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by

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TOWARDS A QUEER ULTERIORITY

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Report

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Abstract

“TOWARDS A QUEER ULTERIORITY”

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2017

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This report outlines the evolution of three year's (2014-2017) of research and practice investigating the objectification and representation of queer sexuality, while tracing the conceptual development and framework supporting my most current work included in *Trouble*, the 2017 MFA Thesis Exhibition. I discuss three major projects *GAK Portraits*, *Director/Subject (or foreplay)*, as well as my recent MFA Thesis work, *Untitled (big toe)* and *Uterior Subjects 1&2* as I attempt to lay-out the discursive methodological approaches and art-historical and/or theoretical significance employed in them all. The purpose of this report is twofold: to map the evolution of my graduate studies and research while at the University of Texas at Austin, and to position the work within a trajectory stemming from the history and narrative of pedagogical and/or research-based art practices.

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A Premise: *No Futures*

In the book *No Futures*, literary theorist Lee Edelman outlines the embodiment of queerness as a negative social viability.¹ Namely, through its detachment with the sexual-drive for reproduction, or what he terms “reproductive futurism”, Edelman argues that queerness is a threatening, “haunting excess” to the dominant social imagination. In other words, since queerness—specifically same-sex desire—doesn’t operate by traditional reproductive imperatives of the nuclear family, it’s constituted as an excessive, sticky mess in the pathway towards human futurity. In his polemic, Edelman insists that the efficiency of queerness is to accept its “negativity”, not in order to maintain its status as lesser, but rather to name it as the ultimate “death-drive”; which is not the actual desire for death, but quite the contrary: an active disruption of any self-sufficient wholeness.

As a queer man who grew up in the American South amidst a stronghold of conservative and heteronormative ideologies, I am inspired by the very polemics of Edelman’s resistance, his insentience on the “haunting excess” of the negativity that “pierces the fantasy screen of futurity”.² I am fascinated by the materiality and mess of queer embodiment; the coupling of desire and repulsion when made visible, like realizing you’ve been rolling a booger between your fingers for far too long. Similarly, my practice generates

¹Edelman, Lee. *No Future Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Durham, Duke University Press, 2007.

²IMDB

instances where queer sexuality and eroticism are objectified as absurd, abject, or grotesque. These adjectives describe deviation from the socially established natural order of things, and are most often used pejoratively out of fear. Be it either a horror of the “other” or of the unknown, this objectification rejects and marginalizes many people. My work exploits these social norms by positioning the gaze to the physicality and corporeality of the body, to its weighty materiality of flesh and fluids.



FIGURE 1: *GAK Portrait #1*, digital video on LED monitor mounted in portrait-orientation, 7min loop. 2015.

By approaching the body as a site for critical discourse, my work attempts to re-figure subjectivity in terms of what feminist theorist Elizabeth Grosz refers to as the “primacy of corporeality”.³ I aim to transcribe the

³Grosz, Elizabeth. “Introduction.” *Volatile Bodies: towards a Corporeal Feminism*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, In.,

complexities of physiological intimacy—viewed by some as conflicts between mind, body, and nature—in order to materialize power and agency, and to question how subjectivity is constituted. In my video series, *GAK Portraits* (2014 – ongoing), the body is positioned at the center of analysis, confronting politics of subjectivity through its very materiality. In the videos, figures appear across flat-screen monitors completely covered in a gooey, flesh-like substance. The material, called GAK polymer, oozes and drips down the figures in excess, blurring the lines that define each figure’s individual representation; simultaneously taking the shape of each subject underneath while forming and emphasizing its own abstraction. The viscosity of the GAK and its likeness to excretion render the body inside-out in a sense, and as abject; the physical interiors and corporeal exteriors are intertwined as they become flesh and then fluid. These works display bodies which are unable to be reduced as objects, oscillating between subject and object and making evident Grosz’s declaration of the body’s ability to “always extend the frameworks which attempt to contain them, to seep beyond their domains of control”.⁴

1994, p. 2.

⁴ IMDB



FIGURE 2: *GAK Group Portrait #1*, install view of (four) digital videos & LED monitors mounted in portrait-orientation, 6min loop, 2017.

