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The Wild Beasts

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Art
at Virginia Commonwealth University.

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Abstract

THE WILD BEASTS

By Peter Cochrane

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Art
at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2019.

Major Director

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The Wild Beasts springs from my desire to thank my ever-expanding queer chosen family and mentors for their strength. Working through the often violent and othering aspects of the lens and photographic histories I create floral portraits responding to each person's being and our relationship. Using the 19th century, 8x10 large format view camera—the same used by colonialists and ethnographers to “capture” the divinity of Nature—I erect each as a traditional still life studio setup at the threshold between the natural world and that constructed by humans.

These environments speak both to the character of each friend and also to the use of Nature against queer people in most legal systems across the planet. We are deemed unnatural and made criminals through inequitable semantics. The 8x10 negative becomes a portrait, a darkroom contact print that is gifted to each of *The Wild Beasts*, an intimate artifact of my gratitude. At these borders I lash at the histories of oppression, remaking these lineages and tools into spaces for empathy, tenderness, and love.

I. Introduction: Uncovering the Path

I come to the creation of *The Wild Beasts* through an arduous journey from deep psychosocial isolation to empathic connectivity between an ever growing queer chosen family. Like a spider connecting one thread from its spinnerets—so anatomically close that they could be mistaken for the anus—to another to create one of the strongest bonds known to exist on our planet,¹ this project comes from my desire to make visible the metaphysical. The defining traits of a relationship are shifting if not imperceptible altogether. A relationship is a taciturn shadow, something we bring into existence through an interchange of words in an attempt to convey a shared experience with another. But it cannot manifest in a way that satisfies our desire to name, to bear witness to, or to know.

Relationships are our lifeblood as social creatures. We strive for the essence of our beings to be understood if only by one other person, or we give up the effort and remove ourselves from society. Henry David Thoreau writes about the internal solidification of the Self through isolation and communion with Nature in *Walden*, yet is the act of writing not an attempt to synthesize our thoughts so they may be understood by another? We keep diaries to catalogue previous systems of reality, and when we die our secrets are inherited by family. Depending on others' interest in our lives and our work, these sections are even published into bound volumes and sold by the millions.

One artist archetype is that of the hermit. We pay our dues to a metropolis and then remove ourselves from a defined social structure. I have dreamt of this myself, of the pound of flesh demanded by the city in an attempt to produce the stream of capital necessary to disengage. And as I age I wonder what this yearning seeks. Is it for personal utopia? Is it an urge inherent in the artist? In the queer? Derek Jarman created his cabin at the edge of the Earth and his garden out of a rocky shore that appears barren to the untrained eye. Agnes Martin found refuge in the alien expanse of Taos, New Mexico and never looked back. Pushed out of the city by a lack of affordable housing, Noah Purifoy created an impossibly liberated jungle of artifacts on the inhospitable edge of Joshua Tree National Park. Nearby, the gay men of Palm Springs know this flight well. They live their youths in Los Angeles or San Francisco and vanish into the desert, skin darkened and houses bleached by relentless sun.

I suppose there's a simple answer: You don't want us, so we don't want you. But I think there's something more, something like mythology and freedom supplanting exile—space and the illusion of infinite time to reflect on creation, on our relationship with nature, on our families, on those we love, those we have lost, and those we will lose. This is never clearer than in *Modern Nature*, the diaries of Derek Jarman written between 1989 through 1990. To Jarman, now living with HIV and looking towards the last horizon, the microcosmic universe of the seeds and weeds and plants that bloom in his garden is interwoven with reports from hospital visits and his career. As his writings progress his reflections become intimate to the point of memorialization. By March of 1990 he write long-form prose about the lives and deaths of his parents—a cycle, a guide.²

¹ Spider's silk, nearly invisible in its thin protein structure, is roughly five times as strong as steel.

² Derek Jarman, *Modern Nature*, (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1994).



1. Derek Jarman's home in Dungeness, England.

When I moved across the country to pursue graduate school I did so in an attempt to live beyond the basics of survival. In spending the entirety of my twenties in San Francisco I created a family of friends that helped heal the wounds created by the family of blood, but in time I lost much of what made me me. Agoraphobia, panic attacks, anxiety; any slew of terms were thrown at my state but my new existence was plain: My reality shattered into something wholly unrecognizable. The most simplistic truths lost their validity. The sky became so large I couldn't look at it for fear of being consumed. I could no longer walk outside, climb hills, be among nature, gaze out to the horizon of the Pacific Ocean, ride my bike through the neighborhoods and parks that changed so quickly it felt like wading through a fantasy novel. I could not feel where my body began and where it ended, if my feet actually made contact with the pavement, or if I would suddenly float away from the ground, through the atmosphere, lost to the eternal darkness of the universe. In essence my mind had turned against me and I could not escape the natural borders of that peninsula for five years.

It is hard to categorize what leaving meant and how the pain of boarding the plane to Richmond, Virginia transformed me. But in the ensuing two years I have realized that the resilience of the human body and mind is incomparable. I have also learned that I didn't leave that family behind but rather stepped into another part of the sea that connects us all. My past works focused on notions of death, whether metaphoric or actual—the deaths of thousands lost to AIDS, the unanswerable question of what comes next, the transformations that occur after deep psychological traumas and the loss of the person we once were because of them. This eastward move was undeniably mine, made for me, and stemmed from the need to nurture myself or perish. In walking from the safety of the shoreline across the lake, looking down to see the ice grow thinner and thinner with each step, only to find land on the other side, I had the great

fortune to look back at my journey. As I stepped across to the opposite shore my hand found its way to another's, and another's, and another's.

