

AFTERLIVES
(Gender)queer Photographic
Self-Representation and Reenactment

by

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This thesis consists of a suite of photographic self-portraits and a critical introduction to the history of queer photographic self-representation through performative reenactment. The critical introduction theorizes that queer self-representation has a vested interest in history and its reenactment, whether as a disguise, or as a tool for political messaging and affirmations of existence. The creative component of the thesis is a series of large-scale color photographic self-portraits which reenact classic images from the history of “Western” art, with a marked interest in Catholic martyrdom and images previously used in queer artwork. As a whole, the photographs function as a series of identity-based historical reenactments, illustrated through performative use of the artist’s body and studio space. The photographs were intended for an exhibition that has been disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. The thesis documents their current state, and discusses their symbolism and development.

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Prelude

This thesis gathers a necessarily incomplete historical and critical account of (gender)queer self-representation through reenactment in photography as an answer to questions of my artistic belonging, and presents a series of my self-portraits made in conversation with that tradition. I say the historical introduction is necessarily incomplete for a few reasons: queer identity is often “mute” to mainstream history, many queer artists have been lost to violence and/or the HIV/AIDS crisis, and the true work of this thesis is to define my basis for and philosophy of making artwork, and to gesture towards the need for pluralized histories of queer art. I’d like to think (with my ignorance of my future) that this document marks a crossroads in my knowledge production: I have been photographing myself as an artistic practice for a decade, but, I am in my first year of consciously exploring my “out” trans* and genderqueer identity/ies (through self-portraiture, among other pains and practices). As such, this project is an opportunity for me to consider different temporalities of my practice in making images, and, to find and look to my predecessors for guidance. As my relationship to history is terse and fraught, the artwork-as-historical intervention is meant to be the bulk of the academic work, and yet this paper too seeks to synthesize certain fragments of the rich history of queer self-representation through photography, an act of lifting up challenged and silenced history. Prior to this portfolio, I had been making self-portraits that reenact history in gender and agency-centered terms for many years, but didn’t find my predecessors and movement until I peered into “Queer” art histories, which inform so much of the more abstract language of looking I had culled from more widely canonized photographers.

Because I believe transparency is important, I would like to make a note here about my identity and where it folds in to my practice as an artist and academic. The majority of my photographs are solitary exercises, which often place my body in front of the camera. This is to say, they are, for all intents and purposes, self-portraits, outside whatever other language I swaddle them in. My identity often holds some stake in the pictures I make, but I tend to elide it from discussion in order to center the language of the images, which may go on to exist without my defenses to back them. Both of these conditions hold true for the work in this thesis, but it comes from a time of particular intensity and pressure for my identity. I am white, assigned female at birth, transgender-nonbinary, raised middle-class, neurodivergent, chronically ill, and queer. All of these facets of my identity are to some degree manifest in my pictures, but I have been using my pictures, more consciously, in the past few years, to explore my gender, sexuality, and chronic illness. In my first term of undergraduate study, I was diagnosed with hereditary hemochromatosis. The only treatment for my body's inability to process iron was a routine of monthly phlebotomy, until the symptoms were under control. In those first months, I also began a habit of reenacting images in my home studio from Catholic painting and sculpture of martyrdom as a way of (at the time, subconsciously) searching for higher aesthetic meaning in my body's frequent vulnerable moments in the medical complex. Rather than improve, however, in the past few years I have seen numerous secondary complications and have frequented the hospital, making my interest in the depiction of suffering-with-a-purpose all the more urgent. The benefit, I suppose, of depicting historical suffering while within one's own, is the meaning has already been made of the historical kind, and reference and history can convey power to an isolated

subject. Further, depicting suffering other than my own gives me, ironically, just enough distance to depict my own. This portion of my identity is well-explored in my work. Less thoroughly explored is my ongoing, unfolding, queer identity. This thesis serves as a first attempt, but holds significant symbolism from my experience of illness, too. In *Cruising Utopia: the Then and There of Queer Futurity*, performance studies scholar José Esteban Muñoz theorizes that queer cultural production is an always-imperfect discourse, and that “Queerness is that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that something is missing.”¹ This is all to say that while this project is final in form, my approach to the representational problems will remain mutable for some time.

Queer artists, too, have had a sustained interest in depicting historical imagery, particularly that of Catholic martyrdom, and so my work finds its place in a history of several hundred years. The reasoning has changed over time, however, and this is what makes my work’s interest in the subject something that begs my research, careful looking, and questioning of my motives. Prior to the inception of the ongoing HIV/AIDS crisis, historical imagery of the prone body, particularly in the homosocial encounters oft provided by Catholic martyrdom and by Greco-Roman subjects, provided a ripe subject for a closeted (if need be) double entendre of reference.² However, the subject matter of martyrdom carried into the more openly political work of the AIDS crisis. There, it succeeded in making suffering that was specific, and, in many ways inaccessible, more universal. Today, queer photographers and artists continue to work with reenactment and make unique meaning of it, but because of this

¹ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: the Then and There of Queer Futurity*, (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 1.

² Richard Meyer, “Inverted Histories: 1885-1979” in *Art & Queer Culture*, (New York: Phaidon, 2019), 15-20.

history one finds that their reenactments are more plural, sited as they are in a larger climate of postmodern photography. While many still try to silence and eradicate LGBTQ+ existence, reenactment in queer photography speaks to plural queer histories. As we make speculative images of martyrdom, we reference now our longstanding existence and symbolism, our need for historical stewardship, and the ongoing effects of the AIDS crisis in our community.

My thesis' critical introduction to queer* self-representation approaches artists working with reenactment and constructed portraiture; the two, of course, being related. I define "reenactment" in this introduction rather loosely, in part because queer cultural production and history have a unique relationship. My introduction to the field of queer camera work and reenactment operates as a series of short studies of a select few works by several artists: the Baron Wilhelm von Gloeden, Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore, Derek Jarman, Catherine Opie, and Tourmaline. I have chosen to provide detailed formal analysis of this handful of artists whose work I find mine in dialogue with, and who define some aspect of the larger field, in the form of "case studies," as opposed to the impossible task that is a survey of every queer artist working with self-representation and reenactment using a camera. My research and many of the surveys of queer art I have encountered in English have a majority "Western," and further, American bias.

The second portion of this thesis includes facsimiles of my photographic work intended for a gallery show. I have worked for the better part of the year to make photographic self-portraits that find space for genderqueer identity in classical imagery, as I have lived for the better part of the year "out" as genderqueer and using they/them

pronouns. While I have found queer community, I am still not “out” as transgender in any traditional sense. This work thus has a complicated relationship in its symbolism to my being “closeted.” This work’s early development was supported largely by my time at Yale Norfolk School of Art’s summer residency in 2019, the applicant pool of which I was nominated to by the department of Art at the University of Oregon. The later development of this work was supported by my time in the terminal year programming in the Bachelor of Fine Arts photography concentration. This has not been without interruption by several things, and I feel it would be amiss to gloss over these experiences’ effects on my research and artistic practice. While executing this project (that is so tied to my personal life), I have experienced a myriad of complications from my chronic illness, which culminated in an emergency appendectomy and a month’s loss of ability. The mention of this here is not to insure against my work’s potential failure, but to embed my differently abled experience in my academic/archival existence. This project’s intended completion has also been interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, and so discussion of the work’s form for gallery exhibition is relegated in part to speculation based on early prototypes. Nonetheless, the content and technique of each image receives discussion and analysis here, with thorough discussion of the visual culture(s) I reference in each image. I have, for some time, been troubled by the way my artistic and academic work is tied up in complicated relationships of ability and access, and this thesis in its successes and failures certainly evidences that struggle.

(Gender)queer Photographic Self-Representation and Reenactment

Critical Introduction

What can history and photography do for queer artists, and what does queerness do for history and photography? Both practices are forms of representation that have been used against marginalized peoples as forces of categorization since their inception, yet, both practices, put to use, offer, at the very least, tools of validation and legitimization for queer artists representing themselves and their culture(s). Thus, we find history frequently taken up as a topic by queer artists, particularly those using cameras. The artistic and cultural practice of “reenactment” is a subset of art’s relation to history. The two practices (photography and history), through image and word, work to *make real* and *make sensible* events of the past (as Roland Barthes’ dictum has it, the photograph shows us *what has been*)³. Both practices can be constructive, even as photography is touted as a selective medium— “an attainable ‘critical grasp of history,’” writes Robert Blackson, “is part of the myth of history itself.”⁴

“Queer” is a historical slur, wholly recuperated for some, and still painful for others. It is frequently taken up by historians and theorists of modern and contemporary art to construct an identity-based visual culture. In some studies, “queer” is specific in that it gestures to the unclassifiable nature of a person’s non-cisgendered expression, trans* body, intersex body, or non-heterosexual practices, and, in others, it serves as an umbrella term for persons with nonnormative genders, nonnormative sexualities, trans* experience, intersex experience, queer identity, and questioning identity. Admittedly,

³ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 79.

⁴ Robert Blackson, “Once More ... with Feeling: Reenactment in Contemporary Art and Culture,” *Art Journal* 66:1 (2007), 37.

the two uses of the term have some overlap, and hearken to the move toward shared politics, as well as a history of shared visual culture between lesbian, gay, bi, pan, polyamorous, trans*, intersex, and people with nonnormative genders and sexualities for whom (such) labels might not apply. “Queer,” within and without the context of art theory, exists at the edge of legibility. In one such anthology using “queer” as the latter, *Art & Queer Culture*, Catherine Lord and Richard Meyer note:

We have chosen the term ‘queer’ in the knowledge that no single word can accommodate the sheer expanse of cultural practices that oppose normative heterosexuality. In its shifting connotation from everyday parlance to phobic epithet to defiant self-identification, ‘queer’ offers more generous rewards than any simple inventory of sexual practices or erotic object choices. It makes more sumptuous the space between best fantasy and worst fear.⁵

In some respects, this thesis follows suit by using “queer” as a placeholder to describe a range of identities, but I wish to note here that for all the political and representational affinities held by people with nonnormative genders and nonnormative sexualities, the placeholder term of “queer” can be impossibly broad. Another common habit of compilers and surveyors of queer art is to elide mention of nonnormative gendered experiences in their front matter, even as they often identify complication of gendered signifiers as one hallmark of Queer art. Queer art histories are often searching documents in terms of media, genre, and myths of artistic grandeur, and make strides toward an intersectional politic.

This thesis also takes up the question of the benefits and problems of photographic self-representation. By “photographic self-representation” in this document I mean photographs by a cultural subgroup of members of the same group,

⁵ Catherine Lord and Richard Meyer, referring here to a popular protest image of a person carrying a sign that reads “I am your worst fear, I am your best fantasy,” *Art & Queer Culture*, 7-8.

and thus anything from a self-portrait to an image by a queer artist about queer history, whose literal subjects may or may not identify in the same manner as those who they represent. I should elaborate further and say that I have taken some liberty with what I count as photography, including, in Barthes' words, both those who have *posed* before the camera and those who have *passed* before the camera (for Barthes, the distinction between photography and film).⁶ Queer people, particularly trans* and genderqueer people, suffered a particular dearth of self-representation in the fine arts leading to the current millennium. Yet, the uptick in representations, now, comes alongside an uptick in violence, particularly for transgender people, and even more particularly transgender people of color. Tourmaline, with coeditors Stanley and Burton, notes the dire situation with eloquence in the first sentences of the anthology *Trap Door: Trans Cultural*

Production and the Politics of Visibility:

We are living in a time of trans visibility. Yet we are also living in a time of anti-trans violence. [...] We know that when produced within the cosmology of racial capitalism, the promise of "positive representation" ultimately gives little support or protection to many, if not most, trans and gender nonconforming people, particularly those who are low-income and/or of color—the very people whose lives and labor constitute the ground for the figuration of this moment of visibility.

