

FOR US, BY US

Six artists on the verge, united through the power of mentorship.

By Shira Levine



The Performer

"At this point in life, I just feel like a cultural worker," jokes writer and actor **Jess Barbagallo**. "It's my job to make art and that takes many forms." The 33-year-old originally from Cato, NY—a town near Syracuse of just under 600 people—first dove into the arts acting in high school musicals. "After that, I studied theater at NYU and right out of college I was drafted to join the ensemble Big Dance Theater.

Working in NYC's downtown theater scene ever since, Barbagallo is primarily focusing on the stage today. "This summer is all about me performing." That means trips to Portugal, Brussels, Germany, and Paris for a role in Samuel Beckett's *Endgame* plus an adaptation of Don DeLillo's *The Body Artist* at NYC's Abrons Theater.

What inspires the uber-prolific artist today? Poet Stacy Szymaszek, for one. She was Barbagallo's mentor during Queer-Arts inaugural year. After that, the list is long. Jess says: "A need to support myself in a costly world, curiosity, and the desire to have new experiences and come into contact with new people and new ideas. Being contained inside a formal structure—the theater—in order to play and investigate other modes of being. Doing theater is the opportunity to test out certain life philosophies and be changed in the process. It reminds me I am alive and improves the quality of my life and I think maybe the lives of others."



The Painter

After working for years in her 20s at a 9-to-5 job, **Maia Cruz Palileo** soon realized what her life was missing. Art! "I took a part-time job on the weekends working as an assistant to an artist," she says. "Being in his studio made me realize that I wanted that for myself." Today, her paintings, drawings, and fresco-sculpted installations reflect an exploration of her Filipina-American hybrid heritage, with inspiration culled from old family photos mixed with recollections from her grandparents.

"I began inserting figures into those landscapes," says the 38-year-old Brooklyn College graduate and Chicago native. "I play with the globalizing idea of the Philippines being home despite me growing up here and never living there. My work is also representational, with brown people in the forefront. It examines themes like immigration and assimilation—how those things can disappear. I hope my work helps them to not disappear."

With Queer-Arts mentor and artist, Chitra Ganesh, Palileo gained both a role model and a dear friend. "It's not often you find someone to have your back in the art world," she says. "It also expanded my community of queer artists. I'd worried that doing this program meant my work had to be about queer issues when it isn't. Now I know that doesn't matter. It just needs to be created by me, a queer person."

Each artist that follows possess amazing talent and a unique vision they're bringing to the world. All of them were also past members of Queer|Art|Mentorship. Based in New York City and now in its seventh year,



The Visual Artist

It's the physicality of **Monstah Black** that immediately captivates. His collision, or "radical juxtaposition" of audio and visual art as delivered through the lens of the black male experience provokes a wide spectrum of emotions. Pain. Pleasure. Celebration. Mourning. Like his creative inspirations—Prince, Grace Jones, and David Bowie—the Virginia-native, born Reginald Ellis Crump, defies boundaries with ease, be it as a choreographer, musician, or club-kid hero.

Black's career-defining work, a 45-minute film and soundtrack titled, *The Cotton Project*, is what he describes as a "meeting of Erykah Badu and Bjork in the living room of Parliament Funkadelic." Mashing pain with revelry into a journey that unfolds in front of people is Black's attempt to chronicle the black American struggle.

"My art remixes images and sounds through the lens of a cis-gendered African-American queer male," he says. "It's my attempt to build a fanciful, mythological, abstract fairytale based on the grueling truths of American history. It's a wolf in sheep's clothing. It sparkles, it turns you on, but when you get home and you're lying in bed, right before you drift off, it opens your mind like a lotus flower."

the LGBT mentorship pairs emerging and established artists in a year-long program where they exchange and refine ideas and ultimately produce a work in one of five fields: Film, Literature, Performance, Visual Art, and Curatorial Practice.

For more on the Queer|Art|Mentorship program, a calendar of incredible events you can attend, or an application to join their ranks, go to queer-art.org. (Hurry! Submissions for the 2017-2018 cycle are due by July 31, 2017.)

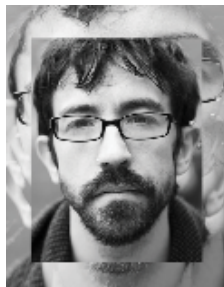


The Poet

Tommy Pico grew up on the Viejas Indian Reservation of the Kumeyaay Nation. A resident of Brooklyn today, his writing bridges these vastly contrasting locales. “I used to think about the rez and NYC as being separate worlds because I saw myself as a different person in each,” he says. “As I’ve gotten older and more self-assured, I’ve come to realize the more seamless I see myself, the more seamlessly I can navigate my strange little world.”

His recently completed third book, *Junk*, speaks to the current state of our nation. Pico describes it as break-up poem in couplets that addresses themes of destabilization. “It examines what actually happens to your identity when it’s robbed of a pillar of security,” he says.

Next up? A collaboration on a screenplay. And aptly so, Pico is already digging into the meat of his fourth book, titled *Food*. “I don’t know if I believe in creative inspiration as much as I believe in having a strong work ethic. I’ll get up at 7:30 a.m. on a Saturday and haul my ass out in the rain to my office space, sit down, and stay there. It’s mortifying, it hurts, it’s horrible, it’s hard, it hurts. Did I mention it hurts? But through practice I’ve learned how to ‘harness’ my creativity.”



The Curator

Hugh Ryan always wrote, but he never really committed to making it his profession. That is until eight years ago when he retired from his career as a social worker following nearly a decade of service. “I’d been unable to imagine a life in the arts and was afraid to do it,” says Ryan, 38. “Then I realized a lot of the youth causes I cared so much about, I could address more effectively through writing and art.”

The Irvington, NY, native got his MFA studying the intersection of queer culture and queer history. These days, research and language are his craft; and oral history his affinity—all of which have left Ryan busy curating a number of historic projects. At NYU’s Fales Library, he’s presenting a show about symbolic language. At the Brooklyn Historical Society, there’s a show about the Brooklyn waterfront’s queer history. Ryan’s also publishing a book entitled *When Brooklyn Was Queer*, with St. Martin’s Press.

His biggest inspiration? “Like most folks interested in queer history, I was initially drawn to the subject by a desire to find other people like me. However, the longer I do this research, the more I am driven by discovering dissimilar ideas about sexuality and gender. In acknowledging the vast differences in sexuality across cultures and time periods, I find the potential for change and growth in our modern ways of thinking.”



The Auteur

This is proving to be a very busy year for 33-year-old filmmaker, **Natalia Leite**. She premiered *MFA*, her second feature film at this year’s SXSW. While working the festival circuit and seeking distribution, she’s already plowing into her third feature and juggling pre-production for her web series, *Be Here Nowish*. It’s a long way from her days as a child back in Brazil.

“I was always making art growing up,” she remembers. Today, Leite’s work mirrors her personal life, which has also made it easier to honor the issues that matter most to her. Part of that mission includes a strategic decision to create content that she calls “inclusively curious.” For example, when working on *Be Here Nowish*, she decided to make it a satirical comedy, which, “made the story more accessible to people who are not queer,” says Leite. “I try to not just preach to the converted.”

As for the future, Leite promises she has many more stories to tell. “Each has its own message and journey—most centered around the experience of being a woman and an outsider. When I’m working on a new project, I become obsessed with it. I want to live and breathe that world constantly until it becomes about something much bigger than myself.”