



From genetics to allyship: how queer culture changed the family portrait

A new exhibition, *Kindred Solidarities*, offers a perspective on how LGBTQ+ people have rewritten traditional ideas of family



Christopher Udemezue – *Blue Mountains and The Stain of William Thomas Beckford*.
Photograph: Courtesy of the artist.

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In a [two-minute video](#) produced by the artist Jamie Diamond in 2008, four women and one man gather to pose for what looks like a family portrait. They stand in front of a marble fireplace, in a room adorned with crystal chandeliers. Three of the women shift positions and adjust their hair before settling into smiling poses behind the man and the fourth woman, who are seated.

Despite their apparent familiarity, the five people featured in the video were strangers before filming. Diamond convened them to participate in her Constructed Family Portrait series, which explores “the public image of family, themes of photographic truth, gender, class, culture and identity”, [according to the artist](#).

“The family portrait depicts a particular mythology or stereotypical ideal of a happy life, yet family is an ongoing performance where roles are assigned, with a constant expectation of an audience, both private and public,” Diamond [has written](#) of the series. “Gender and hierarchical norms are enforced through the family, and the act is rehearsed much like a script to a dramatic play.”

Diamond’s video is featured in a new exhibition that seeks to flip the script on family life: [Kindred Solidarities: Queer Community and Chosen Families](#), which opened at the 8th Floor Gallery in Manhattan last Thursday and is on view through January, features more than a dozen mixed-media works that highlight an expanded notion of family – one that derives from queer culture, and is defined by allyship rather than genetics.



Andrea Geyer, *Constellations* (Alice B Toklas and Gertrude Stein with Pepe and Basket). Photograph: Photo by Stan Narten / JSP Art Photography.

“This self-selection of family ... comes from, a lot of times, necessity, but can grow into this absolutely wonderful safety net for people,” said Anjali Nanda Diamond, who co-curated the exhibit with George Bolster.

Many of the artists whose works are featured identify as LGBTQ+ themselves, and all are allies to LGBTQ+ people, according to the co-curators. These identities and allyships shape the artists’ depictions of, and commitments to, their LGBTQ+ subjects: “They’re not documenting or reflecting from an outsider perspective, there isn’t a sense of othering of their subjects – they’re embedded within these communities,” Nanda Diamond said.

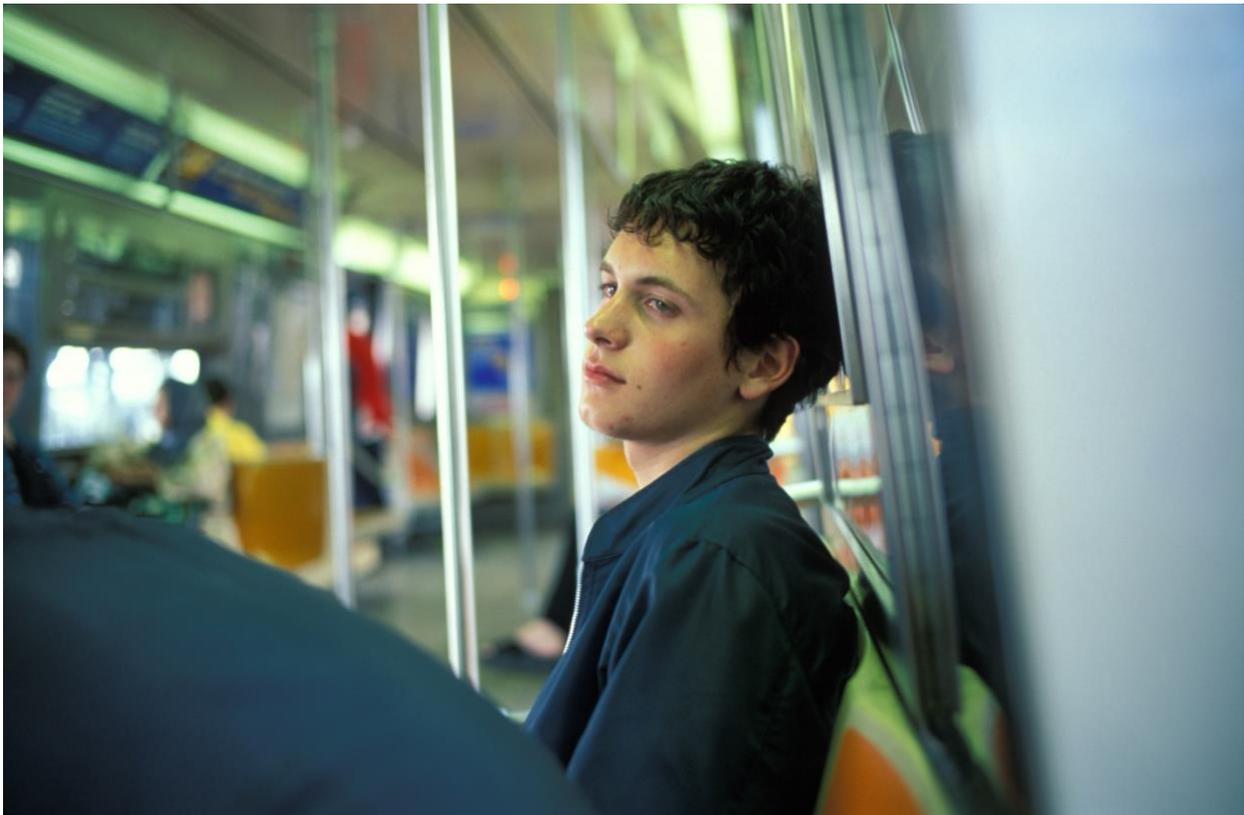
As a result, she added, “you see this will and commitment to community” in the works – some of which seek to forge connections to marginalized people across time.

