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*Paul by Paul*  
*by Paul*

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

*by*

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Virginia Commonwealth University  
Richmond, Virginia  
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# *Dedications*

*To my family, whom I love.*

*To Anna, Cara, Adrienne, Jahfre, Jeffrey, Vanessa,*

*Aruni, Christopher, Ashley, Ekaterina, Alex, Juan, André, & Min for*

*the massive amounts of love and support they've provided, and for believing in me.*

*To Hope, Caitlin, Susie, Brook, Gregory, Lupe, & Noah for their keen questions and generous insight.*

*To Bryan, GM, Luis, Seren, John, Kyrae, Diana, Katie, Su, Wallis, Cait, Emily, Damien, Raul, Ellen,*

*Hanaa, Kelley-Ann, & Connor, for being brilliant thinkers, artists, friends & studio neighbors.*

*To Lennie, Erick, Rollie, & Kayla for their beautiful energy as collaborators.*

*To Hilary, for being present for me at every step in my time at VCU,*

*from the first visit and phone call to the last edits.*

*To Andy, for everything and more.*

# *Abstract*

In 2020 flamboyant fashion is associated with queer performativity. Psychologist Alan Downs and queer theorist madison moore understand this to be a response to a culture that is hostile to sexual behaviour and gender expression that falls outside a rigid binary. I study the history of flamboyant aesthetics and camp sensibilities from an intersectional perspective, and locate designers and artists who have produced clothes in ways that materialize the political implications of fashion. As a studio-based artist, I employ traditional sewing techniques, digital technologies, and performance to create clothes and new media works that demonstrate a circular understanding of time, and highlight the role of the artist as both creator and creation. I complicate a capitalist notion of progress with one-of-a-kind costumes, and reuse and transform textiles to develop a rhetorical strategy of self-expression that fosters sustainable community.

Keywords: history, queer theory, performativity, flamboyance, new media, digital avatar, femmage, fashion, textiles

# *Family History*

I have always been an interdisciplinary artist. Before graduate school I described my practice as revolving around painting. I saw the foundation of the visual culture of photography, film, movies, and television in the history of painting. Like many of my generation, I don't have the kind of attention span that is conducive to strict concentration; my mind, eyes, and hands are restless.

During my time at VCU I have worked towards a practice with a capacity to contain my many interests. I have come to realize how important textiles are in my personal history and work. According to Sonya Clark, textiles are a pre-existing language because of their omnipresence in the human environment.<sup>1</sup> The technologies of fabric and sewing are invisible at times, but they exist in every space we occupy, public and private. The fashion and textile industries overproduce by huge margins, which leaves us with: 1) a huge environmental problem and 2) a source of affordable and culturally loaded materials. Fabric is foldable, pliable, scalable, and practical to ship; artists like Yinka Shonibare CBE and Stephanie Syjuco have addressed some of the ways histories of colonialism, cultural memory, and the production of clothes are profoundly interconnected. Making garments, videos, and digital animations, I have found ways to dovetail different aspects of my research and interests as a maker into forms that are pragmatic in their ease of transport.

Sewing is a way for me to feel connected to my mom, who is a skilled seamstress, and my grandmother, from whom she learned to sew. My grandmother was a schoolteacher who raised four children on a small farm during the Great Depression, and who lost her first husband in WWII. She married my grandfather and had four more children, the eldest of whom is my mother. She took pride in her work as a homemaker and spent great lengths of time sewing and knitting clothes for her family, especially during the long winters of the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. She repaired and altered outgrown clothes for years of reuse, made

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<sup>1</sup> Clark, Interview.

scraps into quilts and toys, and for years collected feathers and down from hunted geese to make feather mattresses. My mother became a skilled seamstress at a young age and didn't wear store-bought clothes until she was a freshman in college. My grandmother died before I was born, but I like to think I inherited her knack with a sewing machine.

My family's evangelical southern Baptist faith made growing up as an effeminate boy difficult. After leaving home, I wanted to distance myself as much as possible from that culture. As I process the shame that culture projected onto me and deal with the depression it causes, there are times when I think I need to break ties completely; however, I have learned that this type of separation often creates even more alienation. In my work I try to make connections between the conservative culture I was born into (and left) and the transgressive queers who have shown me how great life can be. It's difficult to find things that are worth hanging onto from a community that ostracized me, but I recognize that a fundamental idea in queer theory is that we are able to occupy more than one position at a time. We do not need to reconcile this multiplicity per se, but learn to live with what seems irreconcilable at first.

