

Any other name would smell as sweet

An exhibition of painting, sculpture, and photography

by

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Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners. I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

Abstract

Any other name would smell as sweet is an exploration of personal and shared experiences of feeling queer. This exhibition serves as an aesthetic and material investigation of the performativity of othered bodies, identities, and visibility. The process of becoming and adapting to surroundings is conceptually and experientially present in my work. When creating installations, I employ mirrors and queer-coded reflective materials. By choosing materials that have the visual capability to shift and transform their appearance depending on the viewer's body and position in relation to the work, I create a spatial dynamism where each individual's experience is uniquely their own—where the viewer and the work are reliant on each other, in a codependent performance. The gallery becomes a site where viewers can be projected into queer liminal space—a bridge between worlds.

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“Queer people don’t grow up as ourselves, we grow up playing a version of ourselves that sacrifices authenticity to minimize humiliation and prejudice. The massive task of our adult lives is to unpick which parts of ourselves are truly us and which parts we’ve created to protect us.”

- Alexander Leon

Introduction



These are nothing but memories.

I was 10 years old (maybe younger) when I was first ridiculed for the way I walked. It was then when I first realized another child saw me as *other*.¹ Another boy identified the way that I moved my body as “girly”, and from that observation, he had determined that I was a homosexual. Instinctively, I realized that I must learn to perform “boyiness” to avoid further accusations. It was these kinds of comments made by peers, these microaggressions, that I came to understand that people were either normal or gay—so I tried my best to be normal. I began a process of purposefully orienting myself within the world around me by observing the way people were—how they moved, acted, spoke, dressed. My family, peers at school, characters in books, film, and television became guides for “normalcy”. I learned how to perform my gender and did the things boys did—as I understood them. I adopted a boy’s gait with a more or less masculine demeanor: feet pointed outward, hips forward, chest upward, forcing my body to stand rigid and tall.² I attempted to maintain this act, yet amid high school and unruly hormones, I found myself at a troubling intersection, my otherness proven by my deviant sexuality. Yet again, as the guidelines of how to be kept shifting, I was uncontrollably different from the rest. I was no longer performing gender only to fit in superficially, but instead as a means of disguising my sexuality. A chameleon uses camouflage to protect itself as a defense mechanism. Similarly, I constructed a version of myself that was best suited to go unnoticed within the socio-political landscape of small-town Ontario, Canada.³ After high school, I moved. I came out at the age of 18. I cried. My parents hugged me. My step-dad apologized for anything he may have done or said that made it harder for me growing up. After leaving the place that I had mentally and physically amalgamated with, I felt that, with the opportunity to attend university, I could begin to construct the identity I always wished I had. I

¹ Treating people from another group as essentially different from and generally inferior to the group you belong to. Creating an identity is part of the process of othering.

² Muñoz, José Esteban. *Cruising Utopia: the Then and There of Queer Futurity*. (New York University Press, 2009), 68

³ A version of myself created through mimesis, a version of me that echoed back a presumed heteronormativity.

realized this as my second privilege with sexuality. The first was my ability to camouflage via performance.⁴ As I learned to embrace myself, my body, gender, sexuality, and experiences, I recognize now that perhaps it didn't matter if I was declared (by myself, or others) homosexual or not. Onlookers would still form their opinion, distinguishing my *same-ness*, or *other-ness* based on several visual signifiers that constitute queerness and its stereotypes, regardless if I had given myself a label or not. There are contemporary discourses that I've stumbled across through my artistic research, concerned with the complexities of queer visibility and invisibility, which situated how existing as queer within a heteronormative society will always be a sort of utopia,⁵ this is one of the conversations in which I situate this thesis exhibition.

Any other name would smell as sweet is an aesthetic and material investigation which considers othered bodies, identities, and visibility. The gallery space becomes a queer liminal space—a bridge between worlds. My work addresses the ambiguity and performativity of identity, specifically alluding to experiences of becoming and adapting to surroundings through investigating materiality and the careful arrangement of objects, paintings, and photography. As viewers spend time considering their relevance, queer signifiers and meaning become unmasked and revealed. Each installation exists not only as a singular static object but rather in flux, they are constantly transforming as the viewer moves through space. The fluid queer-coded and reflective materials, whose appearance shifts depending on the viewer's position in relation to each work, allowing for a dynamic space in which each individual's experience becomes uniquely their own.