It is in this duality of existence and reverie that I found my wild beasts. Many had been there the whole time, and others I continue to meet. They are my queer kin. They are my love. When it all goes askew and I can no longer remember that gravity holds me to the ground and when the crushing pain of a world that is eating itself alive becomes too much, I feel their embrace. Each time it is a remembrance and a celebration. It is the thick red paint that creates the bodies of Matisse's dancers vibrating next to the blue of his sky and the green of his earth. I want to find the light that glimmers in the darkness of the past, nurture it, help it grow in brilliance, and let it explode the oppressive social orders that bring us together in the first place. I want to deconstruct the histories of violence against minorities that are inextricably linked with the histories of photography. I want to honor the growth in myself, my small steps that march ever forward despite the clinging strands of horror that beg me to end. But above all, I want to say two simple phrases diluted through their colloquial overuse: Thank you. I love you.

II. Becoming and Unbecoming Cerberus

Mine is a story of ripped seams and shattered stained glass windows; of a boy that fractures, collapses, and mends the pieces over and again. The components retain a familiar shape but the form looks slightly different each time. The brain suffers hair-like lacerations and equally miniscule tissues reach out to one another to form scars that reconnect each newly created valley. I am thirty-one now and have spent great energy considering my desire to foster platonic relationships and the events of my past as they relate to definitions of trauma to understand the splintering of my Self. What is defined by some as fact or as wound is questioned or dismissed by others. Still, some truths are indisputable.

My biological family disintegrated around the same time I was born and instability became my only constant. My brother and I were thrown back and forth between parents through the legal system, neither of whom had the capacity to be caretakers. As my father remarried shortly after his divorce, conflict rose to such a point that they gave up and we were handed permanently over to our mother, a psychologically unstable woman the court initially deemed unfit for care, going against the grain of California law that almost always grants custody to the mother. While the ensuing years of childhood through to my early twenties were filled with laughter and my mother's best attempt to give us a loving home, they were also overtaken by the agony that accompanies bipolar disorder. In my early teens, I became the primary support system for my mother whose depressive depths knew only the hollowness of despair. Some days she was the most charming person in the room and we would laugh until we doubled over, holding our guts and gasping for air. Others, her screams of pain were so animalistic, so wrenching that they obliterated any memory of joy and I would beg her to let me into her locked room to cry on the floor with her until the only thing left was sleep. It's interesting how the body's physical responses to exuberance and torment are the same: tears fill the eyes, the abdominal muscles contract, we hold ourselves at the waist as if protecting the internal organs. In those years I lost myself in the constant struggle to keep her alive. Still, I do not blame her, for she hadn't the tools needed to give us the stability any child deserves. She loved us the only way she knew how.

In his breathtaking book *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*, the psychiatrist Bessel van der Kolk writes that:

In order to know who we are—to have an identity—we must know (or at least feel that we know) what is and what was “real.” We must observe what we see around us and label it correctly; we must also be able to trust our memories and be able to tell them apart from our imagination. Losing the ability to make these distinctions is one sign of what psychoanalyst William Niederland called “soul murder.” Erasing awareness and cultivating denial are often essential to survival, but the price is that you lose track of who you are, of what you are feeling, and of what and whom you can trust.³

By the time I left for college I had moved houses over twenty times. Our car had been repossessed once. My mother filed for bankruptcy. We moved from San Diego to Montana and back again twice in an attempt to get her away from the ghosts of her past that lurked the streets,

³ Bessel van der Kolk, M.D., *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (Penguin Books, 2014), p. 136

reminders of a marriage and life no longer hers. Once out on my own, I endured brief, intermittent homelessness. I don't remember much of my youth—it is a dark cloud punctuated by bursts of lightning and rending thunder. I know there were video games. Eventually, there was an online world I could disappear into and leave my surroundings completely. I know I attended school, though I would wake up and listen for the way my mother was walking the hall outside and decide whether or not I should go. If she was humming and her strides were sound I could get out of bed, clothe myself, and leave without issue. If her feet were dragging on the low-pile carpet, if something slammed in the kitchen, if the first noise I heard was the blowing of mucus into roll after roll of toilet paper, I would eventually force myself to rise and find her. Perhaps she had collapsed on the bathroom floor unable to move from the weight of her pain. Perhaps she was rifling through the divorce papers again. The walls of the houses changed, the driveways were different, the plants outside new species each time. But each held the same vision: a filing cabinet opened, papers strewn about the floor, and my mother poring over every tear-stained line. How I dreamt of burning those documents and how I dreamt that their destruction would unleash her from her binds. The silly thoughts of a silly child.

It wasn't until many years later that I realized the sickness I woke up with every morning and my inability to eat breakfast were a psychosomatic defense. My body was screaming out but I was too young to know what it was saying. Too focused on survival. My mother, my brother, and I had a codename; a kind of initiate armor that proved our strength. "We Three." They were the isolationist words of power that encircled the sigil engraved in the bones of three survivors. However, as I stumbled into the arms of others in high school I began to understand what comfort and care were meant to look like. I met a group of six other outcasts, each with their own sets of unnerving realities, and began a yearslong friendship that redefined my understanding of family. Though I kept my home life secret as best I could it would seep through the cracks in places and they would bear witness to my deepest shame. Instead of running they held me. I wept and shook and still their clasped arms buoyed me, kept me from drowning. As we aged and scattered to the winds, we kept in constant contact and do to this day. Unbelievably, across winter and summer breaks back home from college, one by one four of us unveiled our queer identities.