This is the trap of the visual: it offers— or more accurately, it is frequently offered to us as— the primary path through which trans people might have access to livable lives.⁷

The queer relationship to photography is not a uniform field: for different subgroups of the queer community representing themselves, photography means different things, as art and as evidence. Photography renders visible and physical

⁶ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 78.

⁷ Tourmaline, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton, "Known Unknowns," In *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*, (Cambridge; London: MIT Press, 2017), xv. Bars to transgender participation, education, and recognition in the fine art world are also elaborated upon at length in the final essay of the book by Jeannine Tang, "Contemporary Art and Critical Transgender Infrastructures," 363-392.

whatever happens before the camera, but it, as Barthes has it, is also surrendered to the subjective viewer. In the eighties and nineties, American scholars and photographers made investigations of photography's relevance to their terms of identity, and these investigations form a broader understanding of photography today. The works of Tee Corinne, Honey Cottrell, Carol Newhouse, Morgan Gwenwald, and J.E.B., among others, for example, were inquiries in what a lesbian, feminist photograph should and could be. Scholar Jay Prosser investigated the genre of the transsexual photograph, complicating the theory of Roland Barthes, lifting the early work of Del LaGrace Volcano, perturbed by the kind of violence that a subjective viewer might do to an image that holds gender in the balance, "concretizations of an imperceptible self."⁸ Today, historian Richard Meyer notes that many of these searches of the medium have led to the establishment of some formal bases for queer photographers, and provide histories ripe for reference and reenactment.⁹

"Reenactment" as a term describing artistic and cultural practice refers to repetitions of past actions within the context of creative practice. However, "reenactment" arguably exists on a spectrum, and could reference in an art practice anything from "subconscious" archetypes, to archival interventions, to specific historical images and occurrences. Cristina Baldacci compares creative reenactment to the theatrical and faithful ones we see in American historical sites¹⁰ and elsewhere, writing: "unlike the act of restaging related to 'Living History,' which implies the idea

⁸ Jay Prosser, "Transsexuality in Photography: Fielding the Referent," in *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 211.

⁹ Richard Meyer, "Queer Photography?," *Aperture* 218, "Queer," Spring 2015, 29.

¹⁰ Blackson writes that the purpose of such performances is to instill reverence and empathy for history within an audience, but that such performances relegate reenactment to the camp of conservatism. "Once More ... with Feeling: Reenactment in Contemporary Art and Culture," 33.

of replicating as faithfully as possibly the original event, reenactment as an art form is an interpretative gesture that never produces a true repetition.”¹¹ The most frequent occurrences of reenactment studies are seen in writing on performance artwork, but, even these studies acknowledge the necessity of the camera’s presence to record such acts. Baldacci’s chapter-long review of reenactment practices within the text *Re-: an Errant Glossary* is helpful for evaluating the basic stages and concerns of such a project. She understands the process of the artist as an

appropriation [which] is then followed by a reactivation, which usually undergoes a process of manipulation and/or migration from one medium to another, and by re-circulation gives the images new values, meanings, and configurations.¹²

Reenactment, as Baldacci notes, has long been part of the artistic process, for all of modernism and capitalism’s attempts to champion originality as the chief hallmark of the artist.¹³ Baldacci names the central issues of reenactment as questions: “who accesses the archive?” and “how can artists make those images accessible again?”¹⁴ Access to history *and* understanding when it is referenced are, at their core, intersectional issues with real consequences of cultural power. It is thus telling whether an artist makes their “sources” visible or invisible, legible or illegible, or somewhere in-between for their viewer, but these actions can have multiple motives, such as to maintain visual power or protect their community. To that effect, Robert Blackson notes “the tendency to construct history to legitimize one’s own actions” present in contemporary U.S. governmental affairs, and ties artists’ reenactments instead to a need

¹¹ Cristina Baldacci, ‘Reenactment: Errant Images in Contemporary Art’, in *Re-: An Errant Glossary*, Edited by Christoph F. E. Holzhey and Arnd Wedemeyer, (Berlin: ICI Berlin, 2019), 60.

¹² *Ibid.*, 58.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 58.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 65.

for agency in the context of history that is otherwise denied us.¹⁵ Reenactment, in short, is deeply political.

There is a difference for Baldacci, between reenactments of archival sources, indefinite sources, and reenactments of things better known. To quote Baldacci again:

When artists deal with images that re-emerge ‘mute’ from either the archive or an indefinite time and context, one of their first concerns is usually to understand how those images can be effectively reactivated and resignified without betraying them. In most cases, the reenactment of mainly archival materials is a unique opportunity to put history in motion through original counter-narratives. History, then, is transformed from a succession of supposedly universally significant facts, which usually produce and reiterate a dominant cultural narrative, into a counter-narrative where archival documents are revived, or if necessary, recreated *ex novo* (through fiction) as witnesses and personal devices of memory and resistance.¹⁶

It would be naïve to understand the past (particularly in the spare, near-undeniable form of archival materials) and its present existence as recuperable in any straightforward manner, or in all occurrences. Often in this context, the work of Saidiya Hartman is invoked and discussed. Hartman, and, later, Tavia Nyong’o propose the practice of critical *fabulation* as one approach for Black cultural production to violent gaps and mutenesses of the archive. Nyong’o describes fabulation, and introduces the term “Afro-fabulation” in the context of Black cultural theory as follows: “a fabulist is a teller of tales, but he or she also discloses the powers of the false to create new possibilities.”¹⁷ Hartman’s project in which she first proposes critical fabulation is very specific: her goal is to render visible an incommensurable violence: how little is recorded of Black women and sexual violence in the Atlantic slave trade. As such, Hartman reaches an impasse with the limits of representation, and finds the creative

¹⁵ Blackson, “Once More ... With Feeling,” 36.

¹⁶ Baldacci, “Reenactment,” 64.

¹⁷ Tavia Nyong’o, “Unburdening Representation,” *The Black Scholar* 44:2 (2014), 71.

potential of refusal to be the only way forward that remains honest to her subject.

Hartman's project refuses some of the typical expectations for reenactment. She writes:

“the intent of this practice is not to *give voice* to the slave, but rather to imagine what cannot be verified.”¹⁸ Hartman notes how tempting it might be for a scholar to fill in such gaps, and claims that “narrative restraint” in the face of the perceived fullness of the archive is, instead, urgent for such work.¹⁹

The *self-* prefix of “self-representation” in combination with “reenactment” is a tricky one, for gender and sexuality are only one piece of a given person's identity. Generally, we might define the subcategories of queer self-representation through reenactment as reenactment of three things: one's own history, queer history, and history generally. Other art historians have noted within the practices of modern queer artists a particular interest in history. For Richard Meyer's collected examples in *Art & Queer Culture*, such gestures are “tactical reclamations of the past,” both “historical and fictive.”²⁰ In the face of history which so often leaves out, neutralizes, or softens queer experience, early queer artists, particularly preidentitarian ones, were creative in their reference, in in their reenactments we find what some might call a “queering” of history. While many lens-interested queer artists have an interest in reenactment and history, their approaches are, as within any subset of human identity, varied. Early queer artists used history (usually classical) as a thin cover for less-accepted interests, others explicated in their work the ways gender is reenacted for and historicized by the camera, and others still lay claim to queer histories both hidden and in the making. In queer approaches to history, the moments in time white predecessors have flirted with

¹⁸ Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” *Small Axe* 26:12 no. 2 (2008), 12.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 12.

²⁰ Meyer, “Inverted Histories,” *Art & Queer Culture*, 15.

or taken up the role of the oppressor are less accounted for, as opposed to the popular subject of the martyr.²¹ Jack Halberstam's critical text *the Queer Art of Failure*, and earlier work such as *Female Masculinity* considers such imagery and how its legacy might be considered. During and following the riots at Stonewall, tireless fights for rights, and general encouragements to come out, queer art's approach to history has shifted. History became a more active interest, and, specifically queer history has become a point of access.

What follows this thematic introduction as opposed to a generalizing survey is an in-depth study of a selection of queer camera-based artists doing reenactment, culled from as early as the patenting of photography (and the earliest categorizations of homosexuality and genderqueer identities), to the present day. Each artist has their own context, set of concerns, and range of (queer) content they reenact.

²¹ Jason James Hartford, *Sexuality, Iconography, and Fiction in French: Queering the Martyr*, (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 15.

Wilhelm von Gloeden's Classical Past

In 1878, an ailing painter and academic, the Prussian Baron Wilhelm von Gloeden (b. 1856 - d. 1931) received the recommendations of his doctors to retire to the Mediterranean for his health.²² So, at the age of 22, supported heartily by his socioeconomic status, the Baron von Gloeden settled in the Sicilian fishing village of Taormina, where he stayed for just over fifty years, until his death. However, words like “retire” do not describe the sort of production upon which von Gloeden embarked in Taormina, although “settle” reminds us of the colonial power that backed his uprooting and artistic undertaking.²³ Accounts vary, but von Gloeden seems to have spent the first decade in leisure, and in frequent sexual trysts with many local men far his junior, going so far as to host frequent and renowned “Bacchanalia.” However, he lost financial support after that first decade, and so, picked up a photographic practice that seems to have engaged as models these same young people with whom he was intimate. In the next forty years, von Gloeden embarked on a veritable photographic enterprise that has, in posterity, taken on a grand mythos within the history of queer artwork.

Von Gloeden made thousands of glass negatives, but the exact number is not known, as much of the archive is lost to the obscenity raids conducted by Italian Fascist police in the years immediately following his death.²⁴ It is, thus, difficult to say what the overall character of his archive was, but he was certainly known for posing young men, alone, and in small groups, in vaguely classicizing costumes, seminude, and nude

²² Jason Goldman, ““The Golden Age of Gay Porn:” Nostalgia and the Photography of Wilhelm von Gloeden,” *GLQ* 12:2 (2006), 238.

²³ *Ibid.*, 252. Here Goldman quotes Patricia Berman’s criticism of von Gloeden,

²⁴ Goldman provides a detailed account of the known history of the fragmentation of von Gloeden’s archive and its custodians. *Ibid.*, 244.



Fig. 1.1: Baron Wilhelm von Gloeden, *Untitled [Two Male Youths Holding Palm Fronds]*, about 1885 – 1905.

