

Art

What Does Southern Queerness Look Like?

Artist Chloe Chiasson, who grew up in a small conservative town in Texas, draws from its iconic imagery to make space for queer figures.



by Elaine Velie
18 hours ago



Chloe Chiasson, "The Renegades" (2022), oil, acrylic, wood, Plexiglas, resin, foam, LEDs, porcelain, chain, lipstick, aluminum, canvas on shaped panel, 109 3/4 x 130 x 22 1/2 inches (all photos by Thomas Mueller, courtesy Albertz Benda Gallery)

As New Yorkers across the city celebrate Pride Month, an exhibition explores queerness in parts of the United States where it has not been historically visible. In *Fast Hearts and Slow Towns* at Manhattan's Albertz Benda Gallery, artist Chloe Chiasson, who grew up in a small conservative town in Southeastern Texas, paints queer people into scenes from her own adolescence and familiar pop culture narratives they've been excluded from: sitting in a dive bar, wearing cowboy hats, and drinking Texas's own Shiner beer.

Through large-scale, mixed-media works that jut out from the wall into the gallery, Chiasson seems to ask of her hometown and others like it: What has queerness looked like in the past, what could it look like in the future, and what can it look like now?

Velie, Elaine. "What Does Southern Queerness Look Like?" *Hyperallergic*. 13 June 2022, <https://hyperallergic.com/739492/what-does-southern-queerness-look-like/>

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Growing up in Port Neches, Chiasson said, she didn't know many openly gay people. "I knew that I felt differently from a very young age, but even as I got older, there was no one and nowhere for me to turn to in trying to understand myself and what I was feeling," Chiasson told *Hyperallergic*, adding that she didn't see queerness represented in books or on TV, and there was little discussion of it outside of demeaning jokes.



Chloe Chiasson, "The Eyes of Texas" (2022), oil, foam, canvas on shaped panel, 101 x 128 x 6 inches

In 2017, after completing a Health Promotion and Psychology degree from the University of Texas, Austin, Chiasson made a sudden career shift and moved to New York to pursue an MFA at the New York Academy of Art.

"Until moving here, I had no knowledge of the many people before me, like me, who had resisted and transformed the world for people like me," Chiasson said. "I didn't know about other instances of struggle like mine, whose stories and examples might have strengthened, comforted, and inspired me. Since this realization, it's sort of felt like an exciting duty of mine to contribute to this history. To be engaged in my community and in the fights we are still fighting."

But in the quietness of her hometown, Chiasson rarely came across those stories, so she paints versions of memories from her own teenage years — like covert meetups in a pickup truck and holding her girlfriend's hand in private — and imagines the queer spaces that preceded her own. In "Renegades" (2022), for instance, Chiasson depicts a bar scene that could have been featured in any cowboy movie, replacing the men crowding around the table with women.



Chloe Chiasson, "Blind Spots" (2022), oil, acrylic, Plexiglas, resin, foam, wire, cigarette butts, canvas on shaped panel, 67 x 122 x 6 inches

"Places like where I'm from have always overlooked, ignored, or disowned the actual people in that place — queer communities in towns both small and large," Chiasson said. Because of this history, she sees her home and many similar towns as places of resistance, but she also explores what these towns could become.

"By using Southern and Western imagery and ideas I'm both familiar with and at war with, I am able to create something of a usable past — a past wrought with willful blindness — and a present, both actual and imagined, inclusive and liberated utopia," Chiasson told *Hyperallergic*.

"Though I'm critiquing and challenging, I am also creating a South I didn't have to leave," Chiasson said, adding that she still, of course, loves Texas.



Chloe Chiasson, "Shallow Be Thy Game" (2022), oil, acrylic, resin, wire, canvas on shaped panel. 65 1/2 x 117 1/4 x 8 1/2 inches

Throughout the exhibition, Chiasson melds detailed painting and sculptural reliefs to depict androgynous figures. With large hands and feet, they exude a confidence that feels distinctly male — in “Shallow Be Thy Game,” a woman “man-spreads” on a couch — and makes the protagonists of her works as imposing as the repressive societal restrictions they reject.

Chiasson’s choice of medium, a mix of painting and woodworking, is also transgressive in its approach to manual artistic production.

“As someone who grew up in a space where gender roles were and still are enforced, how hands in traditional feminine roles are the hands that make the meals and maintain the household, I try and challenge but also reimagine them in the way I make my work, in the way I use my hands,” Chiasson said. She added that learning woodwork has altered her own mindset.

“It’s helped me to further break past the ideals of where I’m from of what is ‘men’s work’ and what is ‘women’s work,’ this idea of the ‘less than’ capabilities of women compared to men, or of what even constitutes a ‘woman’ or a ‘man,’ really,” Chiasson continued.

For “Sunday Confessions” (2022), Chiasson built a shallow wooden photo booth in which two cowboy boot-clad figures kiss, framed by a velvet curtain pulled open. It’s the only work in the show that portrays an act of queer love in public.



Chloe Chiasson, “Sunday Confessions” (2022), acrylic, oil, metal, wood, fiberglass, resin, paper, LEDs, Plexiglas, Velcro, canvas on shaped panel with video installation, 126 1/2 x 120 x 7 1/4 inches

As Chiasson conjures real and imagined environments where queer people can feel safe and welcome, she prompts reflection on the many such spaces that are disappearing. For years, lesbian bars have been closing their doors at an astonishing rate. The Lesbian Bar Project, an initiative launched in 2020 to help save the nation's remaining lesbian bars, estimates that there are a little over 20 left in the country (at the end of the 1980s, there were over 200). America's first lesbian bars are thought to have emerged in the 1930s, and a 2019 project sought to document the history of this nightlife and its patrons.

A 2021 *New York Times* report cited only three remaining lesbian bars in NYC and delved into the phenomenon, suggesting that the closures signal the end of an era when a more oppressive and pervasive form of homophobia forced queer women to meet in locations explicitly labeled as lesbian spaces. The shutterings have also been explained as an effect of increasing acceptance of gender-fluid identities and the wider LGBTQ+ community. Lesbian bars are in turn expanding the sexual and gender identities they seek to serve.

But elsewhere in the US, LGBTQ+ rights are under threat. In late March, Florida's governor signed a bill preventing teachers in the state from discussing gender and sexual identity in their classrooms, and an assault on trans rights is underway in Texas.

"I never had a lesbian bar to go to where I grew up, nor a gay bar ... I only had a couple backroads or secret (yet not-so-secret) spots to sit in a car with my girlfriend," Chiasson said. "I didn't feel fully comfortable holding my partner's hand until moving to New York just five years ago, and still in some areas back home or other places in the country, it's a thought that is always there."

"It's that awareness of where we are situated in space, at all times. How we can move or not move, together and individually, at any given point or in any given place," Chiasson continued. "It's about finding space for us wherever we are. In this show specifically, finding that space in places like where I'm from. And remembering that this space is not absolute or fixed, but constantly produced and reproduced in how it is all at once created and lived."