Contingencies between the materiality of bodies and the physical properties of GAK—such as viscosity, fluidity, and stickiness—have been discussed in relation to abjectness and horror throughout theoretical discourse with much depth. Jean-Paul Sartre infamously described the physical properties of ‘slime’, saying that it, “transcends all distinctions between psychic and physical, between the brute existent and the meanings of the world”.⁵ Mary Douglas in *Purity and Danger* expanded on this analysis by claiming that viscosity is itself, “in-part responsible for ‘our’ horror of bodily fluids”.⁶ Robyn Longhurst takes this discursive exchange further, mediating texts by both Elizabeth Grosz and Luce Irigaray, to map the social horror of

⁵Sartre, Jean-Paul. “An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology.” *Being and Nothingness*, Routledge, Abingdon, 2007, pp. 612.

⁶Longhurst, Robyn. *Bodies Exploring Fluid Boundaries*. London, Routledge, 2001. pp31.

fluids to the horror of femininity and the female body, claiming that bodies and their fluid associations are “not simply natural or given but rather represent social relations”.⁷ By rendering the body as fluid and in excess, my work aims to reveal these very ‘social relations’. The perpetually oozing and gender-ambiguous figures in *GAK Portraits* confront viewers as they attempt to position themselves according to their own desires or preferences—a familiar process for all subjects—to which they are denied. This ambiguity initiates a reorientation towards bodies that are abject, *ones that are simultaneously desired and repulsed*. These works embrace Edelman’s ‘haunting excess’ to the extent that no subject is entirely free, making evident the role of desire in influencing the orientation of our bodies to one another.

Holes, Desire & The Rectal Void

The notion of the abject has been best described by Julia Kristeva as the process of human subjectivity constituting itself through ejecting the things, or subjects, that it either fears or does not want to contain.⁸ My work of the last three years mediates desire and abjection to exploit the fear of the body’s materiality and the horror of its penetrability. Specifically, I engage representations of the penetrated, or the passive male body, to destabilize the

⁷IMDB (pp 32).

⁸ Julia Kristeva’s “Power Of Horror” as summarized by Jonathan Kemp in *The Penetrated Male*.

deep cultural associations of masculinity as active, self-constituting subjectivity.⁹



FIGURE 3: *Untitled (heads)*, six 1080p videos with sound on LED monitors mounted in the portrait-orientation. 2015.

In the six-channel HD video and audio installation *Untitled (heads)*, the faces of six different subjects are isolated within monitors in portrait orientation and hung across a small gallery. Their heads are covered in black latex masks, revealing only their eyes and mouths framed within a black void. Their eyes frequently roll back as they moan and groan delicate sounds of pain and/or pleasure. Gleaned either through contextual deduction or the work's description in label text, unbeknownst to the viewer at first is that the

⁹ Kemp, Jonathan. *The Penetrated Male*. Brooklyn, NY, Punctum Books, 2013. pp.12

subjects are being anally fisted.

Critical theory—specifically those concerned with queer identity—has discussed the act of fisting at great length. For example, Michel Foucault saw it as indicative of the possibilities to transcend conventional constructions of sexuality by detaching pleasure as exclusively localized in the genitals.¹⁰ Thomas Piontek constituted it as a radical delinking of sexual identity and gender.¹¹ In *Untitled (heads)* I use the act of fisting to link the asshole to the eyes and mouth of my subjects, drawing out unexpected metonymies to activate the socio-cultural fear of anal penetration, which popular idioms suggest is pejorative *i.e.* “*get your head out of your ass*”.

One need not look very far within the historical trajectories of psychoanalysis and critical theory to further discover a cultural and social fear of the behind. The rectum is permitted through societal norms a single function: to release the body of waste. It therefore comes as no surprise that anal penetration, as most commonly associated with male-on-male homosexual desire, is so frequently linked to excess, death, and loss¹². Leo Bersani famously speaks about the asshole’s association to death in his book *Is the Rectum a Grave?* in which he analyzes the very real death of gay men made evident by the AIDS crisis. “It may, finally, be in the gay man’s rectum,” Bersani states, “that he demolishes his own perhaps otherwise uncontrollable

¹⁰ Michel Foucault. *Histories of Sexuality Part 1*. Pantheon Books, 1978. Print.

¹¹ Piontek, Thomas. *Queering Gay and Lesbian Studies*. Urbana: U of Illinois, 2006. Print.

