

Beauty will save the world. But can art change it?

A look at the festival that has been celebrating protest and equality “in all walks of life” for the past decade

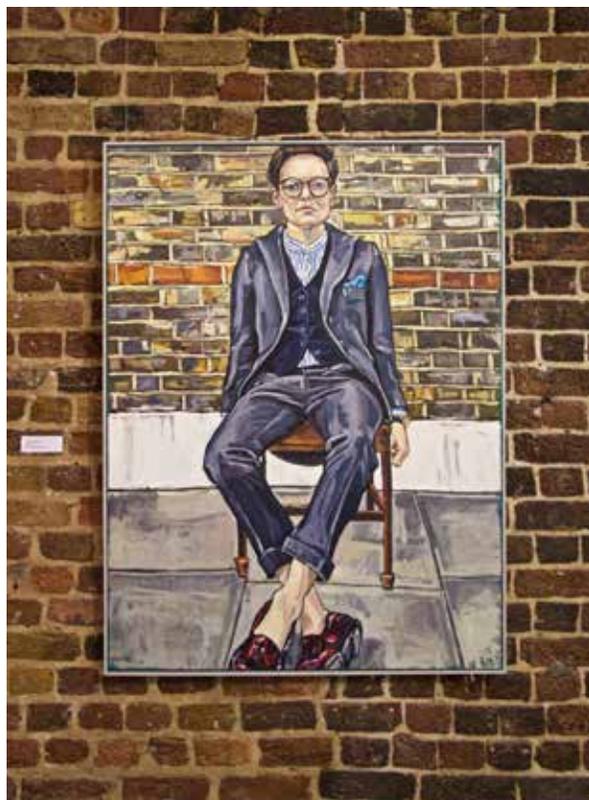
BY ANA SENCENKO

“Art can profoundly change the way an individual thinks. It can shock and startle. It can educate. And it can be a catalyst for change,” says Sarah Jane Moon, a painter specialising in portraiture that explores sexuality and gender.

Together with many other multi-disciplinary artists, she has gathered for an annual event celebrating the LGBTQI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex) art community, the Gaywise FESTival (GFEST).

Celebrating its 10th anniversary this year, GFEST started in 2007 as a result of LGBTQI cross-art workshops and residencies organized from 2003-2006.

“We used to have showcases of works produced after each residency. These showcases looked like mini festivals, so we thought why not run a fully-fledged festival - an annual event that would showcase the amazing talent that exists in LGBTQI artistic community?” says Nirajan Kamatkar, artistic director of the festival and its organiser, the Wise Thoughts arts charity.



SJ Weston, by Sarah Jane Moon

The festival's main event was an arts exhibition at the Menier Gallery near London Bridge, running from 13th to 18th November. The small yet deceptively spacious venue had an intimate feel that was brought to its visitors by the selection of the showcased artwork, as well as Nirajan himself who kindly greeted anyone walking in and navigated visitors through the stands.

One of the most outstanding exhibits was a wall dedicated to portraits and self-portraits of the artists who have participated in the GFEST in the past decade. The collection was far from complete as the overall number of participants has exceeded 700.

“London is the cultural capital of the world right now – there is no better place to be”

said Nirajan when talking about self-discovery and opportunities, which this year's theme was dedicated to.



Goodnight my darkest friend,
by Jason Carr



Nirajan Kamatkar

GFEST was not just about art. The festival also included film screenings, live performances and debates, all of which celebrated people being different and unique.

Nirajan highlighted that the importance of these events lies far beyond fighting for the legal rights, as there is a need to address the social and cultural equality for LGBTQI people “in all walks of life”.

Sarah Jane Moon is one of the art-warriors, protesting with her work for a brighter future: “My own practice is largely celebratory and stands in opposition to the histories of our community being represented as other in popular culture, the media and the arts...” the New Zealand artist says.

“We have had so many stories of queer people ending up miserable or dead in support of dubious moralising. I seek to paint strong, independently minded individuals in my work and to show them in a positive light.”