Albumen silver print, 23.3 × 17.5 cm (9 3/16 × 6 7/8 in.), 84.XM.631.5, The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles. Digital image courtesy the Getty's Open Content Program. Sold to the J. Paul Getty Museum by Samuel Wagstaff, Jr., 1984. Image description: two youths with short hair are shown in monochrome, one nude with their back to the camera in a contrapposto stance holding an upside down palm frond stands before the other in white robes leaning against a stone column.

among the ruins and landscapes of Taormina. The drive to create classicizing, referential photographic imagery at the time was common. The artist's alleged sexual

practices certainly underline the average view of the imagery, for the figures are made smooth, iconic, in part by the artist's application of body paint,²⁵ and the backgrounds are blurred out— that is, they are nothing but backgrounds. For his culture and time, scholar Kathrin Peters writes that “the homoerotic connotations of the pictures were still overlaid with an either artistic or scientific interest in anatomy.”²⁶ Jason Goldman's thorough essay on the artist's work and reception, titled “The Golden Age of Gay Porn,” notes that the known inadequacy of von Gloeden's archive and the nostalgia surrounding the loss has bolstered frequent and varied resurfacings of von Gloeden's imagery in queer visual culture, high and low. These resurfacings and the strong claim made by modern queer culture on the artist is perhaps more fascinating than the work of the artist itself, which incorporates much of the practice of an average Victorian photographer, but makes it lucrative through homoeroticism. The work has little to say, too, about the distant past of the landscape it inhabits. In the anthology *Art and Queer Culture*, historian Richard Meyer writes that the photographs “reveal rather more about the homoerotic imagination of the late nineteenth century than about the sexual culture or customs of Greco-Roman antiquity.”²⁷

Von Gloeden's practice, we know, was performative and “out” as queer in the way one could be in early modern Europe, but it was also commercial. Thus, there are as many distortions of the archive as there are holes. The artist's sexual and artistic fame perhaps bled into each other, and even in his lifetime he saw a measure of success.

²⁵ Ibid., 240. See also Kathrin Peters, “Anatomy is Sublime: the Photographic Activity of Wilhelm von Gloeden and Magnus Hirschfeld,” in *Not Straight from Germany: Sexual Publics and Sexual Citizenship Since Magnus Hirschfeld*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017), 182.

²⁶ Peters, “Anatomy is Sublime,” 182.

²⁷ Meyer, “Inverted Histories,” *Art & Queer Culture*, 15. Meyer cites here the work of Goldman as well.

He invited various members of the elite to visit his studio, notably, Oscar Wilde, but,

Jason Goldman accounts:

Von Gloeden's nudes are thought to have circulated in a clandestine market that extended from Sicily to continental Europe, Britain, and the United States, to the extent that von Gloeden's identity as an artist is often eclipsed by his identity as an early pornographer.²⁸

However, perhaps the most fascinating circulation of von Gloeden's imagery within his lifetime occurred right at its end, and already detached from his name and reputation. In the essay "Anatomy is Sublime: the Photographic Activity of Wilhelm von Gloeden and Magnus Hirschfeld," Kathrin Peters bestows attribution onto a wayward von Gloeden photograph that found its way back to Germany—back into a publication by frequently studied Weimar sexologist and pioneer of transgender medicine, Magnus Hirschfeld.²⁹

In the early decades of the twentieth century, Western medicine began categorizing and establishing medical narratives of nonnormative gender expression and nonnormative sexuality. Peters traces Hirschfeld's unorthodox (by today's standards) methodology for gathering visual evidence, which included asking known trans* people in his community to self-represent, and the collection of images from Berlin's burgeoning queer underground media.³⁰ The photograph in question shows, in black and white, a nude figure seated before a floral backdrop, cropped from the head to the knees.³¹ The figure has long dark hair, pulled back. Their otherwise placid face looks far to the right of the camera. Their body is turned to the side: the shoulders seem narrow, their breasts

²⁸ Goldman, "The Golden Age of Gay Porn," 243.

²⁹ Peters, "Anatomy is Sublime." For a brief and concise introduction to Hirschfeld, his work's censorship by the Nazi party, and his influence on American transgender medicine, see Susan Stryker, *Transgender History: the Roots of Today's Revolution*, (New York: Seal Press, 2017), 54-64.

³⁰ More on Hirschfeld's practice of image collection can be found in Katie Sutton, "Sexology's Photographic Turn: Visualizing Trans Identity in Interwar Germany," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 27:3, (2018). See also for a discussion of the early genre standards of "transvestite photography."

³¹ Peters, "Anatomy is Sublime," 175, figure 71.

are pronounced, and their hips appear wide. The figure has a penis, which shows just above their legs. In Hirschfeld's publication, the floral background is replaced by a light grey color-field, so the gendered embodiment in the photograph becomes starkly isolated, and enters the language of medicine.³² It is unclear exactly how von Gloeden's image arrived in Hirschfeld's publication on "sexual intermediaries," but its arrival evidences von Gloeden's work's ability to speak to gender performance for the original intended audience as much as it spoke to sexual practices. Furthermore, it speaks to the always-complicated legacy of queer self-representation and its relationship to institutional boundaries of identity (legal, medical, etc.).

Von Gloeden's photographs have enjoyed a popular postmodern afterlife. Goldman traces several resurfacings of the images in popular culture, where von Gloeden's images enter the languages of pulp, camp, and pornography. Von Gloeden in his continued revival caught the attention of critical theorist Roland Barthes, and merited a lengthy review. The artist, for Barthes, disappoints (as many do), because the very medium of photography betrays him.³³ Von Gloeden entered the collections of the modern queer photographic elite, as well, such as that of Samuel Wagstaff (fig. 1.1), longtime partner of premier queer American photographer Robert Mapplethorpe. Thus, one can do more than imagine that Von Gloeden's imagery has continued to echo in queer photography of the contemporary moment. It is arguable that their status as photographs makes them "fail" the imagination less than it used to, for the bodies and the power relations are distanced thoroughly from the contemporary queer universe. Because they are evidence for age and class relations that are frankly unacceptable

³² Ibid., 178, figure 73.

³³ Ibid., 183. Peters quotes the Barthes essay at length.

today, to a much further extent than other slightly earlier art photographers' oeuvres (such as that of Lewis Carroll), their continued place of honor in the canon of queer art seems to rely thoroughly on their relegation to that deep past.

Claude Cahun /and/ Marcel Moore

The (typically isolated) artist Claude Cahun (b. 1894 – d. 1954) was born with a different name, and nearly every historian mentions it. Only those very close to Cahun used the artist’s birth name. Cahun’s “chosen artistic name,” as biographer Jennifer L. Shaw calls it, eschews the artist’s female assigned-at-birth gender and Jewish patrilineal heritage for what would have been perceived in the artist’s time and place of interwar France as a neutrality.³⁴ Cahun was one of the Surrealists: a writer, a photographer, a practitioner of theater, and an activist, among other pursuits. For most of her adult life, Cahun cohabitated and collaborated with Marcel Moore (b. 1892 – d. 1972) (also a chosen name), lover and stepsister. The two spent some time in Paris, tight with the Surrealist milieu before moving to the island of Jersey, where the artists ran an artistic campaign to encourage desertion by German soldiers occupying the island. The pair was discovered, and nearly lost their lives, but were pardoned at the last minute.³⁵ A frequent point of collaboration between Cahun and Moore is a sizable archive of photographs of Cahun, which have been viewed by most as self-portraits. The scholarly attitude toward the ontology of these images until the millennium was rather fixed. Newer views of the archive have reconsidered collaboration, but none are quite as forthright as Tirza True Latimer:

I have come to view the oeuvre attributed to Cahun as the product of collaboration in which she imagined, composed, performed, and her partner

³⁴ Gen Doy in the essay “Another Side of the Picture: Looking Differently at Claude Cahun,” notes that the name “does not necessarily imply refusal of Jewishness, but more a desire to reject fixed identities of all kinds.” In *Don’t Kiss Me: the Art of Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore*, edited by Louise Downie, (London: Tate Publishing, 2006), 77.

³⁵ For the most thorough biographical information on Cahun, see Jennifer L. Shaw, *Exist Otherwise: the Life and Works of Claude Cahun* (London: Reaktion Books, 2017), and *Don’t Kiss Me*, edited by Louise Downie.

Marcel Moore envisioned, visualized, imaged. Hardly anyone would deny that the photographs typically described as “autoportraits” result from some collaboration, since Cahun could not possibly have realized the majority of them alone, even with the aid of a timer or cable release. This observation alone suffices to compromise the word *self* in the generally accepted formulation “self-portraiture.” Yet the categorical designation has provided scholars, curators, and other contemporary viewers with what seems a viable term of convenience. [...] What social norms and artistic hierarchies does the erasure of Moore accommodate and to what extent did the two artists attempt to forestall (or, in effect, foreordain) this erasure?³⁶



Fig. 1.2: Claude Cahun (and Marcel Moore), Untitled, 1927

Jersey Heritage Trust, Cahun and Moore Collection. 4.6 x 3.5.” Image description: Black-and-white image of Cahun against a black backdrop in a hybrid of Parisian feminine attire and workout gear. Her face, covered in makeup and with tightly curled hair, stares down at you, as she holds her flattened chest confidently. The shirt she wears has false nipples attached to it and reads: “I am in training / Don’t kiss me.” She holds a barbell that sports the names of Hergé comic characters Totor and Popol.

³⁶ Tirza True Latimer, “Entre Nous: Between Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore,” *GLQ* 12:2 (2006), 198.

In the photographs (which reappear with frequency, somewhat cut up, turned around, layered and recontextualized, in collages), Cahun appears in many gendered visages, augmented by lighting, environment, costume, and makeup. Some are utterly fabricated, and some seem pared down: one can see the flickerings of Cahun's own changing expressions under the changing expressions in the photographs, particularly with (slightly) long-term decisions like the buzzing of all her hair. In some of these photographs, gendered signs proliferate, and in others, it seems that Cahun has been emptied of it.

Cahun and Moore were well-supported financially, and each received a thorough education in the humanities. Cahun's early work had a professed interest in the gendered politics of history. Her text *Héroïnes*, an address to Ovid's *Heroïdes*, for example, took the stories of different well known assigned-female characters from myth and history, and retold them, with a rather sardonic eye, from the women's point-of-view.³⁷ On the project, Kristine von Oehsen writes:

Heroïnes provided Cahun with an opportunity to experiment with perception and public restriction, as well as the reception and projection of appearance. She gave heroïnes from Western history who inevitably are mute in historic accounts, a voice, which allows them to relate a potential alternative view of events and especially motives which may have led to them.³⁸

The *Héroïnes* were not published in full in Cahun's lifetime. Further, the photographic material in the extant shared archive has a much less pointed relationship to history, perhaps by nature, although later textual projects by Cahun and Moore, such as *Aveux Non Avenus* (roughly translatable as "Disavowals," put forth as Cahun's

³⁷ Katharine Conley, "Claude Cahun's Counter-Archival *Héroïnes*," *Don't Kiss Me*, 24.

³⁸ Kristine von Oehsen, "The Lives of Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore," *Don't Kiss Me*, 14.

autobiography) and *Les Jeux Uraniens* are described to have maintained the same critical edge, and evidence of the pair's combined encyclopedic knowledge of queer forerunners.³⁹ Latimer notes Cahun described herself as plagued by a "dreadful mania" for "citation and recitation."⁴⁰ In the portraits, we see reenactment of cultural and social types, but it is veiled in the Surrealist bricolage's vast universe of symbols.⁴¹ Latimer argues that the photographs are accessible in a way Cahun's more direct citations are not.⁴²

The photographs of Cahun's body are usually attributed to Cahun alone, but her partner Marcel Moore must have been actively involved in the taking of nearly every one: releasing the shutter, communicating about composition, pose, and so on. As such, scholar Abigail Solomon-Godeau postulates that we might categorize these photographs not just as part of the history of women's images about the self, but as images that might be building a visual language of lesbianism.⁴³ Solomon-Godeau is careful in this theory, however, noting that Cahun did not self-identify as a lesbian, but was "conversant and engaged with contemporary discourses about homosexuality," and emphasizes that Cahun and Moore lived in the Paris of the 20's, which is known now for its lesbian community and cultural producers.⁴⁴ Tirza True Latimer speculates that the pair made careful study of past homosexual (and rumored to be homosexual) lives

³⁹ Latimer on *Les Jeux Uraniens*' composition: "It is tempting to speculate that Moore, who compiled a personal dictionary of quotations, selected the epigraphs and laid them down like challenges for her lover to take up, or arrows to follow." "Entre Nous," 202-203.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 202.

