

A Whitman Sampler

Sensitivity and Strength

"As an artist and a lesbian, I want to express the sensitivity and strength I feel are prevalent in women," says Deborah Whitman in a quiet tone that exemplifies the same qualities. "The silkscreen prints I've done are my tribute to women. In my sculptures and sculptured furniture, I apply the softness of the female form either realistically or abstractly."

Transplanted from Binghamton (New York), where she received a bachelor of arts degree from State University College, Debbie is in Colorado to work on a master of fine arts at the University of Colorado in Boulder. She works as a carpenter, silkscreen printer and drafts person to support her education and has won several commissions for her sculpted furniture.

Her work has been exhibited at the Colorado Woman's Festival and at the Velvet Hammer Feminist Bar in Denver.

"Light, touch and comfort are three qualities which are with me at all times whether I'm working in a two- or three-dimensional medium," she notes. "I'm always watching the movement of shape as light crosses over an object. My hands tingle from wanting to touch the energy within an object."



A Commendable Coupling

Three Decades Together

We settled into comfortable chairs in a dark nook of Denver's Hilton Hotel. Mack Watson and John Adams were nervous. Ever since they had responded to an ADVOCATE questionnaire asking if they would be willing to be interviewed, they had been re-evaluating their own closetedness. Later Mack admitted he'd been "scared stiff" to go public.

At the outset of the interview, they had debated whether or not to use pseudonyms. Now, half an hour later, Watson and Adams hesitatingly allow their real names to be used. "We have never really come out of the closet," says Adams. "This is our coming out."

Watson and Adams have been together 29 years, since shortly after they met at a Chicago bar in 1949. As they talk about moving in together in a Chicago suburb, they yield to each other with the easy grace of people who have been together for a long time. Meanwhile, I try to fathom what it must have been like to be gay in Middle America in the early 1950s.

"We lived in what used to be called 'duplexes,' with adjoining backyards," recalls Watson. "The neighbors were all married couples, and our social lives developed around them, really. I don't think anybody ever thought about us being gay, mainly because we were always running off to Africa, and the stereotype was weird back in those days: 'Gay people don't do things like that.' Which is so much baloney."

Adams remembers suburban life in the '50s: "We were accepted as part of the crowd even though we were gay," he says. "In fact, we would have big parties and the whole neighborhood—they were all straight—would come to our house. The parties would last all night, winding up with breakfast the next morning."

John and Mack still live in the suburbs—of Denver, where they now enjoy putting around their comfortable four-story home. When a heart attack eight years ago forced Mack to curtail his activities around the house, John quit his job to handle domestic chores. He is also the neighborhood handyman. "I work for all the women," he says, "painting, fixing up, just about everything I can do." They both cook, and Mack handles the money. The two have won awards for films they made during three jaunts to Africa in the late '50s and '60s. Their home is



crowded with African art objects they brought back with them. John is a fan of old-time radio and has some rare recordings he says are classics. He is also president of a local tape club.

As they grow more at ease, Mack and John talk about coming to terms with their sexuality in the 1940s. "I had always been attracted to guys," recalls Mack, "but I never knew any who were attracted to me or to another guy. It was the Swing Era, lots of big bands all over the country. I became engaged twice; then I suddenly realized it wasn't right. A few years later I met John and we decided to stay together. It was kind of tough, the climate at that time. When Mayor Daley was running Chicago 30 years ago and he decided to close down the bars, they were closed down."

"All through my teens I never even heard the word *homosexual*," says John, "but I knew I was different from other people. I was always 'making' my straight friends. In the Navy they started talking about 'queers,' and that's when I learned the word *homosexual*. I was 21."

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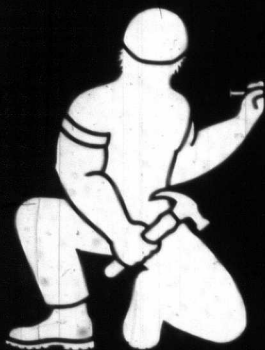
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founded a gay parents group together two years ago, and Setala belongs to the Gay Community Center's speakers bureau and is often invited to talk to classes in human sexuality and psychology at high schools and colleges in the area.

The two have been together for four years and have a lifelong commitment to each other. "We are planning to be buried together, I guess you could say," says Setala. She met Lin Gillham through mutual friends at a New Year's Eve party. "We kind of got acquainted between two and six in the morning," Setala says. "And I haven't been home since," grins Gillham.

Setala was not always so comfortable with her sexuality. She recalls one weekend after her divorce: "I had money in the bank and my car was in good shape and my mother was babysitting my child, and there had just been a big spread in the newspaper about the horrible gay bars in Portland, Oregon, and so I cut the newspaper article out, and I got in the car and went cruising!" It was a fearful experience. "I knew that I was going to be knifed to death, I mean those type of people were really tough," she remembers. "And when I walked into that bar and saw all those women dancing with each other, I thought, 'This is it! This is where I'm supposed to be!'"