The subject of my work pulls from personal narrative, and this exhibition is my way of allowing viewers to connect to a material experience that illuminates the disguised, shifting, nauseous, and reflective nature that for me defines the embodiment of feeling queer. Tactfully

⁴ This is a privilege rooted in race, and physical stereotypes or attributes contributing to the idea of gay-ness as a performed identity

⁵ Muñoz, José Esteban. *Cruising Utopia*.

placed mirrors and reflections disorient spectatorship by revealing new angles of the work while confronting the viewer with their gaze. New vantage points, unconstrained by the walls of the gallery, are created by a queer optical intervention that disrupts the heteronormative viewpoint. Sexual orientations and the performance of gender are formed by impressions that arise from societal constructions that physically affect the body (in clothing, actions, personalities, and interests). As such, how does one orientate or situate oneself in a world that is heteronormative? I do so by focusing on creating experiential work that reveals or unmask a physical and intended meaning through its placement in space, and by including the viewer in the production of meaning. Viewers are no longer passive observers but are physically and performatively implicated in the action of looking. This leads me to create work through material exploration, and moments of realization (or moments that reveal something to the viewer) that invoke a feeling that is decidedly, queer. When broken down, I understand it as a feeling of otherness or displacement coming through in my practice. I want my work to embody my understanding of otherness and I want to, present to and affect those who have been privileged enough to not experience this visceral feeling while relating to those who have been othered and continue to be the other⁶.

⁶ Other is used throughout this paper as a Noun, Adjective and Verb.

Feeling Queer



6 years old

I sometimes spend weekends with my grandfather.
We walk to the Blockbuster and I am allowed to pick out one VHS.
Every time I pick Sailormoon.

Any other name would smell as sweet conveys queerness through aesthetic strategies that explore my personal experiences with performing and becoming. Turning these experiences and trauma into labour has been a physically and emotionally strenuous process. Adrienne Crossman (they/them) is one of many queer artists pursuing personal journeys of reflection as a means to understand and map their sexuality. Like Crossman, I am interested in exploring my childhood, before and after my queer coming of age as a conceptual wayfinder for the way that I make physical objects. Crossman investigates lesbian and non-binary representation in media and popular culture by appropriating genderless cartoon characters and by combining and re-contextualizing them, they make sense of their own reality and queer coming of age. Crossman uses inanimate objects turned into cartoon characters⁷ like the Teletubbies, Gumby and Pokey, and Polkaroo to address their associations and references of gender in childhood television shows.



Fig. 3 Adrienne Crossman, *Gumby and Pokey*, 2018.

⁷ Halberstam, Judith, and Jack Halberstam, *The queer art of failure* (Duke University Press, 2011), 175.

I approach conceptualizing my queer identity through the lens of José Esteban Muñoz's proposal of queer futurity⁸. Queerness, in Muñoz's conceptualization, is a rejection of "straight time", the "here and now" and the insistence of the "then and there."⁹ Muñoz proposes the concept of disidentificatory performances, "as acts of transgression and creation, by which racial, sexual and other minorities, articulate the truth of cultural hegemony"¹⁰ by "[illuminating] a landscape of possibility for minoritarian subjects through the aesthetic strategies for surviving and imagining utopian modes of being in the world."¹¹ Muñoz's queer futurity destabilizes and challenges contemporary mainstream gay and lesbian politics which he sees as conformist. He argues that present gay and lesbians, whose political goals are gay rights or same-sex marriage, are trapped within the limiting normative time and present. The desire to be relieved of otherness and acceptance of societal conventions leads towards assimilation into heteronormativity¹². To escape easy assimilation, I unpack my own continuous experiences of being pushed up against what is deemed "normal".

Within Muñoz work he examines memories of his childhood, noting a time he was mocked and disciplined for his performance of gender. He describes the visceral feelings of pain from knowing that something about him was irrefutably different, alongside his simultaneous confusion in not knowing exactly what *it* (the difference) was. Prompted by this gender surveillance, Muñoz, like me, considered his gestures in relation to those of others; he studied the gestures that men and women made and in term mimicked how their bodies moved through space: "I noticed a stiffness in the men around me and lack of stiffness in the women next to them. I studied all this and applied it to my own body".¹³ He used his findings to

⁸ Muñoz, José Esteban. *Cruising Utopia*,

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ <https://peoplepill.com/people/jose-esteban-munoz/>.

¹¹ Muñoz, José Esteban. *Cruising Utopia*,

¹² Referring to the acceptance of heteronormativity as the norm instilled by cultural hegemony.

¹³ Muñoz, José Esteban. *Cruising Utopia*, 68.

construct a version of himself, a performative caricature, that had the masculine mannerisms needed to fit within the constraints of gendered rules. I could not believe how hauntingly similar Muñoz's experiences were to my own.

Judith Butler has described such actions as gender performativity, stating that, "there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results."¹⁴ She suggests that gender is constituted by language, an idea expounded upon by Andrew Gayed, who discusses how the intersecting triangulation of nationality, sexuality, and masculinity affects the way we perceive gender.¹⁵ Gender and sexuality, while not inextricably linked, have a causal relationship, one which I find parallel my own performance of sexuality. Butler's concept of performativity has informed how I want my work to function through performative participation. Muñoz's utopia supports performativity conceptually, like the performative sexuality of my practice, or any performance (fugitive and fragile), we can only be given an inkling or fleeting vision of utopia.