⁴¹ Cahun, for example, takes on the attire of what Abigail Solomon-Godeau calls a "swami or yogi," but historians tend to comment on how this gesture destabilizes gender, instead of how it might enforce colonial norms. See Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "The Equivocal 'I': Claude Cahun as Lesbian Subject," in *Inverted Odysseys*, edited by Shelley Rice, 117.

⁴² Tirza True Latimer, "Narcissus and Narcissus: Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore," *In Women Together/Women Apart: Portraits of Lesbian Paris*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press), 68.

⁴³ Solomon Godeau, "The Equivocal I," 116-17.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 117.

and narratives, and, notes, further: “this homocentric set of references formed the constellation within which they first imagined themselves and their relationship.”⁴⁵ In fact, it seems Cahun didn’t vocally self-identify as any gender/queer category, preferring to identify with more slippery referents, such as the “neuter,” or the Wildean “love that dare not speak its name.”⁴⁶ In the histories there is a noticeable discomfort around Cahun’s gender expression in photographs, which manifests most readably as earnest insistences regarding her womanhood. Cahun is subject to frequent ahistorical gestures, the efforts of which attempt to align her with essential womanhood and/or lesbianism, and essential postmodernist thought on the self. To call Cahun and Moore “queer” photographers is also a contestable gesture, yet, their work is an extended exploration of visual practice that folds in not only the subjectivity of nonnormative sexuality, but the history of that identity, too.

⁴⁵ Latimer, “Entre Nous,” 203.

⁴⁶ Latimer, “Entre Nous,” 202.

Derek Jarman & (Queer) Edward II

Described by those who remember their original context, the films of Derek Jarman (b. 1942 – d. 1994) were an incursion upon British television’s sanitized representations of gay life (and exclusion of most other LGBTQ identities).⁴⁷ Jarman’s work today continues to be something of an acquired taste, somewhere between proper cinema and art film, although it has garnered more advocacy and recognition in recent years. Niall Richardson’s study of the auteur tracks a turn against Jarman by critics within his lifetime, particularly when his filmmaking became part of his politics. His films, in particular, are urgent and vital queer representations. Jarman “thought of himself primarily as a painter who also made films,”⁴⁸ and trained in literature, history, art history, and painting before becoming a filmmaker. He lived during a time of marked, open hostility towards queer people in Great Britain, and in his lifetime saw Thatcherism, fueled by hysteria surrounding AIDS, make impossible restrictions on the rights of queer people, their representation, and their cultural production. Jarman was diagnosed HIV-positive at the height of his career as an artist, and had his life and work cut short by the disease. His work’s particular saliency and ingenuity lies in the many ways he protested denial of his existence with the words and images that British culture had historically used to uphold the status quo. This is not to say that making meaning out of this trauma such as this should be the standard upheld for a queer artist, particularly since those with closer relationships to the disease than my own write of its particular illogic and unspeakability.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Niall Richardson, *The Queer Cinema of Derek Jarman*, (London; New York: I.B. Tauris, 2009), 1-7.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁴⁹ Lee Benjamin Huttner, “Body Positive: the Vibrant Present of Derek Jarman’s *Edward II*,” *Shakespeare Bulletin* 32:3, (2014), 400.

A common “trick” of Jarman’s work is to resituate imagery from Western painting and the literary Canon in a frame that makes the works’ queerer tendencies visible. There are many examples of this in his work, and several feature-length films devoted to the practice, which theorist Niall Richardson describes as “palimpsestic.”⁵⁰ More specifically, one can find many moments in his films that are sharp, postmodern camera-based reenactments of well-known Western art. His very first, *Sebastiane*, notable for its’ lines being delivered entirely in Latin, reenacts the first portion of the Catholic saint Sebastian’s story for the Super-8 camera. The film’s ending sequence depicting the saint’s first martyrdom is the most striking, first making direct reference to the Renaissance paintings of the passive saint riddled with arrows, but, ending with a cut shot with a fisheye lens that gives us the saint’s perspective. *Caravaggio*, Jarman’s first feature film and first collaboration with Tilda Swinton, creates a whole universe out of the muteness of art history, putting pictures to the whispers that Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio was, perhaps, (gasp!) a living, practicing homosexual. The frisson, arguably, of the piece, are the moments when diegetic motion brings into frame a perfect reenactment of one of Caravaggio’s paintings, but also David’s paintings, or Millais’ and so on.⁵¹ Jarman’s oeuvre has a particular gravitation towards imagery that was already being coopted by the queer community in some respect. His work’s relationship to the reenacted imagery is subtle and complicated: the visual paring-down of his sets and costumes lays a trap for the viewer to imagine that his relationship to history as a whole is simplistic. Jarman is, in fact, unpacking and evaluating the imagery’s importance to the queer community, and reenacting it as he does so. Scholars

⁵⁰ Richardson, *The Queer Cinema of Derek Jarman*, 89.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 99, 153.

often quote a strikingly insincere line that appears in his biography, and the epigram to a companion book to his film, *Queer Edward II*, in relation to this. Jarman makes note: “How to make a film of a gay love affair and get it commissioned. Find a dusty old play and violate it.”⁵² In some ways this seems an affront to the painstaking detail with which Jarman approaches each of his references, and yet it speaks to the more desperate and urgent message of his work, too, the elements that were less concerned with accuracy and more with producing as much as he did. It speaks also to the real struggles Jarman faced seeking funding for his work during his lifetime, and the visual economy (which opened criticism for historical inaccuracy) in which he was forced to operate in many of his pieces.⁵³

Edward II, the film the previous quote references, is one of the director’s most stark political pieces. Built out of his relationship with the British nonviolent activist group OutRage!, the film reenacts a Renaissance script by Marlowe about a medieval king who has been rumored to be gay, using a juxtaposition of ‘timeless’ and very contemporary visuals.⁵⁴ His sketchbooks from the period evidence the remarkable folding-in of OutRage! to the imagery of Western painting he was more familiar with. Like the earlier *Caravaggio*, the film includes moments that compositionally reenact well-known paintings.⁵⁵ While making the film, Jarman was in and out of the hospital, and experienced police discipline for his activism.⁵⁶ The British government had just

⁵² Quoted here from Alexandria Parsons, “History, Activism, and the Queer Child in Derek Jarman’s *Queer Edward II*,” *Shakespeare Bulletin* 32:3, (2014), 414.

⁵³ Bette Talvacchia, “Historical Phallicy: Derek Jarman’s *Edward II*,” *Oxford Art Journal* 16:1 (1993), 112.

⁵⁴ Bette Talvacchia notes: “What Marlowe had to say in 1593 was already a reassemblage of the past, a reworking of medieval documents and legends that chronicled the events of Edward II’s reign in the early fourteenth century.” “Historical Phallicy,” 113.

⁵⁵ See Talvacchia for a detailed tracing of which paintings are included. *Ibid.*, 114.

⁵⁶ Huttner, “Body Positive,” 401.

effected Section 28, which prohibited the “promotion of homosexuality” in schools, and had effected a different age of consent for homosexual, as opposed to heterosexual, encounters.⁵⁷ Jarman was sick, maligned, and furious.



Fig. 1.3: Protest images from Outrage! with Derek Jarman, ca. 1990.⁵⁸

Image description: A crowd of people carry a banner down a London street, reading “Stop violence against lesbians and gay men.” A smiling Jarman and other unidentified person hold an Outrage! banner.

⁵⁷ Richardson, *The Queer Cinema of Derek Jarman*, 39.

⁵⁸ From Outrage! flickr album made free for public use.
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/outrage/albums/72157623731662231>

Complicated a representation as it is, *Edward II* does operate on a very clean set of constraints, in that every utterance by the characters is taken from Marlowe's script. However, those utterances, reordered and truncated, come from people in medieval guises, the costumes of contemporary Thatcherites, Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, and OutRage! activists. In the film, we watch a tragedy play out in a spare, brutalist gray set: the eponymous king falls from power, supposedly at the hands of his scorned wife Isabella (played by Tilda Swinton) and the royal court, when he promises love and property to the French Piers of Gaveston. However where Edward II and Gaveston wear vaguely medieval garb and are lit, with a diffuse glow, like they are heaven-sent (as are the OutRage! activists), their detractors, presented, rather jarringly, in the same space, could come straight from the news broadcasts and royal parliament of Jarman's day. The binary one might assume the dialogue and lighting is false, however. Both "sides" of the argument have a relationship to militancy, pursue violent ends, and push around the anguished queen for their own gain.

The falling action of the film is focused on bloody, horrific skirmishes between royalty and members of OutRage!. For Lee Benjamin Huttner, the bloodiness is part-and-parcel of Jarman's "mobilization" of the "mythic resonances of AIDS."⁵⁹ As the film progresses, it ties the "wars" between heterosexuals and homosexuals to a larger anxiety for the future of queer people. Throughout the film, Edward and Isabella's child runs among scenes of sexual and violent explicitness, witnessing the queer present and manifesting queer futures of his own, notably in his costume. The child is, perhaps, one true nexus for the piece, and is the location of doubled-down reenactments, re-playing

⁵⁹ Huttner, "Body Positive," 406.

the actions of his parents. The child is poignant, too, within a larger debate in queer theory about family, reproduction, and futures outside heteronormative constraints.⁶⁰ While Jarman was making images to make sense of his very real martyrdom, he was also thinking about potential futures he could leave behind. What the child “does” with gender, too, seems freed (by comparison) of the more cisgendered attitudes and binary politics of the adults in the film, as well as the binary politics that consumed the majority of Jarman’s work and British politics at the end of the twentieth century. In the falling action, which effectively historicizes the battle over the queer child’s right to history, the child plays at militancy, carrying guns and wearing a uniform or balaclava depending on which parent he is in the presence of. He witnesses the death of his uncle, and consumes his blood, which, for Huttner “crystallizes” his queer “potentiality and gestures toward a queer afterlife in the present.”⁶¹ In the conclusion of the film he prances atop a cage holding his mother and her advisor in wedding regalia, wearing Isabella’s old baubles and a splash of red lipstick. The earrings the child wears are seen earlier on Isabella when she delivers a speech that bears remarkable likeness in its comportment and image to a condemning one given by Margaret Thatcher in October of 1987, where Thatcher questions children’s “inalienable right to be gay.”⁶² The message of the image is nuanced, dark, even when it hopes for a queer future, in that when the queer child (perhaps naively) dons the accessories of she who was the oppressor in gendered play, it is not necessarily an act of recuperation, as some quickly assume it to

⁶⁰ This debate is largely characterized by two books (and two camps), Lee Edelman’s *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, and José Esteban Muñoz’ *Cruising Utopia: the Then and There of Queer Futurity*. Parsons, “History, Activism, and the Queer Child,” connects Jarman to Edelman, 419. For Muñoz’ refutation of Edelman, see *Cruising Utopia*, 11.