¹² Kemp, Jonathan. *The Penetrated Male*. Brooklyn, NY, Punctum Books, 2013.

identification with a murderous judgment against him”.¹³ Therefore if sexuality, specifically gay male sexual desire, has made the rectum a “grave” for the masculine ideal, the “self-constituting”, “proud subjectivity” of the social order, then queer sexuality should be embraced and celebrated for its value “to demean the seriousness of the efforts to redeem it... for its very potential for death”.¹⁴ *Untitled (heads)* takes up similar politics, not only through parodying of the ‘macho’ male, but by transgressing socially established norms that deny any value in powerlessness. As the heads float across the screens moaning together like an (un)orchestrated choir, they embrace the queer pejorative associations, relinquish all self-control, negate the normative desiring-subjects gaze, and ultimately “shatter the psychic structures... for the very establishment of a relation to others”.¹⁵

¹³ Bersani, Leo. “Is the Rectum a Grave?” *Is the Rectum a Grave?: and Other Essays*, Univ. of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2010.

¹⁴ IMDB

¹⁵ IMDB



FIGURE 4: production still from *Untitled (heads)*. 2015.

Human Bondage & Submissive Agency

Untitled (heads) (2015) stems from a larger series of works entitled *Director/Subject (or foreplay)* (2014-ongoing) in which I generate similar macabre humor. This series of works are the result of a methodology I devised utilizing self-identifying submissive men within the context of appropriated BDSM relationships. I perform the dominant role of Director, and employ my submissive participants, or Subjects, into various performances under guidelines of bondage, humiliation, exhibitionism and most importantly, consent. These scenes are documented via photography and video so that the lens acts as an additional binding agent while the recorded footage further extends a sense of exhibitionism or exposure. The transference of libidinal and creative desire functions as an alternative exchange economy; the subjects' relinquishment of power on behalf of their sexual urge to be controlled is satisfied by my artistic/directorial urge to produce. The methodology ultimately destabilizes processes by which the dominant social order assigns power and agency within gendered and sexualized relationships. By visualizing powerlessness as materialized desire on submissive and penetrable male bodies, the works from *Director/Subject (foreplay)* position both masculine and feminine subjects away from the dominant phallogentric social imagination, towards new structures of power and pleasure.

My work disrupts the dominant, heteronormative order by confronting the materiality of explicitly queer bodies. This materialist subjectivity of the body is informed by a trajectory stemming from the surrealist George Bataille's ideas of base materialism, in which material hierarchies are challenged in an effort to deflate materials to the level of physical phenomena.¹⁶ My work embraces the 'messiness' of queerness to transgress dominant understandings of the relationship between mind, body, and nature. I use specific materials such as polymers, hydrogenated oils, latex and silicone rubbers for their physical properties similar to bodily excretion and flesh. The corporeal resemblance of these viscous materials, coupled with their physical tendencies to stretch and contort the body's own form, display a volatility of bodily boundaries. Quite literally, the "mess" in my work is an attempt to mess-up heteronormative imaginations of discursive binaries, stretching open and laying claim for subjectivity beyond its imagined limits. In my work, sticky substances ooze and oscillate subjects in and out of recognition, as they are rendered inside-out, liquefied and then reimagined as sites for new, alternative corporeality and forms of embodiment.

¹⁶ Bataille, Georges, and Allan Stoekl. "Base Materialism and Gnosticism." *Visions of Excess Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2008, pp. 45-53.



FIGURE 5: production still from *Untitled (pink puppy)*. 2015. From the “Director/Subject (or foreplay)” series.



FIGURE 6: *Untitled (vacuum)*, a video projection inside of a 20' shipping container. 1080p video with sound. 2016. From the “Director/Subject (or foreplay)” series

The Queer Politics of Monstrosity

The queer and abject site of embodiment remains one of horror. This is especially made clear considering how monstrosity has been associated with theories of alterity over time. The monstrous has not only been understood as synonymous with the “abnormal”, but it’s very genealogy stems from “something other than normal”.¹⁷ I have particularly been inspired by the idea of a queer embrace of the monstrous—in both it’s excess and lack—explored through the discursive field of teratology. In his “SEVEN THESES” on monsters and culture, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen claims that the monster is only born at the “metaphoric crossroads” of culture.¹⁸ He states that the “monster is always difference made flesh” and that a fear of monsters is actually confused desire of “simultaneous repulsion and attraction” through which monsters maintain social popularity. Cohen ties the figure of the monster to the figure of ‘the other’, making clear their mutual association of a desire in constant excess.¹⁹ Although he addresses ‘monsters’ as indicators of difference and usually marginalized people, he goes further to claim that *any* kind of alterity can be inscribed across or constructed through the monstrous body (cultural, political, racial, economic, sexual).²⁰ This idea makes a significant distinction at the nexus of queerness, teratology, and the social imagination, in that

¹⁷ Picart, Caroline Joan, and John Edgar. Browning. “Monstrosity and Multiculturalism.” *Speaking of Monsters: a Teratological Anthology*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, NY, 2012.