All sorts of repressed memories came flooding back as I read his work, and with this newfound clarity, I could remember my first experience with feeling "other". I appropriated the text from part of his story in my piece *Presence and Potentiality* (2018) to further embody this feeling of otherness, while simultaneously drawing a connection to Muñoz, who I feel a shared experience with. Through my singular personal experiences, of which I struggled with alone, I eventually found community through the experiences of other queer people and queer artists. Finding sameness through a shared experience of otherness, stands as a conceptual metaphor for how queer utopia presents itself in mere moments of realization.

When I printed Muñoz' words, using cyanotype, on a cotton sheet, six-feet large, upside down and backwards, for it to be read in a mirror positioned below the hanging tapestry, I was

¹⁴ Butler, Judith, *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity* (routledge, 2006), 25.

¹⁵ Gayed, Andrew, "Queering Middle Eastern Contemporary art and its Diaspora (Duke University: Graduate Islamic Studies Conference 2015), 2.

investing in a shared experience of otherness through the mirrors—cultivating intersubjectivity. The reflection creates the illusion that the print extends through the floor, deep into an alternate dimension. This illusion not only makes the material seem twice as large—but also allows the viewer to read the text only through its reflection. One must position themselves directly in front of the work, and although at first, it seems fairly easy to read, it becomes increasingly difficult as the quote extends deeper and deeper into the abyss of its alternate visual dimension—ultimately a queering of space that resists easy assimilation. The struggle to see clearly and understand the text in this sinking space is meant to emulate my own feelings of growing up queer in a straight world. These feelings are made explicit by Muñoz when he writes:

“This was a different wounding, one for which I had no defense because I knew something was there, something I didn't quite understand but felt at my core. This proto-homophobic attack made me sit down and think about my movement, to figure out what it was about the way I moved that elicited such mockery and such palpable contempt from a room full of males. I wanted to, needed to know: what was it about my body and the way that I moved it through the world that was so off, so different?”¹⁶

Feelings of dizziness and disorientation, combined with a sense of the unknown, are shared amongst minorities of gender, sexuality, class, and race and where they intersect.¹⁷ Muñoz' text in the mirror of *Presence and Potentiality* (2018) exposes a reality outside of the heteronormative. It is positioned to, ask the viewer to see the world from a different angle, to experience a queer feeling. This illusion also illustrates Muñoz's concept of queer utopia, wherein it can only be experienced in fleeting glimpses and moments of “queerness is not yet here,” only revealed to us in the future.¹⁸ The tactical nature of queer utopias is such that they

¹⁶ Muñoz, José Esteban, *Cruising Utopia*, 68

¹⁷ Peter Carpenter's parameters for queer dance, as he says in 'The Last Cowboy Standing' "...queerness reminds me that my own white, gay male, privileged body cannot assume queerness—I attend queerness through uncomfortable processes that say 'yes' to perspectives beyond my own. Queerness serves to keep me working outside of my own navel-gazing and remember to engage sex and gender within contexts of class, race, and globe... when I dance queerly I remember the political limits of dancing alone." (From Clare Croft's, *Queer Dance: Meanings and Makings*)

¹⁸ Muñoz, José Esteban, *Cruising Utopia*, 7

require active viewers to investigate, contemplate and actualize their spaces. My work aspires to divine this feeling by referencing queer histories that engage in conversations on the current and future experience(s) of queerness by presenting a glimpse of utopia, or at least, of hope.

Any other name would smell as sweet addresses the viewer's body, the body of work, the embodiment of theory and experience, my own body, bodies in mirrors, performing and extending through queer time in various ways: through the considerations of the material, formal, and conceptual signifiers. I consider the relationship between the viewer's body and my work by selecting materials and employing certain installation tactics that activate and change only with a viewer presence. I also address my body through my quasi-presence, considering the work as a direct response to being in my body and orienting myself as a queer person in a straight world. The materials used to make the paintings envelop the canvas, suggesting a subjectivity, but one which is marked by the absence of my physical presence, and replaced by the moments where the viewer can see themselves through mirrors. What is left is my work, imbued with my labour, my experiences, and my emotions, my quasi-presence is met by the viewer's body, their reflection and their experience(s) of/in the world. This interaction creates potential for intersectional connections of otherness—a coalescence of shared human experiences.



Fig. 4 *Presence and Potentiality*, 2018.

Becoming Queer / Queer Representations



10 years old

I watched the film *Mystic River*. I should not have. I didn't completely understand the film's premise or storyline. But I did understand the sexual abuse and rape. This film confused me, validated my sexual abuse and simultaneously made me feel like a villain.

