The Museum of Closetry: Reclaiming Erasure, Reimagining History

By Lucas Azevedo Cabral

The *Museum of Closetry* is a project rooted in the artistic practice and personal collection of Spencer J. Harrison, an artist whose work consistently navigates the interplay between personal experience, cultural critique, and the act of reimagining and reshaping reality. In this exhibition, Harrison creates an immersive space, a fictional museum where artifacts, ephemera, assemblage, and artworks engage with the silences left by centuries of queer suppression and erasure. Much like his groundbreaking PhD project *Not a Freak Show: Growing Up Gay in Rural Ontario*, through which he became the first in Canada to submit a fully painted dissertation, Harrison uses this exhibition to adapt, subvert, and expand reality by creating an immersive space. The *Museum of Closetry* invites us into a world where queer histories are abundantly visible, tangible, and celebrated, challenging audiences to reconsider the gaps in what we record or are taught to remember.

While the objects in this museum *may* be fictional, the erasure they address is anything but. Decades, and indeed centuries, of queer existence have been hidden from public record, creating what scholars often refer to as "archival silence." Harrison, acting as both collector and curator of his own museum, reframes this gap as an opportunity. The *Museum of Closetry* imagines a history back-filled with queerness, an alternate reality that asserts, "This could have been here all along." Piles, stacks, and groupings of “queer” objects take center stage, offering viewers a playful, speculative, and intimate encounter with artifacts that blur the lines between historical reality and creative invention.

Harrison’s methodology in assembling this fictional museum draws heavily from his queer identity and his experiences navigating the world as someone with a learning disability. The installations reflect a dynamic, nonlinear approach to collecting, organizing, and archiving, rejecting traditional systems of order in favor of something more fluid, messy, and personal. Labels accompanying the works bounce between narrative and informative, fact and fiction, encouraging viewers to suspend disbelief and consider new possibilities for how queer stories might be told—or retold. The museum itself is a space of queer imagination, a reclamation of a history that isn’t unimaginable.

Layers of Visibility and the Queer Archive

At the entrance to *The Museum of Closetry*, visitors are enveloped by a wallpaper installation that acts as both a declaration and an invitation. The pattern, composed of images depicting affection between men, overwhelms the senses in a way that feels almost radical—a striking contrast to the historical absence of such imagery in public archives. The sheer scale and repetition of these images create an immersive environment where affection, tenderness, and intimacy between men are not only visible but inescapable. While these images are real, the context in which they’re presented is skewed. While queerness may and could be documented in these images, primarily, they reflect the displays of closeness amidst male friendships and familial bonds in a world where queerness was so hidden that same-sex affection wasn’t “suspicious” or threatening to heteronormativity. Our absence then provides now for a vision of a world where queer love has always been present, liberated from the constraints of heteronormativity.

Mounted atop this wallpaper are original tintypes from Harrison's personal collection with unique and ornate mattes and frames. These exaggerated choices serve a dual function: they physically and symbolically spotlight the individual images, transforming them from ephemeral, overlooked moments into venerated artifacts. While the wallpaper immerses the viewer in an overwhelming abundance of queer affection, the framed tintypes distill these moments into more singular vignettes. This juxtaposition mirrors the paradox of queer visibility itself. Historically, queer lives have existed in plain sight yet remained obscured by societal structures. Here, Harrison plays with that contradiction, creating a space where queerness is both omnipresent and singularly cherished.

These images, and many others, appear throughout the exhibition, woven into various installations that reflect the breadth of Harrison's personal collection—one that spans over 600 tintype photographs and other objects. This abundance opens the door wide to challenge the historical scarcity of queer representation in visual culture. By amassing and recontextualizing this collection, Harrison not only repopulates a historic queer community but also reclaims storytelling itself, reinforcing the idea that queer lives have always been present, even when erased from dominant narratives.

Walk a Mile in Savage Pussyfoot Shoes: The Museum as Self-Portrait

At its core, the public presentation of *The Museum of Closetry* is rooted in the private collection of the artist—one assembled through a deeply personal curatorial mandate: the question of whether or not an object is *questionably queer* or *documents queerness*. This subjectivity makes the collection inherently reflective of the artist's relationship with queerness and self-understanding. Throughout the museum, Harrison employs a unique, deeply personal approach to organizing and presenting his collection—one that reflects both his queer identity and his perspective navigating the world with a learning disability. Objects, images, and groupings resist conventional archival and presentation standards, instead embracing a fluid, non-linear, and sometimes rebellious perspective that prioritizes warmth and narrative over rigid categorization. By engaging with and deviating from traditional archival practices, Harrison's work honours his instinct when organizing information.

One of the most personal installations in *The Museum of Closetry* is *Bedroom Wall*, a direct replication of the arrangement of objects in Harrison's own bedroom. By transplanting this deeply personal display into the sterile environment of the gallery's white cube, Harrison blurs the boundary between public and private, exhibition and lived experience. The installation functions almost as a self-portrait—one in which the artist's presence in the work is paradoxically underscored by his absence. In doing so, it speaks to the broader shortcomings of the archive and institution, which often fail not only to document queer lives but also to capture the warmth, intimacy, and complexity of those lives.

