

Adrian Gordon

ARTIST EDUCATOR / THE WARHOL



Interview by Kiley Fischer
with Introduction by Faith Bennett

The Social Soles interview series is based on the saying, “You don’t really know someone until you have walked in his shoes.” We thought it would be interesting to begin each interview asking our guest to bring a pair of shoes that are significant to him. They can be the ones he wore running around as a kid in Pittsburgh; Those he wore the first time he explored The Warhol as a teen; The pair he wore when he walked into The Warhol the first time as an educator; The pair he wore to the first LGBTQ+ Youth Prom meeting he attended in 2015; A pair we would have never guessed...What shoes will he bring?

We associate shoes with memories: good and bad. The question steers the path of the conversation. This route will show us a side not always seen in the one we are talking with. A more personal side. We are excited to see in which direction we are lead – by the choice in footwear and the memories stirred. Come. Let’s take a walk...

April showers bring May flowers and May flowers find themselves made into bouquets, boutonnières, and corsages for thousands of starry-eyed teenagers flocking to prom as the school year starts to wind down. But for many, prom can also be a source of anxiety, reject, and hurt. Each year, The Andy Warhol Museum on Pittsburgh’s North Shore hosts the LGBTQ+ Youth Prom, a place where youth ages 13-20 can relish in prom without the fear of judgment or harm. We talked with artist educator Adrian Gordon about his own experiences with Prom, what holding Prom at The Warhol means for local youth, and how The Warhol is working to meet the needs of the community. His spirit and passion is contagious!

Social Butterfly Magazine: Adrian, let’s start right off – tell me about the shoes that you’ve brought to talk about today.

Adrian Gordon: Okay! I thought it was so great that your focus is shoes. I’m a big shoe fan. I didn’t bring any special shoes – these are the shoes I wear every day. I love platforms, I love wedges – anything with a little bit of lift. These are the boots I wear most days to work and extracurricular fun events that I go to.

I think that for me, boots are something that are really important to me. I wear boots all year ‘round, even in summertime. I feel like it gives me this aura of preparedness that I find useful in my life. I’m a big boot person, but I also like heels which I’ll wear occasionally.

SBM: There’s definitely a boost that you get with a cool pair of boots.

Adrian: Oh, definitely.

SBM: I love that these boots are just you. In that context, if your boots could talk, what would they say to other people?

Adrian: One thing I’m always striving towards is being a more compassionate human and learning about struggles through shoes is interesting. In general, a good rule of thumb is to think about putting yourself in someone else’s shoes, especially in times of conflict.

On a more superficial level, we can talk about an exhibition I went to at the Brooklyn Museum called, “Killer Heels.” Have you heard of it?

SBM: Oh my gosh, yeah! We actually went last year when it was at The Frick.

Adrian: I didn’t get to see it here, but I saw it in Brooklyn about a year ago and I was really interested in the ways they talked about shoes on a less superficial level. They talked about shoes as objects of power, as fetish objects, as something that can give insight into someone’s identity in a way that isn’t just kind of covering your foot from the ground. I’m really interested in thinking about shoes on a deeper level, also. I’ve been thinking about how, historically, they’ve kind of effected populations.

SBM: I love that. You see a pair of sneakers and

it’s like, “Okay, but what does that say about that person?”

Adrian: Right! What does that shoe say about that person’s life story? The way even the sole can kind of wear away in certain areas indicates their style of gait. It’s really interesting.

SBM: That’s really cool. I don’t think I would have thought about that in terms of what you can learn from just literally looking at the shoe, not even thinking about the story.

Adrian: Oh, yeah.

SBM: You’re talking about compassion and really wanting to walk in other’s shoes in time of conflict, if there’s someone whose shoes you could walk in, who’s would those be and why?

Adrian: I struggle with that question, and I think my initial response is to go back to the idea of: in situations where there’s a misunderstanding or trying to understand someone’s perspective or point of view, I think that’s a really good time to think about how that person’s life story has affected their politics or their personality traits. I don’t know if there’s one particular person, I would say there’s a multitude of people I try to understand by putting myself in their shoes.

On a very basic level, maybe John Waters. (Laughs.) He has really great style! Bringing it back from the deep end! (Laughs again.)

SBM: Bringing it back to the light side! Talk to me about prom.

Adrian: Yes! This is the fourth time The Warhol is going to be hosting LGBTQ+ Youth Prom. Originally, we had the name Youth Pride Prom, but we switched over to be more inclusive of gender and sexual orientations.

Our first year that we held prom here in 2014, it was Gatsby themed and we had over 200 in attendance. The next year was a great combination of The Wizard of Oz and Candyland and we called it “There’s No Place Like Candyland” and we had over 300 youth in attendance.

SBM: Wow!