When I ask my queer friends who their TV crush was when they were kids, we all seem to have experienced a similar phenomenon. Before social-media, dialup-internet days didn't allow me to see what was beyond my small-town worldview. What I found from speaking to other queer people my age was that we invented representations for ourselves. I found true representations of queer people on TV in the late '90s and '00s hard to come by, especially in shows catering to kids or teens. So as queer kids, we imagined them into existence by projecting onto straight characters. On a rare occasion, when there was representation, we took refuge in it. It was an eye-opening, jaw-dropping, utopian kind of moment discovering Queer as Folk on late-night TV. Looking at it now, it's not at all a great representation of a diverse queer community but it was the first time that I saw two men make love. I remember waiting for my mom and dad to go to bed, turning the TV on volume 1 and nervously watching it—ready at any moment to switch the channel and pretend I was sleeping. The shows relationships, attitudes, and stereotypes are what informed me of sexuality, answered my questions and actualized my daydreams. It was my first sex education—that and Talk Sex with Sue Johanson.

I was jealous of the way that Sailor Moon or the Power Rangers could transform, could shed their skin, and become someone else. At a certain point, I realized that I wasn't only projecting queer narratives onto the straight ones I saw on TV, but that there were already queer treasures sprinkled in amongst the mainstream media narratives of the '90s-'00s. However, much of the representation of this post-Matthew Shepard¹⁹ time was not at all suitable for young teens, especially those who were likely already struggling to comprehend their identities within the world. This 00's pre-post-gay²⁰ media era was dedicated to depicting

¹⁹ Matthew Shepard was a gay American student who was tortured and killed in 1998. His death sparked national attention to hate crime legislation in the United States on the state and federal levels.

²⁰ Liora P. Elias argues that with post-gay television, "Viewers are left with the suggestion that the struggles of homophobia, violence against gay individuals and, family alienation due to non-acceptance of one's sexuality are issues no longer experienced by 'modern' gay folks".

the tragedy, the deviance, and sorrow of the gay experience.²¹ During this time, again and again, we saw the archetype of the straight-acting closeted bully, beat up the innocent gay boy, or worse. I remember watching the film *Monster* (2003), which if the story of Aileen Wuornos wasn't dark enough, 10-year-old me saw a glimpse of my own sexuality between the lines of the protagonists tainted relationships, inevitable heartbreak, wrapped up in themes of rape, murder, and incarceration. What stuck with me most was watching Charlize Theron portraying Wuornos being convicted for her crimes and sent to jail as Journey's, "*Don't Stop Believing*" plays loudly in the background. For years, every time I heard that song, I would feel physically sick as I so closely associated *Monster* with gayness in general. Perhaps it was in part because of seeing this film, in combination with the cultural hegemonic authority of heterosexuality in the world around me, that I began spiraling into a state of suppression and denial of my homosexuality. It was also because of this overwhelming nausea that I avoided *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), for fear that my emotional experience with sexuality would be actualized again, especially between two men. I was exposed to two other films as a kid, which left me feeling uncomfortable in my own body. *Mystic River* (2003) and *The Butterfly Effect* (2004), both feature sexual and emotional abuse of children, which essentially ruins the character's adult lives. Seeing this happen to other kids, albeit on-screen, validated my own sexual abuse. Perhaps it also instilled an understanding in me, that my life too, was ruined.

Godspeed (2020), is a series of photographs depicting the long-lasting effects that television and film have left on my psyche. I use this series of photographs in the installation of *Any other name would smell as sweet* to locate pertinent pop culture instances where my queer identity was impacted and formed. There is no textbook, right way to discover or understand one's own sexuality. I arrived at this idea by thinking through how representation

²¹ Petronio, Francesca, *Raised on TV: A queer Teen's Guide to Syndicated Sexualities* (City University of New York, 2019), 5.

can affect the psyche, worldview or identity of a queer child or teen. So for me, this work visualizes a process, through examining learned actions imposed by representation, seen as a public education, which speaks to the lived or shared experiences belonging to a generation of now queer adults in North America, who went through the process of becoming or understanding their sexuality, through watching television and films in the 90s and '00s.

Orientations



9 years old
Don't Stop Believin'

In her book *Queer Phenomenology*, Sara Ahmed states that “if orientation is a matter of how we reside in space, then sexual orientation might also be a matter of residence; of how we inhabit spaces as well as “who” or “what” we inhabit spaces with.”²² Ahmed creates an intersection between phenomenology²³ and queer theory by comparing becoming sexually and physically oriented in the physical world and the systematic social structure in which we live. This process of “becoming oriented” applies seamlessly to the complexities of uncovering one’s gender and sexuality. Reading Ahmed’s work led me to consider my relationship to this idea of “becoming oriented”. I moved 10 times as a child and attended 7 different schools. With each new place, there was a period of adjustment; a process of becoming oriented in an unfamiliar setting. I looked to those around me to understand how and where I fit into the world while adjusting my performance to acclimatize. The action of becoming oriented is not so different from the experience of being queer.²⁴



Fig.7 Claude Cahun & Marcel Moore, *Self-portrait & Woman in mirror*, 1928.