¹⁸ Cohen, J. “Monster Culture: Seven Theses.” *Speaking of Monsters: a Teratological Anthology*, Palgrave Macmillan, Place of Publication Not Identified, 2015

¹⁹ IMDB

²⁰ IMDB

monsters reveal difference as arbitrary and mutable, threatening to destroy the very social apparatus of subjectivity from which individuality is constituted.²¹

Taking that idea into consideration, along with the radical politics of queerness to embrace its own negative social-constitution, I have come to question the limits of its alterity and embodiment. More specifically, if the monster is simultaneously the ultimate signifier and defier of difference, then how might a monstrous symbol be located within the already established, dominant social imagination? Furthermore, how might monstrous subjectivity gaze upon, or even from within, the normative social imagination?

Inspired from these questions, I recalled Bataille and his essay simply titled, *The Big Toe*. In the text he addresses the big toe as the most human thing about us, as well as the most monstrous and grotesque.²² He traces the historical relationship between the foot and societal norms to show the ways in which it has been both fetishized and repressed. His aim is not only to reveal a “seductive” or “base element” to the toe and feet, but more so to explicitly question the very nature of seductiveness itself. His intent is to criticize society, saying that ‘man’ is preoccupied with poetic materialisms to the extent that their “heads are raised to the heavens, to heavenly things”.²³

In this essay I was struck by Bataille’s revealing of something already

²¹ *IMDB*

²² Bataille, Georges, and Allan Stoekl. “The Big Toe by George Bataille.” *Visions of Excess Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2008.

²³ *IMDB*

monstrous on the human subject; that the big toe, in all of its seduction, could embody the “something other than normal” that defines the monstrous. This led to the creation of my short-film, *Untitled (big toe)* that centers around a single character who embodies a significantly long, 20ft big toe. In the film the character stands alone in the room and appears to be stuck in a hysteric state of emotion. He perpetually sobs in emotional agony as the film explores his long extremity. Suddenly, a furtive hand creeps into the frame and slightly tickles the very tip of the toe. This subtle touch brings the character out of his emotional state, and back to himself, so that he no longer feels the urge to cry. This moment, although significant, is brief as the hand slowly retracts and the cycle of burden continues its loop.



FIGURE 7: Production still from *Untitled (big toe)*. 2017.

In *Untitled (big toe)*, the silicone toes' prosthetic function is twofold. It operates by literally extending the character's physical body outward, stretching the toe beyond limits of what is biologically possible. It also figuratively operates as a prosthetic for emotion that's otherwise denied to masculine subjectivity. *Untitled (big toe)* not only explicitly takes on Batailles charge to "open man's eyes wide" to the big toe, but it infuses it with an allegory of contemporary man's lack of emotional capacity, teasing him with both his desire and with his lack.²⁴ This 'lack' also takes form by an association and contrast to the symbol of the phallus. As the video tracks along the 20ft long silicone prosthetic, we become aware of the limbs acute sensitivity, confronted by an anxiety of castration: the end of the extremity and reveal of it as a toe and more specifically the toenail and conjured horror of it's potential cuts. However, the cut manifests in the sequence instead to the crying man and then to the tickling of the toe, revealing his ensuing emotional state, ultimately transcending the phallus as signifier of the self-constituting subject. The crying man is no longer contained and in control; he cries and leaks, he is monstrous and no longer stable.

Silicone as a material is inherently corporeal and it has many overlapping economies relating to the body; it is used cosmetically, biomedically, and theatrically to augment and remold its shape, while it also serves as the base material in lubricants used to penetrate the body's orifices. This expansive

²⁴ IMDB

material-reach, especially as employed theatrically in horror or fantasy movies and biomedically as body prosthetics, is especially interesting in relation to ideas of the monster as both signifier and defier of alterity. In the last year of my graduate studies I have become increasingly more interested in exploring the ways in which the materiality of silicone can offer alternative configurations of embodiment, especially as relating to traditional social imaginations of gender, sexuality, and reproduction.