I came of age without the Internet as we know it today or gay people in sitcoms. In the sixth grade my class was gathered in an assembly hall and shown images of the fence that Matthew Shepard was tied and beaten to death upon. I was twelve and living in rural Montana when I realized I was gay, something the other kids who already didn't care for an outsider knew before me and used to threaten as they cornered me in hallways. Our town, another small encampment built through Manifest Destiny, shared with Laramie, Wyoming—the town where Matthew was killed—so thoroughly in its Western architecture, expansive land, and xenophobia that pictures or stories of them could be interchanged. In high school, now back in San Diego, we were told that if you were a man who had sex with another man you would get HIV and likely die of AIDS-related illness. I hid, I diverted, I adopted an asexual persona.

In Chicago, during a stint at a second college, I fell in love with a boy and confronted that which I feared the most. He and I shared roots so deep it was as if we were two branches of the same tree. I would tell him a story from my past and he would echo it perfectly with one from his. I talked with him more than I had with anyone in my life before. Most of it was through tears and

holding onto each other as tightly as we could bear. I came undone in his arms. I whispered his name when I walked the streets. I smelled his scent when he was away and burrowed into his skin when he came back. For the first time I was seen. To him I wasn't a third of a whole but a person with shape and being all my own. I wasn't my mother or the agony in the voicemails she would leave me from across the country. Nor was I her joy. I was me, removed and unknown.

I had dropped out of school at nineteen, re-enrolled in San Francisco at twenty, and finished my undergraduate education. I had found art and started to scratch at its histories, the first endeavor that helped me understand my existence. Over the course of a decade I worked at a gallery, then at a museum, then for an artist, and then as the editor of a politically radical arts magazine. I helped my friends build a coffee roasting company from the ground up and grew a floral arranging business after placing congratulatory flowers throughout the cafe upon opening. San Francisco and the people I met there gave to me my belief system and guided me into the fight for queer liberation over assimilation. I had stopped speaking to my mother for our mutual survival and my father and stepmother re-entered my life. With him came the other half of the story and the fracturing of truth that brought an entirely new realm of pain I was unequipped to handle. As my chosen family grew and I came to a revolutionary understanding of love, the blood that coursed through my veins remembered all that I had tried to forget. In whatever way the word had twisted by then I loved my parents, though I was coming to know that this version was a contingency game and my life was the reward. I was aware that there was the apparition of Peter that made strangers laugh, attended protests, and brought his friends together over dinners around his table, but I also knew there was another that I could not recognize in photographs or while brushing my teeth each morning and night.

Van der Kolk also writes that, "The lack of self-awareness in victims of chronic childhood trauma is sometimes so profound that they cannot recognize themselves in a mirror. Brain scans show that this is not the result of mere inattention: The structures in charge of self-recognition may be knocked out along with the structures related to self-experience."⁴ Around the age of twenty-five I lost what I knew Peter to be. I started having what I later came to know as panic attacks and at one point was bedridden for a week, entirely overcome with the fear of being alive. The first occurred while hiking a mountain in Montana with my father and stepmother. Halfway up a switchback I dropped to the ground, clutched at the grass, and shut my eyes tightly. I felt as if I was going to fling myself down the slope against my own will. The natural world had provided my only solace and surveying the land from a peak helped me forget all of the suffering that took place below, if only for the moments between breezes. No home provided the security and nourishment that I felt while walking among the lodgepole pines, while watching the slow growth of lichen on a favorite rock, while listening to the rustling leaves of quaking aspens or the woodpecker creating holes to store its food. I could never forget that the rural United States took Matthew, but it also gave infinitely. In it I could feel my essence radiate through my body. I lost and have still not found the ability to exist in that space again.

Years into surviving in this newfound state I created the *Osiris* project, one of many that have focused on death and transformation. By twenty eight I had come to somewhat understand what was happening in the disconnect between my body and mind through great assistance of

⁴ Bessel van der Kolk, M.D., *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (Penguin Books, 2014), p. 94

therapeutic mentors. I needed to honor the traumas that had shaped me into the person I was becoming. I was learning to walk again and to call myself an empathic being worthy of the love I felt for my friends. I created twenty-eight porcelain death masks from a mold of my face, each fractured and mended with gold lacquer through a Japanese ceramic repair technique called *kintsugi*. A peer from San Francisco State University owned a gallery called Incline, so named for the tight, two-story ramp that formed the entirety of the space. The building was a former mortuary that was situated on a train line in the middle of the city used to move bodies to plots south of the growing metropolis. Along the walls of this ramp, installed in order to cart bodies up for embalming and back down for transportation, I hung these masks as a progressive journey through my decades of trauma and recovery. In the center of the space, its ceilings soaring thirty or so feet high, I hung a canopy of stargazer lilies that bloomed and died over the course of the show. It is said that recognition is the first step.



2. Peter Cochrane, *Osiris (08)*, porcelain, gold lacquer, 2015.



3. Peter Cochrane, *Osiris (installation)*, 2015.

III. On Loneliness: Finding the Self through Mythology, History, and the Internet

As queer people we do not have the prescriptive methodologies of life given to and laid out for heterosexuals. While media has changed rapidly in the past few years to encompass more inclusive representation, this is a relatively new world. Podcasts like *Making Gay History* or *Nancy*, YouTube channels and a prolific growth of websites like Queerty or even branches of mainstream sources such as BuzzFeed LGBT are filling the gaps in ways both positive and complicated.

There remains a profound isolation in falling outside of the normative model for existence. When I realized my sexuality in rural Montana the closest thing to me for representation was porn, which I was afraid to look at because the eighteen-years-of-age-and-up warnings that came with the early Internet had me convinced my IP address would be tracked and I would be jailed—a young mind grasping at a young Internet. I would perform searches for “gay people,” “gay people in history,” “gay people in movies,” and each would portray a life of villainy or self-destruction. A few years later I saw the film *The Celluloid Closet*, which catalogued the ways in which LGBT people were portrayed in cinema since its inception. The fairy, the thief, the serial killer, and the comic relief were the primary roles allotted to us, while gay Hollywood actors went through a McCarthy-esque expulsion in the '80s after the devastation of HIV/AIDS.⁵ Though the film tries to end with some hope for changing representation, wherever I sought information I found barely a hint of a positive life lived as a gay person. Reading James Baldwin’s *Giovanni’s Room* was one of my earliest experiences with the blunt portrayal of a same-sex relationship, yet even he relocated to France after years of persecution.