I see a connection between my family's history of repurposing used materials with the ways queer people (especially queer people of color) have assembled complicated and fantastic identities in the face of economic and social adversity. In the hands of a marginalized gender nonconforming person, my grandma's thrift and skills would be so useful! For the last two years I have focused on learning how to sew and make clothes for myself that manifest a shared space between my family's history and my values in the present in ways that are surprising and delightful. I'm looking for ways to pass this knowledge into the hands of those who need it. The need to create something that's a perfect fit for oneself is anything but new. As a student of history, I am often surprised by how frequently ideas I thought were novel and contemporary are very old, or have always been around. This is particularly obvious in the fashion industry; I've heard that styles repeat every 30 years, but the cycle is actually much faster. Even our word revolution, which implies a radical change, comes from Earth's elliptical path around the sun.<sup>2</sup> If we want to enact change, we must come back around. Notions of progress have gotten mixed up with capitalist fantasies of continuous growth and development. Our culture bombards us with messages to acquire and dispose of stuff all the time, but in the studio I develop progressive strategies to transform old materials in ways that undermine capitalist messaging. I see this as a form of emotional and environmental

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<sup>2</sup> Mirriam-Webster, Accessed May 15, 2020.  
<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/revolution>

sustainability; working with my hands is a way to reduce waste and slow down my conscious mind.

Looking backwards, one of the first works I made that explored these ideas is from right before I started graduate school. It's an ancient tattered quilt covered in thousands of steel studs, entitled *Grandma's Quilt* (2018). I bought it for a few dollars in a packed little antique store that felt like it was about to collapse and bury me. I followed every line of hand-sewn quilting, applying steel studs in intervals the length of my first thumb knuckle. I retraced every inch of the hand-stitched quilt to feel close to the original quilter as a proxy for my Grandma. Doing this, I spent many hours looking at the quilt, as a meditation on the care the maker had taken in crafting it. I thought of the integration of the studs and the worn blanket as a way of closing a generation gap.

One project that has been influential for me is *A Flower for Ethyl Eichelberger* (1991-2001) by Oliver Herring. It is a series of memorials to Herring's close friend, a queer drag performer and playwright who committed suicide in 1991 after she was diagnosed with AIDS.<sup>3</sup> In one work from the series *Queensize Bed with Coat* (1993-1994)<sup>4</sup> Herring knit Mylar tape into a large cushion and a wearable coat that rests on it. As an elegy for her, the robe implies her absent body.



The meditative process of knitting was a way for the artist to invest time and energy into Eichelberger's memory. The garment and resting place are sites where the labor of the hand is in our domestic spaces, against our skin, and comforts our bodies at rest. For Herring the process of knitting the Mylar was a process that materialized the grief he was experiencing, mourning this close friend, and the passage of time. The progress of a knitted garment is

<sup>3</sup> Herring, *A Flower for Ethyl Eichelberger*.

<sup>4</sup> Oliver Herring, *Queensize Bed with Coat*, 1993-1994, Knit silver Mylar, parachute nylon, 12x57x88", Artist's Website, Accessed April 15th 2020, <https://oliverherringstudio.com/artwork/3159850-Queensize-Bed-with-Coat-1993-94.html>.

reassuring because even though it is three-dimensional, it is linear and visible. This is a comforting manifestation of time, but it is not really how we experience or understand it on an emotional level. Somehow this linear process can accompany nonlinear experiences of healing, and serve as a method of reaching back in time for a lost relationship.

In *On the Concept of History* (1940), Walter Benjamin creates a very compelling image of history as a beautiful and terrifying angel beholding the wreckage of time with dismay, helpless against the destructive force of progress.

A Klee painting named 'Angelus Novus' shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing in from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such a violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.<sup>5</sup>

The angel perceives a single catastrophe, where we see a chain of events. I think it's more accurate to say that we see the catastrophe but desperately want a causal chain of events. We tirelessly study ledgers, make timelines, and carbon date artifacts in order to form cohesive narratives where few exist. After a lifetime of shopping in thrift stores I realize they're a form of historical wreckage. Secondhand shops (and their digital equivalents) are accidental archives. A collection of low-value donated goods doesn't privilege histories of the rich or famous, but represents a much more banal history of the working class. These spaces reflect the way we perceive history not as a chain of events but as a "clusterfuck"<sup>6</sup> of materials, images, and styles arranged in ways that can be confusing, exciting, and illuminating.

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<sup>5</sup> Walter Benjamin, *On the Concept of History*.

<sup>6</sup> Saltz, *CLUSTERFUCK ESTHETICS*.



# *A Timeloop\* of Flamboyance*

\*Timelines are the dominant model for describing sequences of events. Although I want to address the past and the future, I want to avoid using a linear model.

I started to research flamboyance because I wanted to take a closer look at my own desire to wear unique clothes and stand out. I always look for the weirdest garment in the thrift store and see if I can make it work in my wardrobe. I don't let the gender assigned to me based on my biology limit my fashion choices, and I love to feel like I'm wearing outfits that transcend clothing and become costumes. In my bedroom, in the library and in the studio, I take an interdisciplinary and intersectional approach to flamboyance and its history.

