it's so specific. It's about gay life in the '70s and in the early '80s. I'm already losing a ton of people that won't be interested in the work. "Ah, fuck this. I don't want to see it." Sometimes it's really fun to sort of seduce them. Get them to look at something without realizing what, exactly, they're looking at. Once they look at it, hopefully they're like, "Oh, that's really formally beautiful." I use formalism a lot in my work, because if people can't get into the subject matter, maybe they can look at it from a formal aspect and they can respect it that way. Plus, I just love formalism. (*laughs*) Everybody wants to put a whole bunch of shit in the frame right now. It's like the dominant trend in photography right now is, "How much stuff can we photograph at the same time?" I want to distill imagery. I want to distill it down to its most essential forms. What is the most important part of this photograph that I found? Is it a gaze that the model has? Is it the way they're holding themselves in the frame? Is it how they're interacting with their space? What is it that's really poignant about the image that stands out? I'll meditate on imagery, sometimes for years. Once I decide to use the images—once you start to cut them with an X-ACTO knife and dissect them—there's no going back.

Your work also addresses the ephemeral nature of photography itself. Photographs as physical objects that you can hold and touch. Photographs as containers of memory, as markers in time, as documents. Those are the aspects of photography that often feel lost in the digital age, where most images are never printed and only exist in some kind of digital cloud. You are dealing with things that exist on paper.

There's a fragility to physical photographs. These photographs, these collages, these arrangements that I make on the paper before I photograph them, they're so unstable. Literally, you can breathe the wrong way and they'll blow away. I really love that. I love the fragility of the process where you can't help but appreciate the tactility of it. You're right, nobody prints photographs anymore, which is kind of sad. All of your images are contained on your iPhone, or iCloud, or a jump drive or a hard drive, so for me, I try to print my work as much as possible. Also, who buys a porn magazine these days? Nobody buys a porn magazine, everyone can look at pornography on their iPhone. So the medium I'm working from also feels oddly archaic.

But I don't think technology is necessarily bad. On the flipside of this—a 16 year old that has an iPhone can discover their sexuality in a new way, unlike anything I ever could've imagined at 16 years old living in rural Pennsylvania. It's wild to me. I remember the back pages of the *Village Voice*, those raunchy "sex wanted" ads between men and the ads for phone sex operators. I remember going to the payphone, putting some quarters in, listening, waiting for a voice, and then hanging up and running away.



There is something truly archival about your work. From a distance your images look like collages, but then you realize that they are photographs of these assemblages that are really delicately placed together.

That's the other thing—even the way that I photograph is just kind of really nerdy, but I photograph using a stand, which is very much an archivist thing to do, and the process involves photographing from above and looking down at these very delicately arranged things. It took me a really long time to figure that out. Originally I was putting pictures on the wall and holding them up and taking pictures like a jackass. Now I photograph them like an archivist might. In a weird way, there's something almost performative about what I do. I've got stacks and stacks of magazines. I can't begin to tell you how many I have, but I have some in the closet, I have some in the living room right now. The material is everywhere. I keep every piece of paper that I cut, I know that sounds crazy, but I always find new ways to re-use things. I'll have remnants of a photograph that I cut something perfectly from and then it winds up re-framing another image beautifully, and then the text on that page works with the image I'm juxtaposing it with. It's sort of never ending. I always discover new things, new images, even after I thought that I'd gleaned everything possible from a specific old magazine. When I went up to Syracuse this summer for work, I took a roll-on suitcase full of magazines. I didn't put any clothes in it. It was really just about the material. I needed to get the material to where I was going. The material gets treated better than I do sometimes, and I constantly troll the internet to see where I can get new stuff.

Are there particular models that you have an affinity for? Or whose images you find particularly haunting or beautiful?

There are some models that you feel you sort of know after seeing their images come up again and again in so many magazines after so many years. Some of them were actual gay porn stars,

like Al Parker. I did an entire project based on him. I picked him because he looks like Jesus and was just this exceptionally beautiful man. He passed away from complications from AIDS in 1991. I created this project called Male Fantasy Icon. It was a runner up for the Aperture Portfolio prize, which really helped get my work out there. It was shortly after graduate school, and it was the first project I had done post-graduate school with the same themes of HIV, AIDS, and speaking to and for this specific generation of gay men. I bought this one magazine and on the cover was Al Parker's face and it said, "Still the reigning unchallenged Male Fantasy Icon: Al Parker." The project sort of wrote itself.

5 of Pacifico Silano's favorite things:

Ronnie Spector of The Ronettes.

I got a tattoo of Ronnie Spector after reading her memoir *Be My Baby*. Someone on Facebook shared a picture of that tattoo with her people online and they let me attend a taping of her performing on a local radio show. She sang 3 feet away from my face and I just about died! It was one of the highlights of my life. She's such an inspiration with everything she's been through. Plus I love that she's the original "Bad Girl."

Can't Stop The Music

The Village People made a movie at the peak of their fame and it was AMAZING. It's one of the best/worst movies I've ever seen and it always makes me smile. Critics attribute this film with the death of disco but I don't care. I love it!

Cherry Grove, Fire Island

It's a place full of such rich LGBTQ history and we are incredibly lucky to have it. I'm always so inspired when I'm out there and have gotten some of my best ideas for projects while visiting. Everything is just better there. Even garbage picking! I once found a Dionne Warwick record still shrink wrapped and a copy of Amy Fisher's biography in someone's trash.

Giovanni's Room by James Baldwin

It blows my mind that this book was published in 1956. I can't imagine what it must have been like to be gay and put this story out into the world when James Baldwin did.

Anne Collier

One of my favorite artists who looks at the content of imagery around us and how they shape and form our ideas of identity and meaning. It's the simplest looking photographs that are the most complex to unpack and I love that about her work. I've been very inspired by her over the years.

Then I just started collecting of all this ephemera and imagery that I could find on him. He died in 1991, which was right around birth of Photoshop, so I was finding ways to scan the images and re-photograph the images and infuse them with technology, kind of breathe new life into this long forgotten gay icon. It was just really fun, but also really challenging. I was working a lot with a scanner bed when I made that project, so there was a lot of flatness. I equate flatness with death, it's like a flat death when you're using a scanner bed. To be able to use a camera again and photograph with a stand, you get these little subtleties of shadows and depth, and you see the fragility of the paper that you're working with and the material. There is life to it, even when you're dealing with images of people who were lost a long time ago.



Images from the project, "Tear Sheets"

Name
Pacifico Silano

Vocation
Artist, Photographer

Fact

Though he admits that his youthful artistic ambitions were "mostly to make watercolor paintings about Tori Amos," artist and photographer Pacifico Silano has spent the bulk of his career investigating and documenting the lost histories of the LGBTQ community. His work has been exhibited in group shows, including The Bronx Museum of the Arts; CONTEXT, Miami; Oude Kerk, Amsterdam; and ClampArt, New York City. He is a winner of the Individual Photographer's Fellowship from the Aaron Siskind Foundation and a Finalist for the Aperture Foundation Portfolio Prize, as well as being a 2016 fellow in photography with the New York Foundation for the Arts. For the past few years, he has used vintage gay pornography as one of his primary mediums and sources of inspiration.

