

# Portraits of Famous Queer Artists

SARAH HUNTER



*Daphne Du Maurier, 9.5 x 12.5", ink, oil stick and collage on paper, 2012. Willa Cather, India Ink on Paper, 8.5" x 10.5", 2012.*



*Gertrude Stein, 9 x 12", ink and collage on paper, 2008; Colette, 9 x 11", ink on paper, 2012;  
Bessie Smith, 8.75 x 11", watercolor, ink and oil stick on paper, 2012.*

In my teens and twenties I was drawn to many gay male and female writers but didn't realize I myself was gay. Coming of age in Toronto, I had read most of the collected works of authors like Christopher Isherwood, James Baldwin, Tennessee Williams, E.M. Forester, Katherine Mansfield and Colette by the time I was in my mid-twenties. When I came out in my late forties, I discovered more lesbian writers and artists including May Sarton, Willa Cather, Ann Bannon, Patricia Highsmith, and Isabel Miller.

Before coming out I had already started a project of portraits of various types of people including more well know figures such as Dickens, James Joyce, and historical figures like Elizabeth the First. Then I realized it would be interesting to do an ongoing series of queer artists that had inspired me over the years including writers, painters, composers, dancers and film makers.

Many of these figures were important role models for me as a young gay artist. As a gay person, this was very significant for me as I did not have these kind of overt role models growing up as a teenager. My experiences were largely invisible and here were writers putting into words tangible proof that what I was thinking and feeling was viable and worthwhile, even holy in some way.

My coming out process led to the creation of this art work and an increasing ability to celebrate and express my creativity as a woman. Before this time in my life, I felt I often had to keep myself small, not offend anyone and cater or conform to those around me. As a mature woman, I now feel the confidence to become fully who I am and explore all the aspects of self including, sexuality, creativity and need for connection with a female-centred sense of community.

These portraits are of five queer women writers whose work inspired me as a gay woman.

**Daphne du Maurier:** I was drawn to her novel *Rebecca* because I grew up in a family where there were a lot of secrets and there was much that was hidden. The mystery of Rebecca was mesmerizing.

**Gertrude Stein:** I loved her poetry and was intrigued by her relationship with Alice B. Toklas and the fact that they were living together and rubbing shoulders with all the great artists of bohemian Paris in the early part of the twentieth century. I was fascinated not only by her writing, but also by photographs of their home and the world they had created for themselves.

**Bessie Smith:** When I first went to study at university in the United States, I was introduced to many African American jazz artists. I remember feeling that the pain and anguish they expressed with their music reflected back to me much of the conflicted and confusing feelings I had about love and attraction as a young gay person. Those songs expressed in their words and melodies all the longing I felt but could not admit to myself at that time.

**Colette:** *In My Mother's House* is an evocative story about a daughter's relationship to her mother as a young child. There is a touching description of her separating out from her mother for a moment and then being enfolded back in the safety of her mother's small circle of life that encompasses her whole world as a young child. I was able to relate to that feeling of never wanting to be out of my mother's reach or far away from her.

**Willa Cather:** I read her novel *The Song of the Lark* and related to the depiction of a young woman's struggle to follow her dreams: to leave her family and find her way as an artist in the big city. I, too, was struggling to break away from my family and establish myself as a separate entity from those who had raised me. This novel really inspired me as an aspiring gay woman artist.

This series is ongoing and I plan to continue to explore queer artist portraiture depicting a variety of gay, lesbian, queer, bi, trans, and two-spirited figures from the historical past to the modern day.

*Sarah Hunter is based in Toronto. She has been a visual artist and art educator for the past 20 years. She has had numerous art exhibits in Canada, the U.S., and abroad. Visit her website at: <[www.turtleart.ca](http://www.turtleart.ca)>.*

## GIANNA PATRIARCA

### Maria Grazia and Naples

if i could  
i would take you  
back to the snow  
Brunswick Avenue  
where we grew up  
take you back to  
Jimmy in the backyard  
pumpkins in October  
mustard on your hamburger  
and all those apple pies

the hills and sweet jasmine  
linger here  
stars idle on the  
head of Vesuvius

among these ruins  
love songs and tortured sea  
a sadness  
too deep to excavate

courage  
keeps you young  
beautiful

don't surrender  
to this place  
don't give your heart  
completely

sweet tongued cherubs  
hanging about in the  
oleander gardens  
have been known to  
lie

*Gianna Patriarca's poetry and prose appears earlier in this volume.*