Even now, as data polling companies move to ask new socioeconomic questions, our felt isolation becomes factualized and potentially dangerous. A 2017 Gallup poll of 340,000 interviewees in the United States places the numbers of people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender at 4.5%.⁶ That number fractures to even smaller percentages along the line of sex. In our attempts to connect with one another through modern technology, apps are built to profit off of our loneliness. In April of 2018 it was reported that Grindr, the largest of the gay apps, had shared the information associated with every member’s profile—location, age, ethnicity, and, most insidiously, HIV status—with two other companies.⁷ Capitalist pursuits strike us deeply and further diminish what small strides towards connectivity have been made. Gay bars, sites of community organizing despite their complex nature and potential for othering, have fallen victim to gentrification, app-based longing, and moves towards homonormative ways of life including child rearing and suburban sprawl. Gay bars have dropped in numbers by the hundreds since the mid-2000s,⁸ and in 2015 the Lexington, the last lesbian bar in San Francisco, shuttered.

Living in one of the gayest cities on the planet should have been a liberating, connecting experience, and in my early twenties it was. I found my politics and shaped parts of my being

⁵ *The Celluloid Closet*. Directed by Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman. USA: Drakes Avenue Pictures, 1996.

⁶ Frank Newport, “In U.S., Estimate of LGBT Population Rises to 4.5%.” *Gallup*, 22 May 2018.

⁷ Azeen Ghorayshi and Sri Ray, “Grindr is Letting Other Companies See User HIV Status and Location Data.” *Buzzfeed News*, 2 April 2018.

⁸ Daniel Villarreal, “What the F*ck is Killing Our Gay Bars, and is it Our Own Fault?” *Hornet*, 18 January 2019.

into something I could believe in, but these things pushed me further from a mainstream. As panic and anxiety settled into my system the closest thing to reaching out for me was app-based communication. I was able to stay in my rapidly gentrifying city as long as I did due to a room in a rent-controlled apartment, but the majority of radical queer youth were pushed out with the tech boom. With this wealth-infused whitewashing came a new kind of gay, one that called me ugly to my pierced face and said my hair, which settled on my mid-back, was too femme and disgusted them.

This constant rejection from what I had believed to be my community pushed me back into seeking the comfort of history. I believe two major components of lust that turns to desire that turns to love are proximity and time, and in this space I grew closest to a straight man with whom I had daily interaction. So ensued the predictable trope of the gay falling for the person he can't have, and oh how hard I fell. Like a stray cat being let in for a dinner only to be thrown back to the wilds, I experienced hints of reciprocation that multiplied my loneliness. Days and nights would pass lying in bed yearning for the embrace of another, but instead of the warmth that comes from interwoven legs and arms wrapped around my chest I turned to my computer and my books.



4. Eugène Atget, *Versailles (Faune)*, albumen print, 1901.
Image courtesy of Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco.

One of my favorite bedtime stories was of Baba Yaga, a Russian folktale of a witch who eats children and who lives in a hut that moves around on chicken's legs. I remember wanting to be her, alone, always seeking. The darkness of this kind of lore embedded in my mind. I much preferred *The Rainbow Goblins* and their thieving ways and the loss of *The Giving Tree* that grows more profound with time to the tidy bows of other stories. As a child I read Greek mythology voraciously. The parables of the Greeks excited me and sparked my interest in science fiction and fantasy—alternative worlds and realities where more than our own were possible. I connected with the humanity of the gods, with their faults and misgivings and jealousy. It wasn't until I reread the stories later in life that I realized how plainly queer their narratives were, and how readily accepting the society that lived by them was. The gods of Olympus shapeshift and change sexes to have affairs with mortals. Zeus takes the form of a cloud to be with Io or a swan to seduce Leda. The blind prophet Tiresias, worshipper of Apollo, is changed into a woman for seven years. Achilles, the demigod foretold at birth to be the greatest hero of time, held a lifelong relationship with another man, Patroclus.

When I was twenty six I read a book that altogether reframed my thinking about storytelling and the lenses through which we view the past. Unlike so much lost to the cloud of memory, I know my age at the time of my first reading because I wrote on the introductory page that reads "*Autobiography of Red: A Romance*," "04 November 2013: In St. Dominic's, San Francisco I realize I have nothing and no one to pray to. But why should I pray at all?" Anne Carson's epic poem is described on the cover as "a novel in verse." It is a retelling of the tenth labor of Hercules wherein he must gather the red cattle of the red monster named Geryon from the red island Erytheia. Instead of killing Geryon with a poisoned arrow as was Hercules's fate, Carson tells the story of a red beast with awkward wings he straps down to fit in and his nascent relationship with the breathtaking Herakles. She writes of their initial meeting:

Then he met Herakles and the kingdoms of his life all shifted down a few notches.
They were two superior eels
at the bottom of the tank and they recognized each other like italics.
[. . .]
The world poured back and forth between their eyes once or twice.⁹

Later, after Geryon and Herakles have become lovers, separated, and moments before he is about to unknowingly run into Herakles on the streets of Buenos Aires, Geryon sits in a hotel room alone. He has taken up photography and read the likes of Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman, whom he decidedly thinks is evil. Chapter thirty-two, called "Kiss," begins:

A healthy volcano is an exercise in the uses of pressure.
—
Geryon sat on his bed in the hotel room pondering the cracks and fissures
of his inner life. It may happen
that the exit of the volcanic vent is blocked by a plug of rock, forcing
molten matter sideways along

⁹ Anne Carson, *Autobiography of Red* (New York and Toronto: First Vintage Contemporaries Edition, August 1999), p39.

lateral fissures called fire lips by volcanologists. Yet Geryon did not want to become one of those people who think of nothing but their stores of pain. He bent over the book on his knees.

