From Anger to Pride: The Evolution of Homo Riot

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By Homo Riot, Contributor
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I am a street artist. More specifically, I am a gay street artist. In 2008, after the passage of Prop 8, the California ballot initiative that amended the state constitution to recognize only marriages between men and women, I took to the streets. Armed with a stack of posters and a bucket of wheat paste and driven by my rage against the puritanical supporters of the proposition, I blanketed Los Angeles with images of bearded men kissing. I had only one goal associated with this act of anarchy: to piss off all the homophobes and religious nut jobs in my city.

My belief was, and still is, that that vote to take away the option of marriage for gays and lesbians was mostly a reaction to fear -- fear that if homos were allowed to legally marry and have their marriages recognized by the state as equal to those of straight people, then all manner of depravity would follow. Drag queens would parade outside churches, leather-clad men in chaps would fondle each other in front of Walmarts, and tattooed dykes with strap-ons would aggressively seek to convert teenagers to the "homosexual lifestyle." So I told myself that if that's what they were scared of, then I would bring it to them.

In the beginning my imagery was aggressive and unabashed. Bears with big dicks, bald and muscle-bound go-go boys with baseball bats and the occasional silhouette of guys giving blow jobs were all part of my repertoire. This strong gay imagery, sometimes threatening and hostile, loomed over street corners, appeared at bus stops and covered abandoned buildings. It was very cathartic for me, and from the reaction it got on the streets, it struck a chord, both with the haters (who would viscerally tear and scratch at the kissing men and offensive penises) and the fans (who almost immediately began taking pictures of my work and uploading them to social media)

But art that is simply meant to shock and anger, like a life consumed by hate, is ultimately empty and valueless. So when I began to get feedback via emails from gays and lesbians who applauded my work and thanked me for my efforts, I embraced the reality that I was communicating not just to the ignorant Prop 8 supporters but to my queer brothers and sisters. Without knowing it, I was bringing joy to people.

Hardly a day goes by now that I don't get an email from someone who shares with me an experience of seeing my work and having a chuckle or feeling some pride. Sometimes it's an out and proud guy just sending kudos, other times a young queer asking how she can get involved and plaster her own city, but sometimes it's a message from a teenage boy telling me how my work encourages him and gives him a sense that he's not alone. That is powerful to me, because as a young gay kid I felt very alone, very isolated and convinced that I would never be

able to live a life of honesty and openness, and that memory drives my work today. We must constantly push our visibility. Being present on Glee and Project Runway is great, but it isn't enough. Being out, proud and visible has far-reaching effects, and the benefits and ramifications could affect gays and lesbians in ways you can't imagine. With my own street art, I had no idea of the impact it would have on people.

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Sometimes, when trying so hard to do one thing, you realize that the outcome has a life and mind of its own. The thing that you expected to happen as a result of your actions actually turns into something you never expected.