⁶¹ Huttner, “Body Positive,” 407.

⁶² Talvacchia makes the connection to Thatcher, “Historical Phallicy,” 119.

be, even though it is one of potential.⁶³ As such, Jarman leaves a powerfully ambiguous message regarding the uses of history.



Fig. 1.5: Derek Jarman, *Edward II*, 1991.

Screen captures. Image descriptions: Tilda Swinton as Isabella, wearing a gold dress, earrings, and red lipstick, gives a speech in the same camera crop as a political television event. Isabella and Edward’s child dances wearing Isabella’s earrings and lipstick.

To reveal unflinchingly queer pasts, presents, and futures as seamless portions of an accepted piece of history is a radical act in its own. Alexandria Parsons notes the film “demonstrates the continuity of same-sex desire across time,” and describes the film as one that rehabilitates, referencing Jarman’s earliest education and a “hunt [...]

⁶³ Ibid., 127.

for forebears who validated my existence.”⁶⁴ However, the film is concerned with more than a burden of proof. Lee Benjamin Huttner describes the temporality of the film as one that “allegorizes the historical process by hyperbolizing the hybrid present.”⁶⁵ Because the film is sharing history, doing history, and reenacting history, it is accessible as vital, visible queer history, but it is also accessible as a queer critique of history and where its processes have muted queer existence.



Fig. 1.6: Derek Jarman, *Edward II*, 1991.

Screen capture. Image description: People, yelling, in leather and nun's habits carry a banner that reads "Stop violence against lesbians and gay men," and charge against riot police.

⁶⁴ Parsons, "History, Activism, and the Queer Child," 421.

⁶⁵ Huttner, "Body Positive," 395.

Catherine Opie's Self Portrait/Reapproach

The American photographer Catherine Opie (b. 1961) has made her name documenting countless members of queer communities in her studio, but she first entered the upper echela of photography making images of herself and her closest peers and partners. Opie is frequently garrisoned into the category of queer portrait photographer, and is most discussed as one, but has created numerous other bodies of work, and resists the definition. Her portraits are often in dialogue with the conventions of old master paintings and with other queer portrait photographers, but are most notable for the space they make representationally for a variety of assigned female at birth persons and their identities, who had hardly seen mainstream artistic representation before Opie's work. Along with her series *Being and Having*, in which her friends and lovers model tropes of high masculinity that go on to illustrate the work of Judith Butler, and her *Portraits*, Opie's arguably most discussed photographs are three self-portraits taken over a decade, each are somewhat baroque images of the artist printed slightly above life-size.

In 1993, Opie made *Self Portrait/Cutting*, in which the artist's back faces the camera, cut off at the elbows. In full color we see a childlike drawing etched into her skin, blood drips and abstracts the rendering: two stick figures in skirts, a house, and a cloud with the sun peeking out behind it. Other details of her gendered presentation are present but visually minimized, such as her earrings, armband tattoo, and shorn hair with frosted tips. She stands before green brocade. A year later, Opie photographed herself again, in *Self Portrait/Pervert*, which Ariel Levy poetically describes as

“faceless and topless and bleeding again.”⁶⁶ This time, she faces the camera head-on, wearing a black leather mask adorned with rivets. She is topless, and folds her hands together finger by finger, echoing a pattern of needles that pierce each of her arms. Carved just under her collarbones is the word “pervert,” among marginalia. It, like the family in *Self Portrait/Cutting*, is also a fresh wound. Wearing leather pants, she sits again before brocade, this time black and gold. *Self Portrait/Pervert* saw its debut at the 1995 Whitney Biennial, and is also what Opie describes as her “coming-out.”⁶⁷ The cultural debate into which *Pervert* entered was heated, as Ariel Levy reports it:

When the photographs were exhibited at the Whitney Biennial, in 1995, they were “like shock troops crashing a mannerly art-world party,” the critic Holland Cotter wrote in the Times. Among other things, “Pervert” was a fierce response to Jesse Helms and his allies in Congress who campaigned against funding AIDS research. (The disease, Helms reasoned, was the consequence of “deliberate, disgusting, revolting conduct.”) It was also a statement to the gay community, which Opie saw as chasing respectability at the expense of sexual radicals like her and her friends, who were avid practitioners of sadomasochism. “The leather community was really disowned,” Opie said. “The homophobia in relation to aids was so deep. People who weren’t in the leather community were, like, ‘Well, they’re perverts.’”⁶⁸

In an interview with Maggie Nelson, Opie writes of the urgency of working while she produced the *Cutting* and *Pervert*: “I certainly wasn’t thinking about what exhibitions meant. I was thinking about how I could die tomorrow. I never actually thought I would live past my thirties, because I was watching all my friends die of AIDS.”⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Ariel Levy, “Catherine Opie, All American Subversive,” *New Yorker*, March 13th, 2017.

⁶⁷ Opie, Interview with Gregory Crewdson as part of the Yale Photo Pop-Up Lecture series, “20 Questions with Catherine Opie and Gregory Crewdson,” April 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gez9yxwiedQ>

⁶⁸ Levy, “Catherine Opie.”

⁶⁹ Catherine Opie interviewed by Maggie Nelson, “Burning Down the House,” *Aperture* 229, “Future Gender,” 109.



Fig. 1.7: Catherine Opie, *Self-Portrait/Cutting*, 1993

From the collection of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. Chromogenic print, 40 x 29 7/16." Image description: The naked back of Opie, cut into it is a childlike drawing of two people in skirts before a house.



Fig. 1.8: Catherine Opie, *Self-Portrait/Pervert*, 1994

From the collection of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. Chromogenic print, 40 x 29 7/8." Image description: Opie with "Pervert" carved on her chest, sits in the studio with needles and wears a leather mask.

Opie continued to make pictures of her community, described by reviewers as "sympathetic" and "dignifying," for several years following, but notes frequently in interviews a desire to not be pigeonholed as a "lesbian photographer" or "S&M photographer."⁷⁰ Orna Guralnik describes it further: "Exploring the boundaries of sexual categories, Opie identifies herself as a queer artist, differentiating herself from artists

⁷⁰ Orna Guralnik, "Being and Having an Identity: Catherine Opie," *Studies in Gender and Sexuality* 14, (2013), 241.

that aestheticized lesbian or fag work such as Mapplethorpe, [Del La Grace Volcano], or Tee Corinne.”⁷¹ Where such distinctions and tactics of disavowal might have once been useful and likely did heighten Opie in the eyes of the art market, her portraits take many cues from the aforementioned artists, and now circulate in the same spaces. She moved onto other topics— critics and show titles now note her success in becoming that paradoxical phrase, “American Photographer,” like her earliest references of Lewis Hine, Walker Evans, and so on.⁷²

In 2004, in a very different place and time, Opie photographed herself again. In *Self Portrait/Nursing*, the artist, again in half-length, sits in a director’s chair and breastfeeds a blonde baby, gazing solemnly at the child’s facial expression. We see the raised bumps spelling out “pervert,” now a ten-year-old scar. Catherine Lord describes the image as such:

A woman breastfeeds a child. Were it not for the fact that the body of the mother reveals not just age but also the scars and tattoos of an S/M history, the image would be a competent cliché. The mother is photographer Catherine Opie, however, and upon her body we can read her own queer history.⁷³

To expand on Lord’s note, the astonishing part of Opie’s practice isn’t the simple backdrop that the language of Western painting provides for her figures, or the shock of a gender outside the norms of the aforementioned paintings, so much as it is a reenactment of images and desires made known earlier in her career. We watch her document her manifestation of these things, while she lives her career as master of her trade, as well. She “queers” (and reinforces) Western portrait painting’s image-

⁷¹ Ibid., 241.

⁷² Jennifer Blessing, *Rose Is a Rose Is a Rose: Gender Performance in Photography*, (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1997), 215.

⁷³ Catherine Lord, *Art & Queer Culture*, 216.

language, as her photographs are certificates of “having-been” in a (perhaps hastily drawn up) regal studio that are, needless to say, vital.



Fig. 1.9: Catherine Opie, *Self-Portrait/Nursing*, 2004

From the collection of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. Chromogenic print, 40 x 31.” Image description: Opie breastfeeds her child in studio, both are nude.

Self Portrait/Nursing contains in this way the doing of queer history and the promise of queer future. It exists in relation to *Cutting* and *Pervert*, an imperfect triangulation (the second figure in the skirt is implied in the relationship between the three self-portraits,

and made readily available in other documents of Opie's). Opie in *Nursing* has acquired the domestic, the recurring image of mother and child that is so exhausted in Christian painting, yet, she retains signifiers of the culture from which she worried it might be impossible.

Happy Birthday, Marsha!

When thinking of a contemporary queer artist working today who is very actively pursuing the representation and reenactment of history, perhaps none fit the bill better than Tourmaline (b. 1983), academic, artist, and activist. Jeannine Tang describes Tourmaline as a “community historian of pivotal drag queens and transgender individuals around the 1969 rebellion at the Stonewall Inn in New York City.”⁷⁴ Tourmaline’s most widely discussed and disseminated project is *Happy Birthday, Marsha!*, a film produced in collaboration with Sasha Wortzel, which stars numbers of New York’s queer and transgender artistic communities, in a retelling of trans activist Marsha P. Johnson’s life in the hours before her participation in the Stonewall riots. The directors’ statement speaks to the power and necessary innovation of the film:

It’s been over 45 years since the Stonewall Uprising yet the leading role that street queens, trans women of color and gender non-conforming people played during the riots has never received the recognition it deserves. By making *Happy Birthday, Marsha!*, we are seeking to change that. We truly believe how we tell the stories of our heroes matters, so we are drawing upon our community to make this film because we have an opportunity to make a movie written, directed and produced by people living Sylvia & Marsha’s legacy through our own work. This is the first time trans women of color are on both sides of the camera.⁷⁵

Happy Birthday, Marsha! can be described as a piece of historical fiction, and works in the same vein that Derek Jarman did several decades prior (it is similar in structure, in many ways, to *Edward II*). In the film’s fifteen minute runtime, in drug- or dream-like kaleidoscopic footage evocative of sixties New York, we see actress Mya Taylor (known from her earlier performance in *Tangerine*), as Johnson, undergo repeated acts of structural violence on her own birthday, and when this cuts into her community’s

⁷⁴ Jeannine Tang, “Contemporary Art and Critical Transgender Infrastructures,” *Trap Door*, 379.