Gillham and Setala both appreciate the relaxed attitude toward gay people in Capitol Hill after living in the Denver suburbs ("You just don't see two women together there"). They share the responsibility of raising Setala's daughter, and they think she's lucky to have two mothers. A new school psychologist was puzzled by inconsistent remarks Joanie made about her mother, and called Setala in for a conference. After Setala explained that she and Gillham were gay and raising the child together, the psychologist said, "You're right, the kid's fine, everything's O.K."

Such growing acceptance of being gay is a pleasure for Elver Barker, a fine arts instructor. Barker was one of the founders of the Denver Mattachine Society in the 1950s, an organization that at its height "never topped more than 19 members." The small group nevertheless brought the national Mattachine convention to Denver in 1959, and the big issue among the locals was whether to announce the convention publicly in the press. "We won on that controversial issue," recalls Barker. "We did get excellent coverage in the Rocky Mountain News. It was a real breakthrough."

The Denver Mattachine Society had fellowship dinners, discussion groups and public meetings that were advertised "when the papers would take the notices," notes Barker. "I feel that we were pioneers in the gay liberation movement. We helped lay the groundwork for younger folks now who have plunged ahead, and I am most encouraged by the way the movement has accelerated—most encouraged. It was far beyond what I expected within this period of years."

Does the 58-year-old Barker have any regrets about those early accomplishments? "Of course there are cynics who don't feel we got anything done, but I look back on it all as a very positive thing," he says. "You can't measure your change of thought with a ruler—it's an invisible thing. The change is taking place there in the human consciousness, and you can't measure it with an instrument." ●



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Besides devoting a great deal of time to projects around the house, John and Mack often entertain at home or go out with a group of friends. They socialize with four lesbians who live nearby, the same women who introduced them to the first gay men they met after moving to Denver in 1964. "We seldom go bar-hopping," notes Mack, "but we'll often go out for dinner or a nightclub show, to hear jazz or something like that rather than a specifically gay place."

Mack and John say most of their gay friends are much younger than they are. "I think one reason we're really coming out is that so many of our young friends come to us and say, 'Mack, John, how do you find somebody?' And it's very sad to me nowadays, [that with] as much freedom as we've got, people still aren't finding each other. Most people want somebody, believe it or not, for the rest of their life. But so many of the bars are so gosh-darned loud that you couldn't meet and talk to someone if your life depended on it."

John agrees. "Nowadays, since sex is a lot freer—straight as well as gay—people keep putting off that settling down, until they find it's almost too late. We have friends in Boulder approaching 35-36, and they're getting a little desperate because they haven't found Mr. Right. But you're never going to find your knight in shining armor. Mack and I have our fights, our likes and dislikes, just like any other couple has."

"What is their advice to people looking for a long-term relationship? 'The most important thing that I would like to get across to young people,' says Mack, 'is this: try to talk to each other, try to communicate, because, by God, you're all going to get middle-aged and it's a hell of a lot nicer on a cold January night to have somebody in the same bed with you.'"

How has their relationship changed over the years? "I think it's deeper than it's ever been. Instead of getting worse I think it's gotten better," says Mack. "Our relationship has been mostly monogamous, though we've had three ways."

"Well, I have a roaming eye," chuckles John. "When Mack and I first got together I used to sneak out and he would get very angry with me. If he did the same thing I would get angry with him, too!"

"By the way, there is sex after 50," adds Mack, "but not as often as when you're 25, of course. And I think it's also important to sleep in the same bed; it strengthens your relationship. There's an awful lot to be said for just sleeping together, and I mean just sleeping. It's a very warm, wonderful feeling, and the older I get the more I enjoy it."

"As far as our sex life is concerned," remembers John, "when we first got together we'd even have sex in the kitchen before we left for work in the morning. This meant sex about three times a day, which finally slowed down. Although I love Mack very much, I'm not an affectionate person," says John. "He shows the affection. When we sleep together he has to sleep with his arms around me. We have a queen-sized bed, but he's on my side all night long. It's just one of those things," he says philosophically.

Looking back over their three decades together, John and Mack are content and comfortable in each other's presence. "I'd say this to any young gay couple: Sure, you're going to have your fights, but just don't walk out. Stick with it, because it gets better, it gets easier. Sure, John and I get mad at each other and we holler at each other sometimes. But I wouldn't consider living without him, and I don't think he'd consider living without me."

"It's worked because we've made it work and it's been damned hard work at times; you still always have outside pressure—whether professional or social—because you're living a different lifestyle, although it's one that's gradually becoming more and more accepted."

When I called back to ask permission to publish photos of him and John, Mack said jubilantly, "You can do anything you want. Since I decided to come out, I feel so good. A tremendous weight has been lifted from my shoulders. We're really proud of who we are."

—Scott Anderson
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