FIGURE 8: Production still from *Untitled (big toe)*. 2017.

Informed by this fascination of silicones' potentiality and the politics of embodiment, I turned to theorist Kathleen Long's essay *Theories of the Monstrous from Aristotle to the X-Files* in which she traces the evolution of the

monster as social symbol of difference stemming from greek philosophers such as Aristotle and Augustine. Her essay analyzes the ways in which the monster has been elevated and deflated in societies from the medieval times to the modern era and how marginalized peoples (defined in her text as anything other than the traditional “Greek male citizen”) always carry these associations from birth, ultimately revealing how “monstrosity represents difference as marginalization”.²⁵ Long’s concern is not necessarily with undoing these associations, but rather to suggest that “...everything is different; that difference is part of existence itself”.²⁶ Thus, Long takes to task “the possibility of normalizing the monstrous” through Aristotle's *Generations of Animals* and makes a surprising turn towards challenging near-future notions of reproduction, specifically by way of speculating against ideas of modern eugenics as the “proposed solution to differences seen as unacceptable”.²⁷ She is uneasy by our “technologically but perhaps not ethically advanced culture” and concludes by proclaiming: “In a world where genetic engineering is available and used, where the “monsters” can be done away with, the “normals become monstrous”. Furthermore, “When normality can be engineered, it is no longer natural, thus fulfilling one of the categories of the monstrous, that which exists outside the realm of nature”.²⁸

In a world in which alterity is constituted as excessive and monstrous,

²⁵“A Teratological Anthology.” *Speaking of Monsters: a Teratological Anthology*, Palgrave Macmillan, Place of Publication Not Identified, 2015, pp. 200--.

²⁶ IBDM

²⁷ IMDB

²⁸ IMDB

Long's concern regarding advancements in genetic engineering and artificial insemination to do away with "difference seen as unacceptable" are strikingly significant. This is even more evident if we recall Edelman's notion of the queer as excessive to reproductive-futurism from which this report started. There persists, in the dominant social imagination, a hope to extend the present structure into the future. This is potentially a future free of alterity and excess, but as Long insists, there persists a contradiction inherent to the monster-symbol from which we're reminded that "difference is part of existence itself".



FIGURE 9: production stills from *Uterior Subjects 1&2*. 2017.

These ideas led to the creation of my most recent work, *Ulterior Subjects 1&2*. The work consists of two videos displayed on flat-screen monitors that are mounted on medical IV poles. The videos display fleshy and/or blob-y representations of the human body that have been flattened/reduced to a single, outward facing surface. The figures look familiar and simultaneously *not-quite-right*; the blotchy flesh seems both hyper-realistic and plastic, and the eyes slowly move around, appearing to get stuck in place, go cross, or get out of sync with one-another. The subjects contain all the seemingly necessary human-attributes at first glance, but are soon after revealed with the lack of any 'natural' reproductive means (i.g. genitals). This lack, coupled with their uncanny resemblance to a human-subject, demand closer inspection by a viewer in which the fleshy-surfaces are revealed as some sort of mask—that something is behind the representations, wearing or activating them like a disguise or form intimidation. This is made even more evident through the installation of the work, specifically by way of the IV poles and the a/v equipment cords strung around them, referencing a life medically in support or carefully in sustain.

The fleshy-subjects in these videos are in fact both puppets and masks. Made of silicone, the objects were molded from life-casts of various performers, specifically fitting their faces, tightly, in order to capture the most human-expression possible. Although painted, threaded with hair, and

sculpted to look as realistically 'human' as possible, these representations remain *other*. The performers, which activate the masks from behind, never fully line-up with the borders separating the two subjects—they slip in and out of the obvious in a way that doesn't ask one to suspend disbelief. Instead, these moments of indifference become the means of the work, activating or pointing to a space 'behind' the thing itself. This work marks a significant shift—or perhaps expansion—in my research and practice in which the queer subject of alterity shifts towards one of ulteriority.



FIGURE 10: *Ulterior Subjects 1&2*, 1080p videos with sound on LED monitors, modified medical IV poles, various cables and hardware. 2017.

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