⁷⁵ Tourmaline and Sasha Wortzel, “Statement,” *Happy Birthday, Marsha!* website.

celebration of it, the beginning of the riots are alluded to. This is all visually certified as historical with cut-ins of archival footage of Johnson herself. The film is predicated on a historical misunderstanding from early in the directors' difficult research process—they thought her birthday was at least close to the date of the riots, but, when they uncovered Johnson's birth certificate they discovered this to not be the case.⁷⁶ The directors decided to keep the two events in the same diegetic time, which has great productive tension for the narrative, and allows the directors more visual freedom to celebrate Johnson than the sole reenactment of a riot might. It is a critical fabulation, in Hartman and Nyong'o's terms. Jeannine Tang describes the aesthetic strategy of the film, in this regard, as one of the reclamation of glamour, writing:

[Tourmaline] and Wortzel set out, from the very beginning, to make a luscious film as a form of aesthetic resistance to the ways in which trans bodies are so frequently featured on camera as mangled and murdered. [...] Depicting the social familiarities of transfeminine friendships, [Tourmaline] and Wortzel's film details an affective landscape of intimate transgender social life. Its glamour quotes and reworks the street queens' own grammar of flamboyant femininity, wordplay, and camp, which constituted their liberation aesthetics. These aesthetics have been consumed as pageantry and spectacle in films such as *Paris is Burning* (1990), but, when lived on the street rather than on the screen, such aesthetics were violently rejected by conservative impulses within LGB movements in the 1990s and 2000s, and, in the last few years, have been increasingly used as a justification for murder when embodied by trans people.⁷⁷

The cherishing of Johnson in the film moves across time, as contemporary figures that would be recognizable in particular to New York's queer community interact with her figure through their roles as minor characters. In the film, we see, for example, contemporary queer author and activist Cyrus Grace Dunham placing a wreath

⁷⁶ Tourmaline and Sasha Wortzel, "Interview," Artforum, March 20th, 2018.

⁷⁷ Jeannine Tang, "Contemporary Art and Critical Transgender Infrastructures," *Trap Door*, 382.

of peonies on Johnson's head as a birthday gift, and Stonewall participant and queer elder Jay Toole, as an emcee, giving Taylor as Johnson an introduction on stage:

In case you didn't get the message, but I can see you did, 'cause you all are the message— we have someone here for you who's gonna sum it all up again. She's the queen of this here island, she's the saint of Christopher Street, it's Miss Marsha P. Johnson!⁷⁸



Fig. 1.10: Tourmaline and Sasha Wortzel, *Happy Birthday, Marsha!*, 2018.

Screen capture. Image description: Cyrus Grace Dunham's character crowns Marsha with flowers, in a car.



Fig. 1.11: Tourmaline and Sasha Wortzel, *Happy Birthday, Marsha!*, 2018.

Screen capture. Image description: Marsha reads an activist poem at the Stonewall Inn.

⁷⁸ *Happy Birthday, Marsha!* 2018, directed by Tourmaline and Sasha Wortzel.

In short, time is doing something queer in *Happy Birthday, Marsha!*. The bar scene in particular, where Johnson's contemporary, Toole, introduces her reenactment, underlines the fact that her causes-unknown death was very much premature, as overwhelmingly many trans women of color's are today. The theme of (history) forgetting (Marsha) and the slippage of time is at play in the piece, too. A jarring piece of archival footage shows Johnson unable, temporarily, to remember the year of the Stonewall riots, exclaiming with surprise that she was "lost in the music." Johnson's footage, taken in the contemporary context, reminds us her legacy was and is unknown by many. Tourmaline's research reminds us Johnson was in fact key to the inciting events of Stonewall, which are key to American timelines of queer rights. Tourmaline and Wortzel's filmic intervention finds meaning in the historical instability.

Afterlives: the Creative Project

Artist Statement

If you turn the corner in my memory palace, you'll find the Portrait Room, just a few steps beyond the Closet. Here are icons of a metamorphosis that I've quietly undertaken, living out their afterlives. Inside and outside my life in photographs, I'm in the process of becoming someone formerly-known-as. In the studio, I cloaked my obstinate, shifting body in histories of saran wrap and shiny brocade to keep it from distracting me from longer-term concerns. I can't say these pictures solve my problem with gender dysphoria, or my yearning to be Out, so much as they enact and memorialize it in archival prints and gilded frames. The walls and tapestries might whisper secrets to you: "hot-glue tears aren't really a metaphor," they say. So too, might the accessory-laden pictured noble dead: "my false lashes are terribly uncomfortable," "these boxers are plucked from a forgotten poem in some public bathroom," "this packing tape is not just for show..." I pray you ~~don't~~ take their grievances to heart!

Introduction

I have spent the better part of a decade making self-portraits, and my thesis work continues the logical trajectory of such explorations. In the photographs I present here, a suite of images I have titled *Afterlives*, I use long-developed techniques of reenactment based self-portraiture to embrace, explore, and underline my genderqueer identity, while asking questions of the source imagery. It is important to note here that these photographs are highly constructed and aren't *representing* my identity, if anything, they emphasize how it shifts. Most of my selection of imagery was at least initially intuited, based on years of study of Renaissance and Baroque Catholic painting and sculpture. The work was then further developed through study of queer camera work and its engagements of history, and the culture of protest some of this work grew out of. The source for each of my images comes from a different intersection of Catholic and queer symbolism. While I did not grow up Catholic, the imagery has been important to me for some time because of the way it makes meaning out of suffering, frequently using metaphors of light-metaphysics that render well in the medium of photography. These photographs were not intended to exist primarily online, but instead as large scale prints that mimic many of the qualities of painting. I had the chance before the COVID-19 shutdown to print and exhibit three of them, as individual pieces in the context of larger group shows. The photographs as they exist now are best understood as being organized into three sets of dyads.



Fig. 2.1: *Santa Lucia (After Palma and Del Cossa)*. January 2020.

Image description: A white person in naturalistic feminine makeup and large false lashes wears a pink sateen robe and draws back a blue veil from their face, bringing in golden light. Flowers with eyeballs and the green stem of a silk flower rest in their lap.



Fig. 2.2: *Santa Lucia (After Palma and Del Cossa)*. January 2020.

Image description: In an arched frame, a white person in a pink robe hides their face behind white silk flowers.



Fig. 2.3: *Annunciation*. March 2020.

Image Description: A white person with flushed skin wearing only saran and bubble wrap grasps a bouquet of dying white tiger lilies. There are drops of hot glue and pimple stickers attached to their face, streaming down from their eyes.



Fig. 2.4: *Angel Action (After Romaine Patterson)*. April 2020.

Image Description: The back of a person wearing a large set of wings made of PVC pipes, duct tape, and sheets. Their left hand places chamomile blossoms in their hair.



Fig. 2.5: *Saint Sebastian*. April 2020.

Image Description: The torso of a white person with their arms raised, standing before a blue tarp. Their chest is flattened using packing tape. They wear orange boxers, a blue leather chest harness, and a blue leather strap-on harness. Their left leg sports a blue band-aid.



Fig. 2.6: *Vigil*. May 2020.

Image Description: Two white skinned hands with yellow and blue false nails come out from holes in a blue curtain with yellow stars embroidered on it. One hand holds a lit blue lighter, and has the pointer and index nails cut short. The other hand holds a yellow votive candle.

Review of Imagery and Technique in *Afterlives*

As I introduce my portfolio of artworks, I would like to recall Cristina Baldacci's note on artists' approach to transparency regarding what they reenact.⁷⁹ As an artist who frequently references the work and ideas of others I have been deeply concerned with how I can make my sources accessible. This thesis document provides one space for doing so, but, the act of opening up my sources remains a point of continual challenge and innovation in my work.

The first piece created for this series in effect solidified my technical constraints for the remainder of the project— the piece in question being *Santa Lucia (After Palma and Del Cossa)*. These constraints are as follows: color imagery made with a full frame digital SLR camera, “queered” reference to the tradition of Catholic painting, some connection to my personal journey through identity markers (implicit or explicit), and presentation of the imagery as large scale prints in ornate frames. I elected to take my photographs digitally originally out of necessity: following emergency surgery in January I was limited in my mobility and found it much easier to eliminate the steps associated with processing film. However, this brings out a debate central to my work, wherein I had for several years produced all my images on film, partially because I lacked proper digital equipment at the time and partially because I was interested in the negative or polaroid as a “receipt” of the image's existence. I have found in making large scale prints from my full frame camera that while the experience of making the image is different, and that the immediacy of digital workflow asks restraint on the part of the maker, the large scale prints I have made for this suite of images are comparable

⁷⁹ Baldacci, “Reenactment: Errant Images in Contemporary Art,” 65.

in their final form to the large scale prints I was making using a view camera and drum-quality scanner. An issue the digital/analogue debate in photography often neglects is that of access, and for all the antiquated philosophical holdups I have surrounding the digital I am incredibly grateful to have access to digital imaging technology both in the context of my surgery and in the context of shooting the second half of this portfolio during the COVID-19 crisis, when I couldn't have accessed film development and scanning technology even if my project had demanded it.

To further address my methodology, digital post-processing has become an important tool in my work in ways I did not expect at the outset of my undergraduate career. In the majority of my self-portraits, and certainly in *Afterlives*, I am very detail-oriented and selective in regards to what details of my *actual* body are rendered in the conceptual space of the photograph. In part this is an extension of a lesson learned in critiques from a generous mentorship and friendship I had in my first two years of undergraduate and first years of studio photography, where I was reminded to consider every detail in the frame as something that could be read as intentional, such as jewelry forgotten, or hairs left out of place. Thus, the details *left in* the suite of images are meant to add to the semiotics of the piece, and/or convey a sense of painterly realism. My process is as follows. First, when shooting an image, I position my body carefully and consider how any tattoos or blemishes or layers of costume might read in the final images. Much like a smaller scale “fashion” shoot, I tape and pin pieces of clothing into place, and use makeup to achieve the desired pallor on my face. The intent of these actions is to set up a very specific image, controlled in its details so that it is conceptually focused but also engaging and realistic. In post-processing, I try to keep

my tools similar to what I would access in a darkroom, but do use them to remove distracting details, tattoos in particular. The result is a smoothed-out, but realistic image that is a kind of photograph often accused of being more like a painting— I find these contradictions to be nourishing for my work.

I began printing these pieces at a large scale, similar to that of Renaissance and Baroque portraits, but also limited to what is reasonable in terms of scaling up my files, which have a native size of approximately 18 x 24.” In printing these images large scale on matte paper and framing them, I was interested in the further slippage of genre and medium, between painting and photography, that they might accrue, inspired by photography’s earliest incarnations in fine art as something remarkably close to painting.⁸⁰ The slippage of medium in *Afterlives* is found also in the fact that I (sometimes painstakingly, sometimes haphazardly) constructed detailed costumes and sets for each image. My self-portraits are usually performances, but for the camera alone. In making images about genderqueer identity, I noticed that the kind of “passing” they were doing as paintings related to the heady debates the transgender community, particularly in the last two decades, has had about the merits and possibilities of (photographic) passing.⁸¹ As a white person making images about gender largely in reference to white culture which has coopted from others with convenience, I have a number of privileges, even with my body lacking much serious medical intervention,

⁸⁰ Photography mimicked, aspired to the status of, and referenced painting with frequency from its inception. See Phillip Prodger, “To Rome and Back,” *Victorian Giants: the Birth of Art Photography*, (London: National Portrait Gallery, 2018), 158-175.

⁸¹ Prosser, “Transsexuality in Photography: Fielding the Referent,” and Prosser, “My Second Skin,” in *Light in the Dark Room: Photography and Loss*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).

both in “passing,” and the opposite of it, for which Jasbir Puar names the term
“piecing.”⁸²



Fig. 2.7: *Santa Lucia (After Palma and Del Cossa)*, exhibition documentation.

Archival Inkjet Print, gilded frame, 30 x 40.” Image description: a thick gold frame surrounds the image from fig. 2.1.

