

Art **Reviews**

# Crocheting a Queer Vision of Art History

by Jillian Steinhauer  
February 24, 2016



Support Hyperallergic's independent arts journalism. Become a member today >



Caroline Wells Chandler's "Zack" (2016), hand-crocheted assorted wool, 30" x 22"; installed at Lord Ludd (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic unless otherwise noted)

PHILADELPHIA — Just as you're rounding the corner, lamenting the fact that you must, in fact, climb another set of stairs, a smiling face greets you. There, at the top of your next flight, is a curious crocheted creature with legs but no arms; a vertical line through its crotch that could represent, alternately, a penis, vagina, or bathing suit decoration; and a hot-pink crescent mouth and ocean-blue dot eyes, all looking like they were smeared on with MS Paint. He appears to be caught mid-stride, jogging into the gallery the way one might move down a beach with delight. "Let's go!" he seems to say. Though he doesn't have hands or arms, a lock of hair and his whole body seem to point the way.



Caroline Wells Chandler, "Frostina" (2016), hand-crocheted assorted wool, 74" x 92" (click to enlarge)

This is "Zack" (2016), one of Caroline Wells Chandler's *Beach Bois*, who are on view in the artist's solo exhibition at the gallery Lord Ludd. The show features a cast of characters in keeping with the brightly colored, crocheted, genderqueer figures for which Chandler has become known. There's "Frostina" (2016), who bears scars from a double mastectomy

FTM top surgery and holds his ankles in a jump split; his genitals, which may be a penis or a vagina — it's unclear and, more importantly, unimportant — radiate a rainbow, while a pink cape hangs from his shoulders, anointing him a queer superhero. There are the "Beach Bums" (2015), whom you could mistake for stereotypical beach-bro-bums with backward baseball hats if not for their dazzlingly colorful facial hair and, again, those scars and ambiguous private parts. There are three smaller troll figures, including "Zack," that seem to be boys, and there are three counterparts that seem to be girls — but you quickly realize that such crude assumptions of gender based on signifiers like names don't work here, because everyone is simply and happily a boi.



Left: Caroline Wells Chandler, "Big Red (The Bather)" (2016), hand-crocheted assorted wool, 11' x 4'; right: Paul Cézanne, "The Bather" (c. 1885), oil on canvas, 50" x 38 1/8" (click to enlarge)

The boi I found most impressive — the one I didn't want to stop staring at — was "Big Red (The Bather)" (2016). Towering 11 feet tall and mounted on the wall, "Big Red" is modeled after Cézanne's "The Bather" (c. 1885), which captures a man with his hands on his hips cautiously making his way into the water. Chandler's figure adopts the same pose — while wearing a wet suit whose greens, yellows, and purples come straight from Cézanne — but in jolliness rather than quietude. Instead of a person looking down in introspection, we get someone looking out at us with confidence. This is no small feat, as that someone has been queered in almost every conceivable way: in body — with the mastectomy scars and unidentifiable straight-line sex organ, as well as with red hair ("the hair color of the most other," says Chandler); in materials — Chandler turns a painting, art historically the most straight and masculine of mediums, into a work of crochet, which has long been shunned as handicraft and women's work; and even in disposition — how many more melancholy, or at least mysterious, men do we know from art history than happy ones? In Chandler's world (as well as our own, sadly) to be happily, proudly, and freely queer is a radical triumph.



Caroline Wells Chandler, "Freestyln" (2016), hand-crocheted assorted wool, 37" x 7" each (photo by Benjamin Sutton/Hyperallergic) (click to enlarge)

Chandler also looks to Cézanne for the show's centerpiece, a site-specific, wall-size installation titled "Freestyln" (2016). Inspired by the modern master's "The Large Bathers" (1900–06), which hangs at the nearby Philadelphia Museum of Art, Chandler's work features nine queer bathers paused mid-stroke — as if a group of the women who are the subjects of Cézanne's painting had realized they were transgender, gone for FTM top surgery, come back, jumped in the water, and begun synchronized swimming.



Caroline Wells Chandler, "Freestyln (pink)" (2016) (click to enlarge)

Scattered along the gallery's wide white wall, the bathers vary in color, but all have neon elements (Chandler counts Katherine Bradford's cosmic swimmers among his inspirations) and all strike the same pose: left arm angled in the air, face turned toward us and smiling, legs kicking up in a separate, second piece. It's as if Chandler had released them from the heteronormative male gaze of art history, freeing them to do what and become who

they wish. Now we've caught them reveling in their newfound subjectivity.

He's also released them from gender in a way that seems both literal and profound: by hiding their genitalia in the invisible water. We only see the parts of the queer bathers that would appear above the water's surface: one arm, most of a face, half a torso, two lower legs and feet. Their sexual organs are gone, seemingly fled to become the eyes of Chandler's arresting "Bridge Trolls." This is, in a way, realism — it's faithful to what we would see if we were watching people swim. But it's also an ambitious abstraction — Chandler has chopped his bathers in two and cast them as highly geometric figures whose bodies create a series of triangles, which leads us straight back to Cézanne (not only are his forms blocky, but "The Large Bathers" is essentially one big triangle). Quietly and effectively, Chandler has drawn a powerful line that connects the development of Cubism with a fabric-making technique most commonly associated with doilies and slipper socks. He does not want, though it's filled with bias and discrimination, to dispense with or disregard canonical art history; he wants instead to queer it.



Caroline Wells Chandler, "Beach Bums" (2015), hand-crocheted assorted wool, 80" x 5" (photo by Benjamin Sutton/Hyperallergic)



Caroline Wells Chandler, "Kathy" (2016), hand-crocheted wool, 28" x 32"; "Stacey" (2016), hand-crocheted wool, 30" x 32" (click to enlarge)



Caroline Wells Chandler, "Bridge Troll" (2016), hand-crocheted assorted wool, 56" x 8"

Caroline Wells Chandler: *Beach Bois continues at Lord Ludd (306 Market Street, 5th Floor, Philadelphia) through March 6.*