Through Andrea Geyer’s [Constellations](#) collages, composed of hand-cut archival prints on rag paper, the artist resurrects

the stories of women who shaped the cultural landscapes of their eras but have been lesser-known in history, using the collage form “to reflect on the refraction of their stories”, [Geyer writes](#). Many of the women Geyer depicts also structured their lives beyond the bounds of traditional, heteronormative nuclear families – including the [Ladies of Llangollen](#), two upper-class Irish women, Eleanor Butler and Sarah Ponsonby, whose late 18th- and early 19th-century relationship was known as a “romantic friendship”, and who successfully evaded their families’ encouragements to marry men by living together in Wales instead.

In other works, connections between the artists and subjects are more recent – and more overtly personal, relying on “community-based practices”, according to Nanda Diamond.

In Christopher Udemezue’s two featured digital prints, from 2017, the artist enlists mostly queer or trans friends and community members to depict opposing sides of 18th-century slavery: [in one](#), the arm of William Thomas Beckford – an aristocrat who fled Europe for Jamaica, where he became an enslaver, after his [affair with a young boy was revealed](#) – reaches towards a pair of Black people, whose bodies lean against each other; [another](#) depicts a serene Queen Nanny, leader of the Jamaican Maroons, a community of formerly enslaved Africans.



Nan Goldin - Simon on the Subway, NYC, 1998. Photograph: Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery.

A pair of featured photographs by Nan Goldin, who has [long chronicled LGBTQ communities](#) – [Kenny putting on make-up, Boston](#), taken in 1973, and [Simon on the](#)

subway, NYC, from 1998 – capture quotidian moments that suggest an ease between Goldin and her subjects: “There’s no pretext ... it’s just showing snapshots of daily life, in the most innocuous way, that shows this tenderness, and this idea that there are these happy pockets that have been there [in LGBTQ peoples’ lives],” Nanda Diamond said of the images.

But connection can, indeed, be found within more traditional nuclear families, the exhibit concedes – provided they encourage freedom over constraint. In Narrative Shifter: A Portrait of Julio Salgado, a video installation by artist Carlos Motta focused on Salgado, an undocumented and queer activist, one video – titled Family Life – features Salgado’s Mexican parents explaining how they came to accept his sexuality and identity as an artist.

In doing so, Bolster said, it also illustrates what makes an ally – and what makes a family: “Essentially, allyship is showing solidarity for your family, whoever your family is.”

- Kindred Solidarities: Queer Community and Chosen Families is showing at 8th Floor Gallery in New York until January