⁸² Jasbir Puar, “Bodies with New Organs: Becoming Trans, Becoming Disabled.” *Social Text* 124:33, no. 3 (2015), 56. Puar writes: “The trans body that pieces, then, also passes not as gender-normative male or female but as trans.”



Fig 2.8: *Santa Lucia* (After Palma and Del Cossa), exhibition documentation.

Archival Inkjet Print, gilded frame, 12 x 20.” Image description: An arched frame holding the image from fig. 2.2. hangs centered over a fire door.



Fig. 2.9: Jacopo Palma (Il Giovane), *Santa Lucia*, 1620.

Image description: A woman, painted in a pink dress and a dark veil looks at you and holds out a platter of two eyes.



Fig. 2.10: Francesco del Cossa, *Santa Lucia*, 1472.

Tempera on wood. National Gallery of Art. Image description: A woman, wearing reddish and navy robes, painted on an arched golden panel, holds out a pair of eyes on a stem, and looks down at them.



Fig. 2.11: Palma's *Santa Lucia* in the doorway of S.S. Lucia e Geremia.

Author photographs, Venice, IT, 2018. Image description: In the tall doorway of a white church façade, a framed portrait of a woman holding out her platter of eyes.

I made the *Santa Lucia* photographs in a particularly vulnerable moment, a week after undergoing emergency appendectomy, although the preparation for them started several weeks prior. Effectively pulled out of my life to be cared for in my mother's house, somewhere between closeted and out as I am, I was thinking about my own loss of an organ, the ways in which hospital staff perceived and commented on my gender presentation, and I the femininity I have been raised to. The result in my costuming choices was a firm commitment to naturalistic drag, which I have been exploring as a processing medium for my feminine socialization. The use of drag was something I took on cautiously, and something that is a logical extension of my lived experience. The trans* and nonbinary community has a complicated relationship to concepts like gender-as-doing and drag-as-metaphor, which has undergone much discussion

particularly in the context of theorist Judith Butler's work.⁸³ The piece consists of two photographs, and as the title notes, they refer to two paintings of the Catholic saint Lucia, by Jacopo Palma and Francesco del Cossa. The photographs each have one painting that is their primary reference, but each pull elements from the other, so they share a title and I exhibit them in tandem. I was first fascinated by the Palma painting while traveling in Venice, because its reproduction hangs over two doorways of the church of Saints Lucia and Geremia, where Lucia's supposed corporeal remains are located. The sun's effect on the painting bleached it and make the blue and pink tones quite apparent. My choice to hang one portion of my reenactment over a doorway in the two exhibitions this piece has had so far reflects the importance this image has had for me as an apotropaic one. Lucia was an ancient Catholic virgin martyr, and can be recognized in paintings by her attributes: eyes on a platter and a palm frond of martyrdom. Myth has it that she was forced to "choose" between sexual assault by men or loss of her sight, and she chose the latter. I have been interested in Lucia for some time because of her refusal to see and be seen as anything other than what she knew herself as, and the potential for a queer mobilization of her refusal of men. My reenactment of the paintings by Palma and del Cossa is one meant to straddle the lines of sincere, realistic reenactment, and a queerer, campier one I have come to know in my engagement with drag performance and my longstanding tradition of reenacting

⁸³ In *Transgender History*, Susan Stryker recounts transgender people's relationship to the theory from *Gender Trouble*— "The main idea is that "being something" consists of "doing it," a point often misunderstood in some quarters of the transgender community as an assertion that gender is merely a performance and therefore not real." However, Stryker takes the theory as validating of trans experience: "the implication of this argument is that transgender genders are as real as any others, and they are achieved in the same fundamental way." 162-3.

Western images of impossible women with a contemporary edge (with color gels, in Converse, fishnets, and so on).

The next photograph I made was *Annunciation*. Here, I was interested again in mobilizing the queer potential found in the narrative of a Catholic woman, this time the Virgin Mary. Her image is a specter that I had particular difficulty in approaching, but the paradox of “immaculate conception” had a draw when thinking about where nonbinary imagery might exist or be injected into the canon. I was inspired in part by a collage by Giuseppe Campuzano of a Peruvian trans* woman as the Virgin from his project *Museo Travesti del Peru*,⁸⁴ and the Virgin’s frequent appearances in drag, as well as by the work of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence. These occurrences encouraged my own transgendered reading of the figure. In this photograph, I reference no particular painting, but was instead interested in the density of gendered symbols I could achieve in the Virgin’s figure. As such, I worked to collapse several portions of her narrative into one image, namely scenes referred to as the “Annunciation” and “Lamentation,” from the beginning and end of Jesus Christ’s life— however, it is worth noting that this is just as often the task of religious artists.⁸⁵ In “Annunciation” scenes, the archangel Gabriel appears in the Virgin’s study with white lilies to inform her of her impossible pregnancy, and her posture reels back delicately in surprise. In the “Lamentation,” the Virgin holds Christ after he has been taken down from the cross and weeps. In these scenes, and in generalized icons of the Virgin, particularly in her epithet as the Lady of Sorrows, a baroque artistic pleasure is often taken in the rendering of the Virgin’s tears. In popular drag reenactments, we often see these tears rendered in

⁸⁴ Cyle Metzger, *Art & Queer Culture*, 264-5.

⁸⁵ Hartford, *Sexuality, Iconography, and Fiction in French*, 37.

plastic, such as hot glue. There is an ambiguity to these gratuitously rendered tears, frankly, a sexual one, which I highlight in my photograph. In it, I make tears out of hot glue, and use pimple stickers to render them as well, but use transparent media to clothe the remainder of my body as well. At the time when I made the photograph, I was reading Jose Esteban Muñoz' *Cruising Utopia*, and meditating on the way the author read the HIV/AIDS crisis back into artworks that might otherwise appear blank.⁸⁶ In my younger generation, use of protection such as condoms and dental dams in sex has a different meaning than it did for those who campaigned for it at the start of the crisis. Thinking of this, my Virgin's being wrapped in plastic while exposed to flowers and plastic that is meant to look remarkably like ejaculate matter, is intended to be both gratuitous and overly resolved. I used the difficulty of lighting transparent objects in-studio as a symbolic layer, here, using my placement of flashes to reveal and obscure parts of my body at will, working to eliminate my primary and secondary sex characteristics from the image even though I am practically nude, so that the gendered expression of the photograph is located mostly in cheap pieces of plastic. In the introduction to *Trap Door*, Tourmaline and her coeditors suggest that stepping away from "traffic in the dominant visual economies of trans images" (binding, undressing, etc), is one way to imagine new trans worlds.⁸⁷ I had a chance to exhibit this photograph as well, and chose again to surround the image with an antique frame, which I painted white, so as to have the conceptual presence of a frame without much formal distraction. Below the frame on the right corner, I adhere a line of hot glue tears,

⁸⁶ José Esteban Muñoz, "Ghosts of Public Sex," and "Cruising the Toilet," *Cruising Utopia*.

⁸⁷ Tourmaline et al, "Known Unknowns," *Trap Door*, xviii.

made to look as if they are cartoonishly seeping from behind the frame. The ontological ambiguity of these is of course intended!



Fig. 2.12: *Annunciation*, exhibition documentation.

Archival Inkjet Print, frame, hot glue, 28 x 34.” Image description: Image from fig 2.3, a self portrait as the Virgin, framed in white with hot glue tears.

The remaining three photographs in the suite were taken during my self-isolation in the COVID-19 crisis, and without some of the studio resources I had grown accustomed to. They have not been explored as prints, so any discussion of their final existence is speculative. They were each in conceptual development prior to isolation.

Angel Action (After Romaine Patterson) is the stylistic partner to *Annunciation*. It is the result of a prolonged study of the image of the angel in the American queer culture of the nineties, although the image later sees a resurgence. In preparation for making an image of a queer angel, I was interested in the discourse regarding the murder of Matthew Shepard and the move in popular culture towards Christianity and respectability politics in his memorialization.⁸⁸ Shepard was a young, out gay man living in the college town of Laramie, Wyoming in the nineties. He was HIV positive at the time of his death. He was brutally murdered by two men he had met at a bar there in 1998, and near-immediately became an icon for the queer civil rights movement. Scholar Brett Krutzsch writes that “Matthew Shepard’s murder in 1998 occurred at a time when [some] gay activists framed pleas for greater rights through images of gays who wanted the opportunity to marry, raise children, and serve their country in the military.”⁸⁹ It follows that the movement was quick to see the news descriptions of Shepard’s body tied to a fencepost in the country as something that could be mobilized in a Christian sense. Krutzsch further expounds on the motive:

Gay activists also depicted Shepard as an upstanding Protestant youth so the public would embrace him as a more legitimate Christian than those in the Christian right who denounced homosexuality. The portrayal of Shepard as a

⁸⁸ Brett Krutzsch, *Dying to Be Normal: Gay Martyrs and the Transformation of American Sexual Politics*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019); Scott Hoffman, ““Last Night, I Prayed to Matthew”: Matthew Shepard, Homosexuality, and Popular Martyrdom in Contemporary America,” *Religion and American Culture* 21:1 (2011).

⁸⁹ Krutzsch, 2 (ebook version).

pious Protestant helped present Shepard, and gays along with him, as similar to straight Christians.⁹⁰

I discovered through Moises Kaufman and the Tectonic Theater Project's *the Laramie Project*, a play that records the sentiment of people in the town where Shepard died, two sources that heavily influenced my image: the Tony Kushner play *Angels in America*, and the angel protest costume devised by Romaine Patterson. After seeing Westboro Baptist minister Fred Phelps appear at Shepard's funeral with homophobic picket signs, and hearing that Phelps and his followers would be present again at the court trials of Shepard's murderers, Patterson designed a simple angel costume that uses two bedsheets and PVC pipe to create large wings. In effect, the costume silences the visual field. The instructions for the costume are provided online, and have been used as an intervention at other public events of queer mourning, such as the aftermath of the shooting at Pulse Nightclub. Patterson, online, asked that users of the costume not add slogans or other information to the costume. My resulting photograph is a fairly straightforward document of a reenactment of Patterson's angel costume, meant to mimic some of the qualities of light in images of the first protest, while placing it in the meditative space of the portrait studio where the intended function of the costume can be isolated. My original intents for representing an angel in my work were much more fantastical, but in my study of *Angels in America*, a text that surfaces in *the Laramie Project*, I was reminded of the gendered associations American angels with too many symbols tend to accrue.⁹¹

⁹⁰ Ibid., 3.

⁹¹ Yair Lipshitz describes the Angel from Kushner's play, for example, as an impossible script for the human body, which directors tend to overlook and gender female. "The Jacob Cycle in *Angels in America*: Re-Performing Scripture Queerly," *Prooftexts* 32:2 (2012), 213-215.



Fig. 2.13: “Angel Action,” 1999.

Caption from the *Casper Star-Tribune*: “Romaine Patterson, front, walks with fellow protesters to the Albany County Courthouse during the trial of Aaron McKinney on Oct. 11, 1999, in Laramie.” Photograph by Dan Cepeda. Image description: a line of protestors draped in bedsheets to look like angels proceed down a tree-lined path.