²² Ahmed, Sara, *Queer phenomenology: Orientations, objects, others*, (Duke University Press, 2006), 1

²³ The philosophical study of the structures of experience, consciousness and our very existence in the world as a subject.

²⁴ Ahmed, Sara, *Queer Phenomenology*, 1

Claude Cahun was a pioneer of playing with and performing gender for camera. We see her in *Self-portrait* (1928) as she performs a character for the mirror (both on the wall, and in the camera). Like me, she uses the mirror to facilitate viewership, subject and I would argue, a truth—through orientations of the performance of gender and sexuality. I think about her work inspiring succeeding generations of queer and straight photographers like Robert Mapplethorpe, Andy Warhol, Dianne Arbus, and Cindy Sherman.

The Capacity to be Affected (2019), is directly responding to the idea of becoming oriented. The viewer is disoriented by the illusion created in the perception of the (reflected) world. Similar to *Presence and Potentiality* (2018), I use a mirror on the floor, positioning the text to be read as a reflection. *The Capacity to be Affected* (2019) consists of an abandoned piece of barn board that is propped vertically on a mirror by a peachy skin-toned painted metal rod that sits on a puddle of silicone. Each material here holds a signifier,

wood= the natural world,
mirror= truth,
metal= the structures in which we
build ourselves and live within,
silicone= the artificial body and
every plastic cock ever made.

A response to my experience of becoming oriented is laser engraved into the piece of wood. The text begins on the outward-facing side of the wood, half of the text is cut off where it meets the mirror, the writing continues on the opposite side of the wood, engraved upside down legible only via the reflection of the mirror. The text reads:

Constantly feeling like the new kid. In the stages of settling in, orientating one's self, you look to those around you, neighbor kids, adults, families walking their dogs. I had to relearn what was cool and appropriate in each new place. I culminated my findings in an archive, of which I would use to construct myself. My performance was constantly affected, shifting, especially in new places. Feeling out of line, or out of place was the most visible I thought I could have been. Like a spotlight is placed onto you, highlighting your difference, it sparkles in the light, shines and hits the eye, attracting attention.

It's a feeling of being 'othered' or 'outsider' in a new environment. I had to relearn what was cool and appropriate in each new place. I culminated my findings in an archive, of which I would use to construct myself. My performance was constantly affected, shifting, especially in new places. Feeling out of line, or out of place was the most visible I thought I could have been. Like a spotlight is placed onto you, highlighting your difference, it sparkles in the light, shines and hits the eye, attracting attention.



Fig. 8 *The capacity to be affected*, 2019.

The Queer Body



10 years old

I watch the film *The Butterfly Effect*. It's disturbing to watch. The film illuminated my unconscious memory in a dense fog of forgetting. The characters are children and their father is sexually abusing them. The main character stands up against the abuse and puts an end to it. This is the first time that I understand what happened to me as negative.

In my work, I use the language of painting as a metaphor to reference the queer body. Martha Buskirk and Laura Hoptman argue that a process of copying or remaking allows contemporary art a continuation to exist in many new contexts in our current atemporal moment.²⁵ Buskirk proposes that much of the avant-garde activity of the nineteenth to the twentieth century was overlooked by Clement Greenberg's linear classifications of purity, and instead of dividing art into modernist categories of medium, what we should do instead is allow for a mixing of subject context to apply to multiple media at once:²⁶

In the place of medium divisions used to designate specific qualities, it is increasingly necessary to speak of painting, photography, and a range of other forms in terms of a series of conventions that may or may not be divorced from the medium itself. An earlier conception of medium has fractured into, on the one hand, a series of conventions that may or may not appear in conjunction with their traditional support, and an abundance of highly specific materials drawn from a multitude of sources. It is in this context that the copy appears in its many guises, as a mode of art production, as part of a process of remaking that allows the continuation of otherwise impermanent works, and in the quotations of both imagery and effects that appear in many contexts.²⁷

This is not unlike how Gay Minimalism²⁸ appropriated Minimalisms' traditional formal qualities of the egotistical masculine oeuvre devoid of emotional connection. The work of Felix Gonzalez-Torres has been a significant influence on my work in sculpture and installation. In speaking with a friend, she told me that she doesn't think that minimalism can ever be happy. While this may be true for Gonzalez-Torres' work, not only was he able to inflict a heart-wrenching sadness onto the viewer by the use of inanimate (often ephemeral) objects, through his work he also had an ability to convey feelings of wistful hope and beauty when connecting to his insatiable love and grief over the loss for his partner Ross Laycock.

²⁵ Hoptman, Laura J, *The Forever Now : Contemporary Painting in an Atemporal World* (New York: Museum of Modern Art 2014).

²⁶ Buskirk, Martha, *The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art* (Cambridge, Mass. : MIT Press), 2003, 111.

²⁷ *ibid*, 113.