Philosophic Problems.

“ . . . I will never know how you see red and you will never know how I see it. But this separation of consciousness is recognized only after a failure of communication, and our first movement is to believe in an undivided being between us. . . .”¹⁰

On October 24th, 79, Mount Vesuvius erupted and the lava and ash entombed the Roman settlements of Herculaneum and Pompeii.¹¹ During modern-day excavations of Pompeii archaeologists unearthed a city that lived and breathed a sexual freedom far different from our own. Bathhouses, serving both as spaces for public bathing and as brothels, were found to have friezes depicting sexual acts between multiple partners and partners of the same sex. Presumably a patron could point to the painting and engage in acts of pleasure regardless of orientation as we consider it today. While it would be inappropriate to ascribe modern terminology such as “homosexuality” to what was found in Pompeii, these images, as well as graffiti found around the city alluding to same-sex love, depict a sexually unfettered society.

Within this tragedy I projected my insecurities and desires. In love with a man I couldn't express my feelings for and in a state of psychological paralysis, I laid in bed and dreamt. I considered *red* in all its shapes and shadows and operatives. I held it in my tongue, felt it stream across my limbs, let its connections expand in my mind. I looked at the photographs of those hollow bodies exhumed from the ash, some desperately alone and camouflaged by their surroundings, others clutching a partner or a child or a stranger in their final moments as hellfire rained upon them. My anger ran and tasted of blood. My sorrow showered me in its cooling purple cousin.

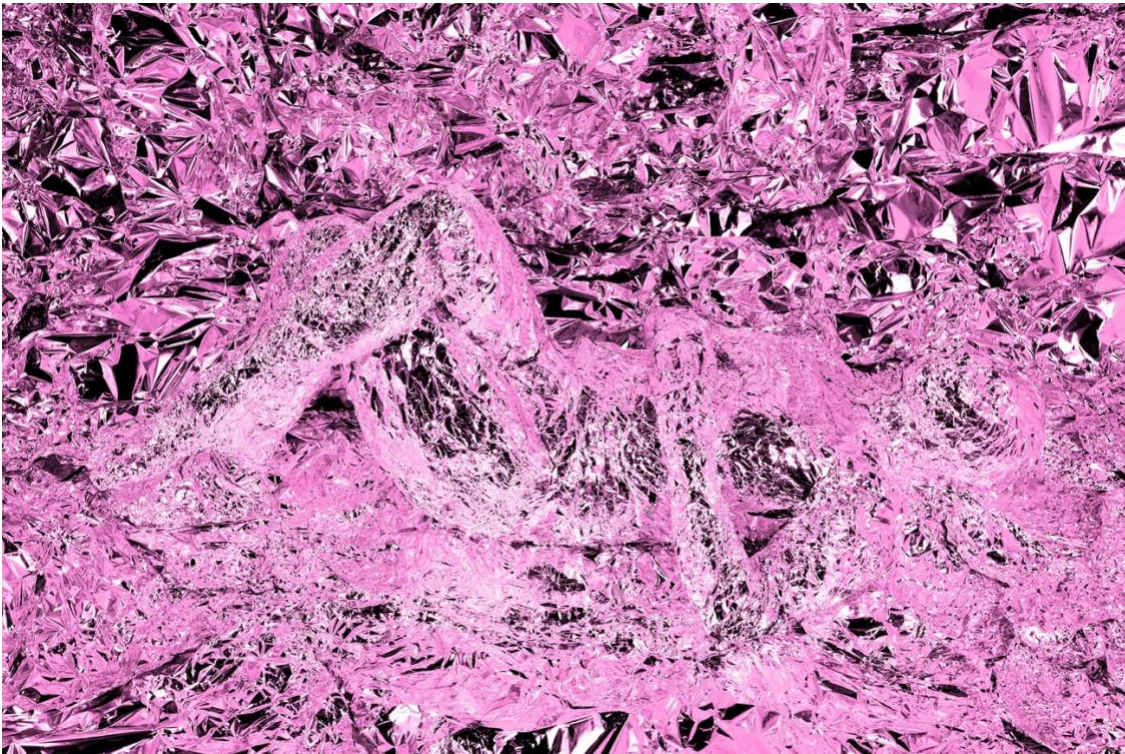
From Blood to Lust, a series of self-portraits involving the pain of stamina and my self-obfuscation, evolved out of carnality. I recognized my need to express my desire as it ground against my need to disappear. Camouflage has been an important part of queer survival through our history, punctuated by openness only here and there in specific societies that ultimately crumbled. What I was feeling was a need to mask myself entirely, to fall backwards into the folds of time to a beginning before an us and a them. What did identity or its associated politics matter under the crushing numbers game of finding a lover, let alone a community, as a member of a practically invisible sliver of society?

¹⁰ Anne Carson, *Autobiography of Red* (New York and Toronto: First Vintage Contemporaries Edition, August 1999), p105.

¹¹ Jessica Ball, “Mount Vesuvius.” *Geology.com*.