Saint Sebastian is the photograph most directly pointed at the transgender journey upon which I have embarked in the last year, and is a kind of love letter to my artistic influences and queer community. The piece is also in direct reference to the long tradition of (cisgender) gay men’s interest in the image, of which Derek Jarman’s *Sebastiane* is part. According to Jason James Hartford’s study of the saint, Sebastian was often depicted under the “guise” of exploring the beauty of the male body.⁹²

⁹² Hartford, *Sexuality, Iconography, and Fiction in French*, 38.



Fig. 2.14: Guido Reni, *Saint Sebastian*, ca. 1615.

Image description: a painting of a white man wearing a white loincloth, tied to a tree trunk, pierced by two arrows.

The “typical” painting of Sebastian’s martyrdom shows us the saint tied to something vertical, riddled with arrows. Hartford writes:

Sebastian’s identifying token or sign, the arrow, carries two strong meanings, one being gradually eclipsed by the other. The arrow is an ancient symbol of the plague, and Sebastian [...] has long been revered as a protector against it. On the other hand, [...] the arrow is both an instrument of love (the weapon of Eros) and a phallic symbol.⁹³

The arrows thus are stand-ins for forbidden homoerotic interest. Maria Wyke adds:

Masculine penetrators do not need to be present in a painting for Sebastian’s martyrdom to be rendered sexually suggestive and homoerotic [...] [Here,] his uplifted face is transfixed by an ecstasy that speaks of loss of self, erotic abandon, the desire to be penetrated.⁹⁴

⁹³ Ibid., 40.

⁹⁴ Maria Wyke, “Playing Roman Soldiers: The Martyred Body, Derek Jarman’s *Sebastiane*, and the Representation of Male Homosexuality,” In *Parchments of Gender: Deciphering the Bodies of Antiquity*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 253-5.

The penetrators' frequent absence, Wyke suggests, shows that Sebastian's images is more about identity than affection.⁹⁵ However, by the eighties, Martin Grief's cheeky *Gay Book of Days* suggests that Sebastian's passivity and solitude had become old-fashioned. He writes: "Sebastian's lost his appropriateness as the official gay patron after the Stonewall riots. Modern Sebastians, after all, shoot back."⁹⁶ In some senses, I suppose this is what my own self portrait does, or more accurately, it holds the trace of my "shooting" myself. About a month before I made *Saint Sebastian* I began medically transitioning, via intramuscular injection of testosterone. The photograph holds traces of this, most obviously, the band-aid over my regular injection site. While the band-aid points to my actual experience, it is intended as a referent. It is larger than what I would normally use, and colored to fit into the aesthetic demands of my suite of self portraits. The band-aid, I have noticed in critique with colleagues who are not transmasculine, can sometimes evade meaning even at its enlarged state. I am not disappointed by this so much as I am interested in how this invites multiple readings. Much of the gendered signification in this photograph is what I am wearing, although to give an exhaustive catalogue is perhaps not useful, I will note some of it here. The leather harnesses are made by River Low, in reference to Sebastian's supposed career as a soldier, and in patterns River and I developed to speak to transmasculine codes in his trade. My chest is bound with packing tape, a nonfunctional symbolic maneuver seen in other imagery from popular culture, most notably in the portraits of nonbinary musician Dorian Electra in what is said to be the last print issue of *Playboy*. I wear orange boxers in

⁹⁵ Ibid., 255

⁹⁶ Martin Grief, *The Gay Book of Days: an Evocatively Illustrated Who's Who of Who Is, Was, May Have Been, Probably Was, and Almost Certainly Seems to Have Been Gay During the Past 5000 Years*, (Secaucus: Main Street Press, 1982), 26-7

reference to the loved subject of Frank O'Hara's poem "Having a Coke with You," quoted in full in Muñoz' theory text *Cruising Utopia*— "partly because in your orange shirt you look like a better happier Saint Sebastian," the line goes, and my photograph imagines for me.⁹⁷

Vigil, the final photograph in the suite of images, is one result of a long, troubled chain of formal experiments with drapery motifs and a pattern of yellow eight-pointed stars on a blue field. It began as a series of pieces I made at the Yale Norfolk residency: a response to a performance prompt involving eggs, and photographs of my body covered in drapery I made that were, looking back, very close to Nabil Vega's nonbinary performance figure *Visiting Thahab*.⁹⁸ These experiments led me to a rather somber piece dedicated to the artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres and his partner Ross Laycock. I appropriated two of Gonzalez-Torres' pieces dedicated to Laycock after his death by AIDS-related illness in an exploration of their relationship to Catholic symbolism, an installation of blue curtains titled *Lover Boy* and the unmade bed billboard. In my piece, I reconstructed a blue curtain, embroidered the phrase "If there is a heaven," upon it, and superimposed the star motif onto Gonzalez-Torres' unmade bed imagery in a video hung below it, all in the spirit of homage and mourning. Gonzalez-Torres, for all his popularity, is terribly difficult to reference in any sophisticated manner— which is, for me now, the particular power of his work. The economy and subtlety of his work is not to be displaced. Gonzalez-Torres' curtain pieces, like *Lover Boy* of 1989 are interesting to study in relationship to a protest piece by Nancy Spector and Michael Gabellini for the first Visual AIDS Day Without Art

⁹⁷ Muñoz 5

⁹⁸ *Art & Queer Culture*, 276.

from the same year, where a giant black curtain was laid over the face of the Guggenheim in New York, although I'm unsure of any relationship they have.⁹⁹



Fig. 2.15: Installation by Nancy Spector and Michael Gabellini, December 1, 1989.

Photograph by David Heald. Image description: A black curtain hangs across the middle of the façade of the Guggenheim Museum, blocking its view.

All these experiments with the intersection of queer protest and the Catholic vision of heaven led me to make *Vigil*, as did further engagement with the visual strategies of ACT-UP, particularly in relation to the Catholic church.¹⁰⁰ I am interested in exploring the line between styles of respectability and urgency with my work, and wanted for it to be a universe where both visions of heaven in protest could play out. Where all these pieces connect in the spirit of their protest is an urgency that meant

⁹⁹ *Art After Stonewall*, 235.

¹⁰⁰ I was particularly inspired by footage of the major protest held by ACT-UP New York at Saint Patrick's Cathedral, which I saw first in the documentary *United in Anger: a History of ACT-UP*, 2012.

disinterest in respectability politics, while maintaining an austere aesthetic program. In photographing *Vigil*, I wanted to combine a disinterest in respectability politics while maintaining Catholic imagery with more personal narratives. The resulting image is a coded one, in which my hands extend from glory holes, and bear a “lesbian manicure.” It signifies the palpable and ongoing mourning the queer community does, and speaks to the tension of what respectable mourning looks like. Like a painting, I hope this image can do long-term vigil for the countless people the queer community has lost, although as a photograph it refers to a short time in my life.

Because I had been making martyrdom images for several years prior to embarking on this portfolio, in some ways the work feels like a natural extension, and in others I am in very unfamiliar territory. Where I am approaching my own identity as an isolated thing in images such as *Annunciation* and *Saint Sebastian* I feel more at home, but even in these images I am putting forth a document of an identity I have shared with few people outside my work. Working to create images that are informed by my lived experience as a chronically ill person, by my queer identity, and by history, I discovered my work was much in line with Derek Jarman’s, who has become a frequent point of reference for my work. As I continue making work and deeply studying queer history, I understand how my images almost inevitably make reference and meaning of the ongoing HIV/AIDS crisis and the mourning I have just started doing as a queer community member, coming into queer history. And, even recognizing the generational rift present in today’s trans* community,¹⁰¹ something I still feel more than know as

¹⁰¹ Jack Halberstam, “Trans* Generations,” in *Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability*, (Oakland: University of California Press, 2019), 64.

someone mostly closeted, so much of what I do and have as a queer person living now is owed in part to how the queer community has made its way through the ongoing AIDS crisis. In terms of my generation's relationship to identity politics, it also serves here to address the meaning of making work about times and conditions I did not live through. In studying and reenacting queer martyr symbolism, I find my work to be in conversation with older work that sees homoerotic and gendered potential in martyrs, and in inevitable conversation with the successful deployment of the imagery in the beginning of the AIDS crisis. In making this work I am not asserting that I know what it is like to have gone through the height of the crisis or to have the disease, but instead hope to foreground queer histories and how they manifest currently. In thinking about my work's relationship to the HIV/AIDS crisis and how I might approach future work, I have found a short document penned by "What Would and HIV Doula Do?," a collective of creatives, academics, medical professionals, and care workers, titled "Twenty-One Questions to Consider When Embarking on AIDS- Related Cultural Production," to be particularly insight-giving.¹⁰²

Afterlives was intended to take its final form as a physical exhibition in the lefthand alcove of the LaVerne Krause gallery. This is currently postponed. My plans for it were as follows: In this space, each of the photographs would be printed using archival inkjet methods, mounted, and framed. *Santa Lucia* and *Annunciation* are both at present in antique frames that have been handpainted, and they would retain these features. To maintain cohesiveness, other frames for new pieces would match a dominant color in the print, and at this point I can imagine them as either new and

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simple, or antique and ornate. It was my intent to activate the space as if it were a portrait room in an Italian villa or palazzo. As such, I planned to apply moulding to the walls, use tungsten spotlighting, and incorporate a gallery bench. I debated painting all the elements and walls a light shade of pink, and carpeting the floor. The plans for the exhibition were intended to give the space an air of both sincerity and gender-genre-performativity.

Concluding Remarks

I would like to conclude this review of my thesis exhibition's artworks, and make a return to the history I have outlined, by returning to the discussion of medium. The images in *Afterlives* are photographs, in that they are certificates of something that did happen before the camera. Thus, as documents of my year of gender trouble, they have something in common with the photographs from transition autobiographies that are the focus of Jay Prosser's Barthesian essays "Transsexuality in Photography: Fielding the Referent," and "My Second Skin." In "My Second Skin," lamenting his desire to protect trans* subjects from the "death of the author" in previous work, that is, their outing as trans-embodied by the photograph, Prosser makes a long review of a body of self portraits by Loren Cameron, a transmasculine photographer. Prosser highlights a full-body studio self-portrait by the photographer, and asks:

It's important, I think, that in this photograph Cameron does not show the shutter release bulb. (Was this therefore taken by another photographer? Or like Levi-Strauss' self-portraits, on a self-timer? [...]) This photograph is one of the few self-portraits of Cameron I've seen, and certainly the only full-length nude of him, that does not foreground, make visible as trace, the processes of technological (photographic/medical) construction. *For why the need to do so when the full frontal itself makes these processes of construction irrefutably evident?*¹⁰³

For years of my artistic career, before I took on the task of "reconstructing" my body and submitting it to the medical gaze, I, too, was infatuated with the symbol of the self-timer. I pulled it from my years of poring over the work of Francesca Woodman, and am reminded of it now in the work of *the Blatant Image*. It was a tactic of claiming authorship over my body. I still think it is irrefutable, but, at some point in the last year, I stopped performing that gesture. Around the time of my introduction to Derek Jarman,

¹⁰³ Prosser, "My Second Skin," *Light in the Dark Room*, 176-177.

Tourmaline, I began making work where I cloaked myself in environments that were all by my hand. Using powders, flashes, and glitter, I was making my skin shine by another light, like von Gloeden bronzing his models. In my most recent photographs, even as I was battling chronic illness, I chased the shimmering illusion of total ability, trying to make them all by my hand. I said at the time it was about power, but over what, I can't say I knew.

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