²⁸ Pseudo movement unofficially lead by Felix Gonzalez-Torres taking from the formal qualities of Minimalism, resulting in a movement of Minimal Art imbued with queer emotional experiences, trauma, and narrative.



Fig. 10 Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *"Untitled" (Orpheus, Twice)*, 1991.

I have imagined how my work can invoke a queer feeling. My physical and emotional experiences with queerness are expressed by objectifying my body and by the act of painting. Through the physicality of employing non-painting materials in my practice, I seek to manifest the social construction, artifice, and performativity of identity in my work. In the series of paintings titled *Every single time I've ever been sad* (2019), I see the initial raw materials as a reference to my body, where I apply layers of paint or non-paint to the canvas. The labour of covering the surface could be considered my artistic metaphor, alluding to my experience with performing gender identity. Isabelle Graw states that in the context of painting there is a

metaphysical connection between an object and the one who made it.²⁹ Graw describes the viewer's feeling of sensing the "absent artist" as "the author's quasi-presence".³⁰ The subjectivity of my work is my body, the resulting painting acts as a meta-narrative, a product that archives the physical history of my labour, which references my experience with identity.



Fig. 11 *Every single time I've ever been sad*, 2019.

The painting's surface consists of textures that I consider a physical representation of the creation of identity. As Sara Ahmed suggests, the impressions and results of becoming oriented imprint on the surface of the skin like goosebumps.³¹ *Every single time I've ever been sad* (2019) plays with material surfaces that transform their colour before the viewer. They

²⁹Graw, Isabelle, *The Value of Liveliness: Painting as an Index of Agency in the New Economy. Painting Beyond Itself: The Medium in the Post-Medium Condition* (Sternberg Press, 2016).

³⁰Graw, Isabelle, *The Value of Liveliness Painting as an Index of Agency in the New Economy*, 20.

³¹Ahmed, Sara, *Queer Phenomenology*.

seem to change at different angles and become more or less dominant depending on the lighting and the viewer's vantage point. I employed this strategy as a way to connect my work with the experience of becoming oriented, the necessity to adapt to one's surroundings, alluding to a feeling of temporal self-discovery that is in a state of flux. The orientation of the viewer in the gallery space determines the colour of the object that they see in front of them. In many respects, the viewer is invited by the painting to move physically past and around it, to engage with it and to investigate its potential. By witnessing the painting's transformation while in tandem performing as part of the viewership that completes the piece.

Other materials used to flesh out this work include silicone, tiling grout, cement, and glitter. For me, they all function as signifiers—prompts for the viewer to connect to queerness. As any of my works evolve, I am in constant consideration of these signifiers, which take into account the conceptual, formal, aesthetic, and interactive aspects of the artwork. A rounded corner is a seemingly small gesture that subverts the straight, in terms of sexuality, and in the canon of art history.³² Materials and readymade objects are loaded and coded with associations based on our understanding of things in the world. Sometimes, these associations overlap creating an overt conceptual contradiction, tension, and/or critique. I am careful with how much I provide, as I want my work to be open to associations and interpretations, that allow for the viewer's experience to amalgamate with mine. Last year, I came across the political tactic and concept of tactile frivolity. The idea is that when a protest or rally is disguised in colourful, fun aesthetic materials, it attracts curiosity and attention from unsuspecting onlookers. Drawing passersby into what seems like a celebration or party, onlookers are lured into a political protest in disguise (which also helps, as it can go on rather unnoticed by the authorities). I find this strategy important given the impactful proactive history

³² Think Laura Hoptman, *The Forever Now*.

of activism and protest of queer rights movements, such as the Stonewall riots. Although not defined, I had been working with this idea of tactile frivolity for years. For example, I often use glitter, which for me signifies as a “queer” material, connected to a rich history of gay nightlife and drag culture. It’s a material meant to catch the viewer’s eye with an assertive and unapologetic reflection of light.³³ It draws the viewer in, and in the case of my work *Untitled (Painting #2)*(2019), its indeterminacy as a painting invites the viewer to decipher its materiality. An imposter, its form and shape refer to the history of painting, a history dominated by straight men, but in actuality, *Untitled (Painting #2)*(2019) is stretchy, glittery spandex. As William J. Simmons says: “Paint became analogous with the (straight, masculine) psyche of the artist, his authority to express himself.”³⁴ In the case of my paintings, the material queers the rectangular shape through embedded signifiers of both conventional femininity and masculinity. I have appropriated the formal qualities that speak to a canon of Western art history, which in my case are inscribed with queer material—queer experience—queer emotion.

Instead of a drag performance, I wrap a painting stretcher in glitter fabric, implying much of the same performance of gender. The feminine and queer associated material signifiers are complicated by the masculine and heteronormative signifiers of its form, allowing for its existence in the combination of these assumptions.