5. Body in Pompeii from the explosion of Mt. Vesuvius in 79 CE.



6. Peter Cochrane, *From Blood to Lust (On Back)*, archival pigment print, 2017.

IV. Queer Oppression, Queer Imprisonment, Queer Murder

In my early twenties I had powerful guides that led me through my queer awakening. I was introduced to the radical and intersectional group *Against Equality*. I read the anti-assimilationist prose of Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore. I learned to question institutions such as marriage, the military, the prison industrial complex, and purportedly pro-queer organizations such as the Human Rights Campaign.¹² And I learned to follow the flow of money into the government from the private sector and religious organizations hellbent on our destruction.

The rights of LGBT persons in the United States are constantly in flux depending on the belief systems of a rotating few. With Donald Trump in the White House and a conservative majority on the Supreme Court, we stand at a precipice of loss—a reversion of recent gains in civil rights and broader public exposure to and understanding of queer rights. God and Nature have already reared their heads in anti-liberation lawmaking as they have been used before to suppress. What is deemed capital-n “Nature” by ruling classes in many countries has been used to fabricate binaries of right and wrong, moral and unjust, healthy and sick, employable and terminable.

In India a British colonial-era law known as section 377, which criminalized gay sex under religious mandates and classified it as an “unnatural offence,” was stricken by the Delhi High Court in 2009, then reinstated in 2013, and finally repealed in 2018. Under section 377 people engaging in same-sex “carnal intercourse against the order of nature” could be imprisoned for ten years.¹³ Also in 2018 the first concentration camp since the Holocaust was opened in Chechnya to detain and torture gay men into revealing the identities of others, where such brutality often leads to death. Because of this governmentally sanctioned, calculated attack some are murdered at the hands of their own family members for tarnishing their honor.¹⁴ A 2016 study conducted by the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, and Intersex Association (ILGA) concluded that same-sex sexual conduct is punishable in seventy-four countries. Forty of these maintain a “gay panic” clause that legally permits citizen violence against and even the murder of LGBT people. Thirteen countries utilize the death penalty.¹⁵

¹² Toshio Meronek, “Human Rights Campaign Under Fire in LGBT Community.” 11 January 2015.

¹³ “India Court Legalises Gay Sex in Landmark Ruling.” *The BBC*, 6 September 2018.

¹⁴ Hemley Gonzalez, “Chechnya Opens World’s First Concentration Camp for Homosexuals since Hitler’s in the 1930s.” *European AIDS Treatment Group: EATG*, 25 September 2018.

¹⁵ Siobhan Fenton, “LGBT Relationships are Illegal in 74 Countries, Research Finds.” *The Independent*, 17 May 2016



7. Sonali Gulati, *I Am* (still image), Directed by Sonali Gulati, 2011.
Pride parade in New Delhi in 2008, before the repeal of section 377 in 2009.

We are not so far removed in the United States from our own history of violence justified by ways of science and religion as to believe it is dead and buried. In 1952 the American Psychiatric Association established homosexuality as a psychological disorder via their publication the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM). From the first iteration through to the DSM-III-R of 1987 this organization of medical professionals contributed to the social panic that maintained the criminalization of queer people. Specifically targeting men who have sex with other men, and even in certain states married heterosexuals, sodomy laws criminalizing anal penetration were upheld all the way until 2003 when the Supreme Court heard the *Lawrence v. Texas* case and ruled to abolish the laws across state lines. However, due to states' rights as they pertain to and operate apart from federal law, to this day only twenty-two states outlaw the discrimination of employment based on sexual orientation. Horrifyingly, VCUArts, my own institution, founded a partner campus in Qatar in 1998, a country that maintains the legal imprisonment of gay men should they be caught having sex.

While great strides have been made towards equality for queer people in the United States, LGBTQ+ content disappeared from the federal government's website shortly after Trump's inauguration and executive orders rolled back governmental employment rights, open military service for trans individuals, and many other privileges allotted for heterosexuals. These moves paved the way for the upcoming *Altitude Express Inc v. Zarda* Supreme Court hearing on whether to dismantle the Title VII anti-discrimination employment provisions of the Civil Rights

Act as they pertain to sexual minorities. As of April 22, 2019 the case is slated to be heard by a majority right-wing Supreme Court following the confirmation of Justice Brett Kavanaugh.¹⁶ If passed, new legislation would permit discrimination across all employment sectors against LGBT persons.

¹⁶ Adam Liptak, “Supreme Court to Decide Whether Landmark Civil Rights Law Applies to Gay and Transgender Workers.” *The New York Times*, 22 April 2019.

V. The Colonialism of the Camera

It is within this precarious space that I am re-examining my interconnected web of queer chosen family, many of whom are artists, and the structures of oppression that have brought us together. What is the heritage of a collective whole? What tacit strength have they given to me in my years of struggle? How can I return such generosity?

Beginning with the 8x10 view camera, an early large-format tool that came to market in 1888, I aim to destabilize and bring to light its extensive history of othering. This and other large-format devices made the capture of imagery onto negatives that could be developed and printed into positives at a later time more readily available to a consumer base that could afford them. Eventually, the camera became popularized by Western landscape photographers such as Edward Weston and iconographically associated with Ansel Adams. The 8x10 is a mechanically simple yet practically complex device that creates a divide embedded in its construction between those with and those without access and knowledge. There is nothing intuitive in its function, all gears that twist and move and lock, panels that swing on multiple axes, a glass plane to focus an upside-down image that is then permanently blocked out by an altogether separate object that holds the negative. It is a tool of dedication, precision, and, perhaps problematically, reverence for its craft—a symbiotic body and surrogate eye.