Adrian: Yeah! Then last year, the theme was “Disruption,” so we explored LGBTQ youth boundaries and resistance and history of resistance. We made protest signs that we had at each table and we had other making activities in the studio.

This year, we’re expecting and hoping to have over 300 youth again in attendance, which is great. A lot of schools do not have opportunities for queer youth to experience a safe environment, particularly surrounding these kinds of rite of passage activities like prom. There’s a history, a long history, of discrimination against LGBTQ folks in general, but particularly youth who don’t have as much autonomy as adults. As kind of silly as a prom may seem, I think it’s a really important event to give youth a sense of grounding in their identity, particularly because a lot of schools don’t provide that for them.

SBM: You definitely see stories in the news

every year that jump out where schools barred individuals from prom because they didn’t wear what they were expected to wear. I never understood that and I love that this event offers them that space.

Adrian: I agree. I actually brought this sheet with me because I wanted to say that according to GLSEN’s 2015 National School Climate Survey, 71.5% of LGBTQ youth avoided school functions and 65.7% avoided extracurricular activities because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable. 15.6% were actually prevented from attending a dance or function with someone of the same gender or identity. There’s statistics that really back up the need for queer youth events, particularly in Pittsburgh with being a smaller city and having less organizations.

SBM: (Nods.) Where did this event come from? What was kind of the genesis of holding the prom?

Adrian: Someone who used to work at The Warhol, Adil Mansoor – he’s an amazing educator, he works on the Dreams of Hope Queer Youth Arts and Theater program in Pittsburgh – collaborated initially with GLESN to hold prom. Then, the year I started working on prom in 2015, we had a community partnership with TRHIVE of Southwest Pennsylvania who does education and outreach in the Pittsburgh area. The initial foundings were really Adil Mansoor.

SBM: That growth must be so cool for you to watch, especially with how many kids are involved.

Adrian: Yes! A lot of kids are involved. One of the ways we try to have this be a youth-centered and youth-led event is we hold prom planning meetings. The first meeting, we ask youth their ideas for a potential theme, potential activities, decorating opportunities, what types of screenings they’d like in the theater because the theater is open during prom, what type of music or DJs they want at the event. We’re really trying to make this an event that’s led by youth and their voice is being heard. And for the youth, it’s really a youth event. Adults aren’t deciding what type of music that’s playing at prom.

SBM: And it really comes back to that idea that – at a lot of high schools, there are prom committees. It really is that full experience you’re talking about.

Adrian: Yeah. We want them engaged on the same level that any other prom would be.

SBM: What was your own experience with prom like growing up?

Adrian: I went to my school Prom in 2007 and had a fine time. With that said, the Homecoming Court (where they crown a King and Queen of that year’s graduating class) along with feeling exclusionary, really just bored us. The tradition really turned us off. I see huge value in queer culture. There is a resiliency that has been born of necessity, a

result of working outside traditions like Prom and Homecoming because of historical exclusion. This is one reason why we do not do any crowning or courting at the LGBTQ+ Youth Prom at The Warhol!

SBM: That makes a lot of sense. What has been something really exciting for you in all of this – in seeing Prom and programming grow?

Adrian: One main thing for me is seeing the openness with youth in terms of gender identity. As a man of trans experience, I had a very different childhood growing up in Pittsburgh and going through Pittsburgh Public Schools. I was fortunate enough to have a GSA at my school so I did take part in that, but there really were not as many opportunities for youth to get involved, particularly queer youth with queer youth programs – at the museum or at other institutions in Pittsburgh.

I’m really thankful to impart my knowledge on a personal level but also a professional level to youth looking for more opportunities to get involved in queer programming in the city. I’ve definitely seen the kind of broadening of acceptance in the general public but also organizations have been coming up with more opportunities for youth to get involved.

SBM: That is really cool, and it has to be really good for youth – you have that personal experience. You’re not just preaching at them or someone saying, “Well, I think it would be...”

Adrian: (Laughs.) I definitely think personal experience is really important when dealing with certain demographics, just to have that real baseline conversation of, “I’ve been there and these are some ways I’ve found to be effective to get through this type of situation” and to impart that knowledge with a real level



of honesty.

There's a need for change in this city, and hopefully we're contributing to that in a positive way for youth.

SBM: I mean, the way the numbers are growing, I feel like you definitely are.

Adrian: We're really excited about the numbers. In fact, our other major youth program called Youth Invasion, which is a youth-led and youth-focused youth-takeover of the museum is another way for youth to have their voice heard in what happens at the museum. Our largest Youth Invasion – over 900 people entered the museum. At that point we actually had a few issues with the over-capacity of the museum and we had to tone down our promotion of the event.

There definitely has been some major success in terms of participation.

Because the galleries aren't open during prom, we can have fewer people in the museum which is fine because it gives a more intimate feel to prom.

SBM: Tell me about prom night itself. What can kids who come expect?