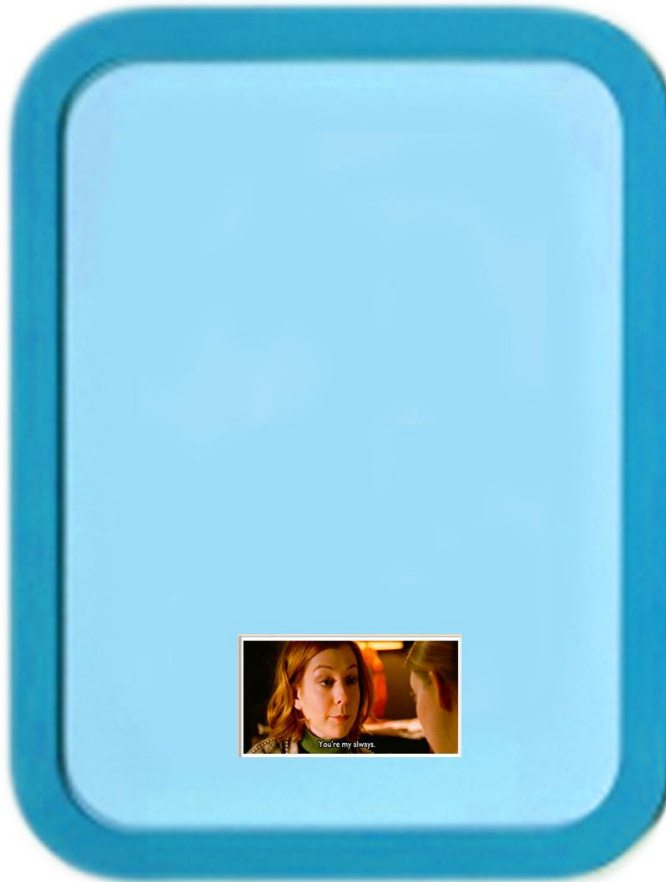
³³ Feminine or Queer associated material through its repetitive use in drag culture.

³⁴ Simmons, William J, *Notes on Queer Formalism* (Boston: Big, Red, and Shiny, 2013), 2.



Fig. 12 *Untitled (Painting #2)*, 2019

Queer Signifiers



11 years old

I watch Buffy the Vampire Slayer regularly with my mom. Its adult themes are inappropriate. But, through this show, I witness the positive reflection of the same-sex relationship between Willow and Tara. I secretly internalize the themes of queer love and heartbreak.

“What characterizes our cultural moment at the beginning of this new millennium is the inability—or perhaps the refusal—of a great many of our cultural artifacts to define the times in which we live. This is an unsettling and wholly unique phenomenon in Western culture and it should come as no surprise that it was first identified by a science-fiction writer, William Gibson, who in 2003 used the word atemporality to describe a new and strange state in the world, in which, courtesy of the internet, all eras seem to exist at once.”³⁵

In her pivotal text, Laura Hoptman describes the current moment that contemporary artists are working in as an *atemporal*³⁶ one. She claims that unlike past movements of revivalism, that today we are neither nostalgic for, nor critical of a time before us. Instead, with the pressure of the art historical canon coming down on us, artists seem to explode into any direction, or no direction, in particular, taking with us elements of the past to re-contextualize our present trajectory in art and politics. Coming from my experience I would agree and argue that atemporality is the paradox of our time, regarding queerness as an identity politics and similarly in the progression of contemporary art. As William J. Simmons states, “Queerness is informed by history; it is at once conceptual and contemporary and the product of countless years of physical work. We vainly consider it a product of our present moment, but it belongs to no moment.”³⁷ I would say this is true for both queerness and contemporary art, neither belongs to a particular moment. The chronological timeline of art history could not be any more tangled than now, loose ends are left untied, and new threads are drawn from iconic signifiers of the past. In painting particularly, within the structures of heteronormativity and Modernism,

³⁵ Hoptman, Laura, *the Forever Now: Painting in a Atemporal World*.

³⁶ Existing or considered without relation to time.

³⁷ Simmons, William J, *Notes on Queer Formalism*, 3.

many queer artists had and continue to have their identities erased throughout art history.³⁸ It is now time to repurpose elements of art history, to create new work that is seen and heard as distinctly queer.

The physical action of my work, as well as the reference to painting's history, serve my conceptual ideas that pertain to the performing of identity, and one's ability to become oriented. By disguising my work to fit into this legacy of painting, it suggests the phenomenon of queer history—the act of blending in or assimilating into the norm. This speaks to a shared queer experience of having to curate yourself for protection. For some, more than others, there are times when you have to perform within the heteronormative, as not to be detected, for the fear of being the target of micro-aggressions, abuse, and in some heavily documented cases, death.