The camera has long been connected to the body, sometimes as an object for the shy yet curious to physically hide behind. Christopher Isherwood wrote in *Goodbye to Berlin*, his novel that dances with the queer underground of an inching-towards-World-War-II Berlin, “I am a camera with its shutter open, quite passive, recording, not thinking.”¹⁷ Andy Warhol recorded *The Factory*, his friends, the skin of sleeping men, blowjobs, and celebrity exploits with similar taciturnity. However, the camera has also enacted a presence of psychological domineering. White men trudged into inhabited parts of the Earth previously unknown to them and used it as a weapon of categorization, a similar us-and-them dichotomy imbued in the use of the camera itself. In these instances, the camera helped to create damaging anthropological studies and the division of humans based on physical appearance that we are still reeling from today. Decades into this narrative of image-driven violence, Susan Sontag wrote *Regarding the Pain of Others* on the camera’s use in the perpetuation of war, coming to one of many powerful theses that a read of our reality based exclusively on imagery is fiction.¹⁸ I hope to counter these histories with this: softness, empathy, and love.

Coming on two centuries of photographic history, a surprisingly well populated and modern list of “photographers noted for having used large format cameras” on Wikipedia showcases seventy-five artists, nine of whom are not men and only one, Duane Michals,¹⁹ who has made work related to same-sex desire that always seems to be couched to the sideways glance within monographs. While this list does not contain such visibly out and notable contemporaries working in the large-format medium as Catherine Opie or David Benjamin Sherry, it does reflect a broad question of access, power, and the myth of the (straight, white, male) artist as hero

¹⁷ Christopher Isherwood, *Goodbye to Berlin* (London, Hogarth Press, 1939).

¹⁸ Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003).

¹⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Large_format

packing up his camera to capture the divinity of the natural world. Sherry in particular has made incredible strides to queer the landscapes that form our consciousness of the West using the selfsame techniques of our photographic forebears, out- and in-side the darkroom. Horrific as it felt at the time to have art popping up around San Francisco sponsored by Absolut Vodka, seeing a billboard-sized print of a blue tinted desert of Utah wrapped around the facade of a building two blocks from where I lived settled deeply within my skin.



8. David Benjamin Sherry, *Winter Storm in Zion Canyon, Zion, Utah*, 2013.
Part of the Absolut Vodka *Open Canvas* campaign.

VI. The Wild Beasts

As Jack Halberstam writes in *Wildness, Loss, Death*, “[Wildness] cannot *mean* because it has been cast as that which exceeds meaning.”²⁰ Similarly to José Esteban Muñoz’s concepts of queerness as itself erratic and undefinable within *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, I wish for this project to make all the sense in the world and none at all. If wildness is the space wherein the blithe un-reality of queer being thrives, I create within it frameworks of entry through seemingly systematized rules of composition, form, and function and then shatter them with the unruly winds of Nature, my co-conspirator.

In understanding my own hindrance to exist physically and mentally within the natural world I realized a need to connect my own morphed fear of that which once nourished me with the dangers inherent to queers existing in these spaces. I needed to pull myself out of the safety of the studio. Utilizing the lineages of flowers and the human desire to cultivate, arrange, and gift them, each member of this chosen family is personified by a still life—an image incorporating but bending the traditional setup of backdrop, vessel, and flowers—erected where the natural environment meets the constructed, the unbridled with the colonized.

Flowers, the subject placed in front of the lens for this project, carry with them their own imbued streams of being and methods of arrangement to convey meaning. As for queerness itself, codes were developed for flora as far back as the rule of pharaohs in Egypt, the 10th-century bird-and-flower paintings of China which spread to Korea and Japan, and reached a critical mass in Europe through Dutch floral paintings between 1600 and 1800. Reality bent in Dutch paintings as artists brought together the physically impossible to create mythic narratives. For example, one red-and-white-striped tulip of dubious corporeality, the *Semper augustus*, was said to fetch 10,000 guilders in the Netherlands—or enough to feed and clothe a family for half of their lifetimes—at the peak of tulip sales in the early 1600s. Mysteriously, in 1639 Hans Bollongier painted an economic impossibility: a still life with no less than a dozen *Semper augustus* tulips present.

²⁰ Jack Halberstam, “Wildness, Loss, Death,” *Social Text* 121, Vol. 32, No. 4 (Duke University Press, 2014), p. 140.



9. Hans Bollongier, *Floral Still Life*, oil on panel. 1639.
Courtesy of the Rijksmuseum.

I am interested in flowers for too many reasons to count, but the two that are most prevalent here are their abundantly clear reflection of our own birth, life, and death cycles, and their camp artificiality when cut away from their host bodies and arranged to make the beautiful even more so. Many queers before me have shared this fascination. Oscar Wilde became infamously associated with the green carnation, a varietal not grown but rather crafted artificially with color injected into the plant, something he deemed to be gloriously unnatural. It was this green carnation that became a coded symbol of homosexuality, worn by his followers and remembered

long after his trials in 1895 for gross indecency with men, wherein a guilty verdict led to his imprisonment and subsequent death.²¹

Perhaps partially due to their stillness and the necessity for very long exposure times in early photography, flowers have been the heart of still life imagery since its inception. Photographic “flower studies” trickled up through time to move beyond formal conceits into a conceptual realm. Robert Mapplethorpe, a prolific photographer of many kinds of formal studies, scandalized the nation with his *X, Y, and Z Portfolios* of flowers placed alongside images of men in fetish gear or of those performing BDSM sex acts for the camera. Indeed, conservative and Christian groups such as the American Family Association were so appalled by the showing of Mapplethorpe’s work at the publicly funded Corcoran Gallery that they mobilized enough to cancel the exhibition and called for the defunding of the National Endowment for the Arts.²²

What I believe in through all of this is the power of the well-crafted image. The sublime may never be reached. Queerness may always exist outside of itself by its very definition. But by utilizing and bending these complex histories I hope to empower through subtlety. Everything that came before is present in everything that comes after. Does my portrait of Jess, all the sunflowers she would bring to our communal home from the Saturday farmer’s market and silver dollar eucalyptus that so reminds me of California held in the loving armature of her grandmother’s vase, a gift given from her to me, carry the weight of Adams and Sherry and Opie and Sontag and Mapplethorpe? I don’t know. Does Aaron’s hand-quilted and bondage-bound vase, laden with plants that disperse thousands of seeds across the winds or attached to animals, amass with kudzu creeping in to throttle what life may be left to live in these cut flowers convey the magnitude of queer mentorship? Yes. I would say yes, it does. It also leaves room for all the rest.