The adjacent collection of objects-turned-artworks, Family (*Mother, Father, Sister, Me)* continue this exploration of archival shortcomings. These readymades—either previously fabricated or reclaimed—were created as part of the artist's mourning process. While the accompanying labels provide essential context for these objects, they fail to preserve or communicate the emotional experience surrounding them.

Every Tear I have Cried for My Father.

An Unopened Gift for My Mother

Did My Mother Make me Gay?

A Jar of Wishes

Through sentiment and intent, these everyday objects are imbued with emotional weight and meaning that could never be transferred through acquisition or demonstrated in an exhibition. In this way, Harrison's work engages the act of collecting as an act of care. This installation points to a complicated relationship between love, documentation, preservation, and sterilization and reminds us that queer communities have often been excluded from traditional archives and denied collective remembrance.

Humor, Subversion, and the Absurdity of Archival Silence

Harrison's approach is not solely rooted in reverence and reclamation—his work also embraces humor, playfulness, and subversion. *The Bride* is a collage-based piece that humorously disrupts heteronormative visual narratives. In this work, Harrison hastily pastes images of men over framed and matted images obscuring the presumed, heteronormative scenes below. The result is both absurd and liberating—a tongue-in-cheek assertion of the artist's right to rewrite the visual record in ways that affirm queer presence. Like graffiti, this rapid act of creative revision reflects a kind of historic guerrilla placemaking, unsanctioned, subversive, and free from the gatekeepers who seek to define and control the narrative.

Similarly, *Behind the Velvet Curtain* plays with the conventions of historical censorship. In this piece, small, framed images of men are hidden behind velvet curtains, borrowing from the Victorian tradition of concealing pornographic images behind fabric coverings. By humorously applying this strategy to photographs that are entirely innocent—expressions of affection rather than explicit sexual content—Harrison highlights the absurdity of the queer archival silence. It becomes a critique of a history that deemed even the smallest, most harmless gestures of same-sex intimacy as too scandalous to be recorded. By exaggerating this act of concealment, the work underscores the arbitrary and often ridiculous standards that have dictated whose stories are deemed worthy of preservation. In juxtaposition, Harrison has removed the glass from the frame, a gesture made to further liberate its subjects from their historic binds.

Other works, such as *Grindr*, *A Little Head*, and *Dip Stick* continue this engagement with coded language, offering viewers who are "in the know" small winks of recognition. These pieces lean into the long tradition of queer subcultures using subtle signals, double meanings, and inside jokes as acts of resistance and survival.

~~Setting~~ Queering the Record ~~Straight~~

Other installations, like *I'll Meet By the Fence Post* exemplify a speculative archival approach, blending tradition and fiction to expose the gaps in recorded history. The "fence" installation presents photographs of men posing with a fence prop, displayed alongside a physical fence within the gallery. Harrison fabricates a history in which "meet me by the fence post" was a coded phrase used by queer men to find one another, playfully inserting queerness into the historical record where it was previously unacknowledged. Here, the fence—a structure typically associated with division and exclusion—is reclaimed as a meeting place, a marker of connection rather than separation. By reimagining this symbol, the work critiques the ways queer histories have been obscured and suggests that moments of recognition and solidarity existed even within systems designed to keep them hidden.

Installations like these draw attention to the importance of coded language in queer communities, from historical necessity to modern expressions like the hanky code. While this particular phrase is an invention, it underscores a broader truth: for those whose existence was threatened, coded gestures, symbols, and phrases have always been essential for survival and connection. By playfully inserting queerness into these historical fragments, Harrison not only challenges the authority of traditional archives but also highlights how history is constructed.

Similarly, the Airforce jewelry plays with existing narratives and traditions as material to craft stories with. Made from the broken windshields of airplanes, these pieces have long been framed as a testament to love and longing, assumed to be exchanged between soldiers and their wives or sweethearts. Yet history is full of omissions, and the absence of recorded evidence does not mean these objects were never gifted between men. By reframing them as tokens of homoromantic affection, Harrison points to a reality that is not just possible but highly probable and exposes the ways queer histories have been erased or left unrecorded. In shifting this narrative, the work urges viewers to reconsider what has been hidden in plain sight, revealing histories that have always existed, even when they were never written down.

Conclusion: The Museum as Resistance

The artworks detailed above represent only a small fraction of all of the riches to be discovered in the museum, all of which share the same priorities: queer warmth and imagination. Rather than accepting history as fixed, Harrison plays with its gaps, showing that what is missing can still be recovered, reimagined, and made visible on new terms. His speculative, playful, and deeply personal approach challenges the notion that history must be fixed, linear, or singularly “true.” Instead, he offers an alternative model: a queer, associative, and intimate narrative that embraces multiplicity, contradiction, and imagination.

At its core, this museum is an act of resistance. It refuses to accept historical silence as inevitable, instead treating it as an opportunity to imagine what might have been and what still could be. By blurring the lines between fact and fiction, reverence and irreverence, memory and omission, Harrison invites viewers to question not only what they see but also what they have been taught to believe.

History is not neutral, and neither is forgetting. In reclaiming and reimagining the past, *The Museum of Closetry* asserts that queer lives have always been here, whether history chose to record them or not. In this space, the erased are remembered, the hidden are seen, and the stories that history *may have* tried to silence are finally given room to speak.