Adrian: Prom is an event that has a traditional structure, but also a non-traditional structure because we're at The Warhol. We have a sit-down dinner from 6 p.m. to 7 p.m. and then there's dancing with a DJ from 7 to 10 p.m. Along with dinner and dancing, the photo booth in the lobby is open all night and it's free to take photos. We typically have a photo frame making activity available for them. In addition, we have a screening in the theater. We're working to source material from the archive to screen.

Last year, we had an amazing hair designer who collaborated with other stylists to provide hairdos during prom and then we had a number of makeup

artists in the basement as well who were doing teens' makeup, too.

We also have our educational studio open during the event and we'll be silk-screening on bandannas during the event, too. The screens will relate to the theme the teens choose and it'll hopefully include some of their own imagery as well.

SBM: That is awesome!

Adrian: It's a lot going on. (Laughs.) We're trying to make this as accessible as possible.

SBM: What has been your experience with working on the prom?

Adrian: It's been fantastic. As an individual and as an art educator at the museum, I've grown a lot working on this program. When I first starting working here, I was mostly doing docenting in Factory, our educational studio and this was one of the first youth programs I worked on.

My passion is working with queer youth. It was an amazing opportunity for me. It's interesting because when I was a kid, I participated in some of the youth programs here at the museum, so I feel like I've come full-circle with being a teen and coming here and having these mentors to becoming similar to my mentors and hopefully mentoring young queer folks through our programs. It's been an amazing experience.

SBM: What kind of prompted you to the career path you chose?

Adrian: I grew up here, I moved and went to college, and then I moved back here and I had a very close friend who worked in the education department here. I had maintained my connections here and the director of the education department when I started was actually someone who was one of my teachers in high school. It was these amazing connections I had made and so I reached out and they were hiring.

SBM: Is that something you kind of knew you wanted to do then, steering toward education?

Adrian: It was. I feel like I got a kind of great introduction to careers in the arts through interning here as a teen. Some of the people I looked up to the most were doing what I'm doing right now. I feel like it was a kind of natural transition for me to be interested in the same kind of career path of the folks who really influenced me when I was younger. I actually didn't get a degree in education – I got a bachelor of fine arts. But that's really useful for working here at the museum. Our youth programs do involve art and that knowledge has been infinitely useful.

SBM: Do you have a favorite medium? I feel like you can do pretty much anything here!

Adrian: The main thing we do here at the museum is silk-screen printing – Warhol's preferred method of art creation was silk-screen printing. We do a lot of that and with most of our programs, we try to incorporate silk-screen printing.

In addition to that, with the youth programs, I would say working with textiles. Our last Youth Invasion last year, we had a fashion workshop and we worked with a silk-screen cooperative on the North Side. We worked with yardage and they constructed garments they had on display at the Deutschtown Festival.

I would say mixed media if I had to sum it up.

SBM: I'm suddenly really sad that I'm almost 10 years removed from being allowed to do any of these programs because this is awesome.

Adrian: (Laughs.) Come by! We'll print with you.

SBM: Speaking of Warhol's preferred medium – what's your favorite places in the museum?

Adrian: Favorite galleries?

SBM: Exactly.

Adrian: That's hard! Let me mention that we have seven floors. It's the largest museum dedicated to a single artist in the country and our collection is massive because Warhol was a prolific artist. Some of my favorite Warhol pieces are his early drawings. In the late 1950s, he did a series of figures of men and it's just graphite on paper. I find them really beautiful.

I really appreciate his later work that he made in the 1980s. He made a really large body of religious pieces really close to his death in 1987 in the mid- to late-1980s that I find really impactful. His self-portrait that he made in 1986 is really beautiful as well.

It's one of the first portraits that shows the kind of granular quality to his face. He was a very self-conscious man, so in his early portraits he oftentimes used overexposed imagery and found ways to remove the blemishes and wrinkles in his face, so I find that later self-portrait to be kind of his coming out portrait. That's really difficult!

SBM: I had to ask!

Adrian: (Laughs.) You definitely had to ask.

The LGBTQ+ Youth Prom will be held at The Warhol on May 27 with tickets available online for \$5 and at the door for \$10. Youth ages 13 to 20 are welcome, though Adrian said as many youth don't have identification that matches their identity, IDs will not be checked. There will be security at the museum to ensure safety.

For more information about The Warhol and its Youth Programs, click here to visit their website. If you want to check out more of what The Warhol offers, you can visit their Things To Do page here.



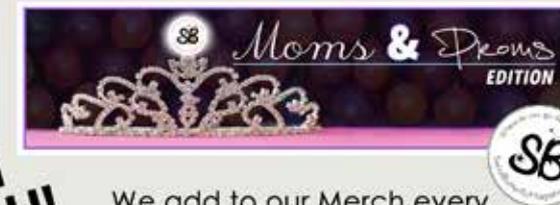
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