As the arrangements are constructed within natural environments, a second, color photograph is taken from a voyeuristic stance; a witness to this caress. This widened view offers contextualization—the liminal space where the artifice of cutting flowers and putting them into a vase blooms into camp, and the desire for empathic communion into sincerity. I wish for these vibrant, large-scale images to consider other streams of photographic history: that of the still life *and* of the landscape. By unveiling that the 8x10 negative—the black and white positive print a gift shared only between me and each queer family member—was taken outside the safety and control of the studio I introduce Nature as collaborator, the sun as light source, clouds as mediators. Through the chatter of birds and the quaking of leaves and the quietude of the frozen lake we shall reclaim that which has been manipulated through violence. I wish for the creation of these objects and images to be as powerful as the love I feel for the people that initiated their making. I want for the bonds of empathy formed in spite of oppression to be glorified, for without this interconnectivity we would be scattered and voiceless.

²¹ Jennifer Latson, “When Oscar Wilde’s Wit Couldn’t Save Him,” *Time*, 25 May 2015.

²² *Mapplethorpe: Look at the Pictures*. Directed by Fenton Bailey and Randy Barbato. USA: HBO, 2016.



10. Peter Cochrane, *For Catherine*, archival pigment print, 40"x50", 2019.



11. Peter Cochrane, *For Michael*, archival pigment print, 40"x50", 2019.



12. Peter Cochrane, *For Taylor*, archival pigment print, 40"x50", 2019.



13. Peter Cochrane, *For Théo*, archival pigment print, 40"x50", 2019.



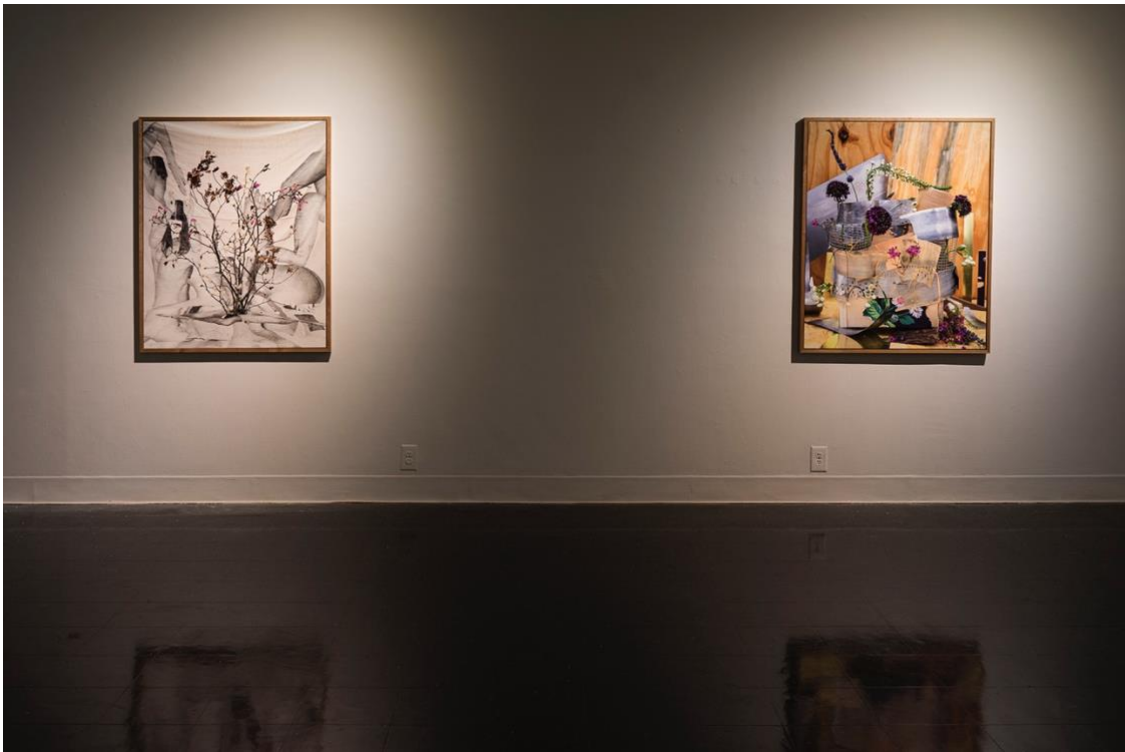
14. Peter Cochrane, *For Aaron*, archival pigment print, 40"x50", 2019.



15. Peter Cochrane, *For Jess*, archival pigment print, 40"x50", 2019.



16. Peter Cochrane, *The Wild Beasts* (installation view), 2019.



17. Peter Cochrane, *The Wild Beasts* (installation view), 2019.



18. Peter Cochrane, *For Aaron_*, archival pigment print, 60"x40", 2019.



19. Peter Cochrane, *For Catherine_*, archival pigment print, 60"x40", 2019.



20. Peter Cochrane, *For Jess_*, archival pigment print, 60"x40", 2019.



21. Peter Cochrane, *For Michael_*, archival pigment print, 60"x40", 2019.

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