As a queer artist living and working in the present, I feel a sense of utopia in two directions.³⁹ I look to the past that I cannot relate to in terms of queer history. I cannot claim to have been directly affected or relate to queer historical events such as the Holocaust, the Gay Liberation Movement; the AIDS pandemic, the Stonewall Riots, etc. However, being of the first generations “after aids”⁴⁰ I live in a moment of residual affect, as in being affected by all histories simultaneously in this atemporal moment. I feel a sense of having missed out⁴¹ on a pivotal time in history when queer identity was experienced and performed differently, as the world was different and affected or oriented the queer body differently. During the '60s-'70s, there seems to have been a genuine sense of queer community, a sense of queer utopia

³⁸ Smith, Richard, “Let's not assign gay artists to the obituary closet,” *The Guardian*, May 2008, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/artblog/2008/may/23/letsnotassigngayartiststo>

³⁹ “Nothing's lost forever. In this world, there's a kind of painful progress. Longing for what we've left behind and dreaming ahead. At least I think that's so.” -Tony Kushner.

⁴⁰ Barbu, Adam, *We Have Never Been “Post Aids”* (Canadian Art, 2017) In this article for Canadian Art, Barbu explains: we are a society with AIDS, and that we have never been post-AIDS.

⁴¹ Davies, Jon, Zoe Leonard, Jimmy Robert, Logan MacDonald, Sharon Hayes, and Ulrike Müller. *Coming After*. (Power Plant, 2012).

during a time when queer people were forced to create space in underground secrecy. I also look to the future that is uncertain, homosexuality seems to be equally as celebrated as it is condemned. I wonder what it is that I can do in this world to make a change. I am also overwhelmed by a feeling of stasis in regard to being an artist in the atemporal era. A large number of gay artists throughout history have had their identities erased and continue to be erased⁴² and the future trajectory of contemporary art is most certainly indeterminate. What I propose here, stemming from Hoptman, is to preserve queer histories and queer experiences, through my artmaking by continuously engaging with the current social and political discourse of identity politics. In doing so, I will be aligning myself with the art historians who are writing to include the narratives and identities of queer artists. Simmons argues: “Sexuality is not something that must be constantly embodied by an artist, one might create a work of art “as” a gay artist one day but not “as” a gay artist the next.”⁴³ For myself, maintaining visibility, and agency over my experience in conversations of queerness feels integral to my work as a queer artist. Simmons also writes: “Queer requires a not-queer, or “straight” in order to exist. Homosexuality has been understood as not only a perversion but also an inversion—what appears when you lift the mossy rock of proper social relations and look at the terrifying flora and fauna underneath. Queer defines itself in opposition to not-queer, but it need not always be in a state of antagonism.”⁴⁴ This is why my current work is urgent, as it rubs up against and responds to the overwhelming heteronormativity that prevails in society. Perhaps my goal is not to “queer” formalism but instead, engage within a discussion by impersonating and appropriating it.

⁴² Small, Zachary, “Why Can’t the Art World Embrace Robert Rauschenberg’s Queer Community?,” Artsy, May 2017, <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-art-embrace-robert-rauschenbergs-queer-community>

⁴³ Simmons, William J, *Notes on Queer Formalism*, 10.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 4.

Conclusion



26 years old

I consider and critically analyze representation in media and how it has affected me as a kid.

Why am I gay? How am I gay? These are questions I have asked myself repeatedly. When I looked to those around me, I didn't find any representation or mentorship in the heteronormative landscape of small-town Ontario. I think a lot about how and why my identity was shaped and how it was created. I think about the influences that leave an impression on a person as their self-hood is still malleable as if being kneaded like clay. Starting in my early teens, I have attempted to identify the impressions that have led me to struggle or to succeed in understanding my sexual and physical orientation in the world. Not only was I learning to come to terms with my sexuality, but I was also isolated with my feeling of otherness.

Any other name would smell as sweet is filled with personal references exploring otherness. The work is linked via nested narratives, queered signifiers found and made objects, readymade, and appropriated materials. Subtle strategies such as curving the frame corners and choosing muted rainbow matte colours to frame the images of *Godspeed* (2020) are my subversion of the straight, bringing to light my journey of becoming. Subtle but intentional clues that further queer the series for the viewer—my queering of the readymade—my journey of becoming. The choices of material signifiers throughout the exhibition stem from personal experiences and point to a shared experience of otherness. The installation of each work is considered to move the viewer from one work to another, I hope that they find time to consider their relationship to being oriented in the work, the gallery space, and in the world. I hope that there is a moment of potentiality that opens up like a window to another world—like a utopia—contrary to this current moment, this heteronormative time that we are in. Relationships can be built by bridging shared experiences of otherness, resulting in the feeling of sameness, or community. By presenting this opportunity to the viewer, like a utopian and fleeting moment, my work proposes the possibility for the viewer to see themselves through my

experiences. I wish that time would stop⁴⁵, for a moment of reflection on our current positions in the world, and how we wound up here.

⁴⁵ Felix Gonzalez-Torres. "Untitled" (Perfect Lovers). 1991

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