From the perspective of psychology, flamboyance is part of a complex response to shame, which Alan Downs analyses in *The Velvet Rage* (2005). Based on years of experience as a psychologist working with queer men, Downs describes three distinct stages they move through as they process the shame projected onto them by heteromale society. Downs' clinical experience and the text focus on the experiences of gay male identifying patients, but his analysis of shame and flamboyance can be judiciously applied to the kinds of shame many marginalized people endure. Secrecy, isolation, and "the closet" define the first stage, when shame overwhelms the individual. In the second, individuals develop ways of compensating for shame to create self-worth, and in the final stage we have developed healthy models of self-worth, are able to love and have created meaningful lives for ourselves. He postulates on the ways in which queer people use flamboyance and fabulousness as strategies in the compensation stage, allowing us to accept the things about ourselves that society tells us are unacceptable and abject.<sup>7</sup>

Performativity is part of the foundation of queer theory. Theories of performativity are controversial because they undermine essential notions of gender, and when we talk about performance we often have to unpack beliefs about honesty, fiction, acting, and spectacle. Eve Sedgwick articulates flamboyance and performativity as the inverse of shame, as the smoke to

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<sup>7</sup> Downs, "*The Velvet Rage*".

shame's fire.<sup>8</sup> When shame is overwhelming, we retreat inwards, and to overcome it, we perform self-worth in ways that are extravagant and theatrical. Flamboyance and gender transgressions are over-the-top rejections of hegemonic masculine norms, so it is no surprise that straight society stigmatizes them. However, these stigmas are so deeply rooted that LGBTQIA communities often malign spectacular performances even as they consume them. In practice, homosexuality is more palatable than behaviors that reject binary gender, even within many queer communities. I take a carefully non-judgmental and pragmatic (as opposed to dogmatic) approach; I don't think the behavior Downs calls compensation is disingenuous, rather, it is a strategy for healing and overcoming shame and a way of building communities. In the book *Fabulous* (2018), madison moore describes four characteristics of fabulousness.

(1) Fabulousness does not take a lot of money. You can achieve creative brilliance with very few resources; (2) It's an aesthetic that requires high levels of creativity, imagination, and originality, but there is no blueprint for fabulousness; (3) Fabulousness is dangerous, political, confrontational, risky, and largely (but certainly not only) practiced by queer, trans, and transfeminine people of color and other marginalized groups; and (4) Finally, it's about making a spectacle of yourself not merely to be seen but because your body is constantly suppressed and undervalued.<sup>9</sup>

For many, the ability to navigate the complexity of clothes can be life or death. The ability to dress in a way that expresses the complexities of gender (or lack thereof) is frequently compromised by violence, or threats of violence. According to findings reported in the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, "Suicide is the third leading cause of death among [LGBTQIA] adolescents and non-suicidal self-harm occurs in 13 to 45% of individuals within this age group."<sup>10</sup> LGBTQIA people also have less access to capital, and are more likely to live in poverty than their heterosexual or cisgender peers.<sup>11</sup> In spite of this, we manage to create abundance, beauty, and fabulous style out of the things other people have discarded. Templates and support structures are widely available for non-queer people, and are manifested in the vast array of clothes that reinforce a rigid gender binary. If the social infrastructures of heteronormativity are ready-to-wear, then being queer demands the customization of couture. Flamboyance has emerged as a powerful strategy for asserting one's

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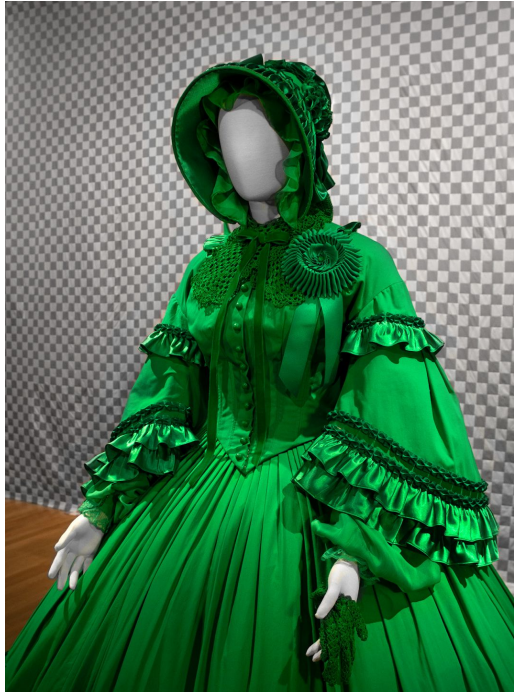
<sup>8</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 38.

<sup>9</sup> moore, *Fabulous*, 8.

<sup>10</sup> Liu, *Suicidal Ideation*, Abstract.

<sup>11</sup> McDermott, *The Myth of Gay Affluence*.

right to take up space and can shift power dynamics. It relies on what you can make, not what you can buy. It renders in technicolor that which hegemonic, heteronormative culture attempts to make invisible.



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These collective strategies of repression and shaming are systemic forces of colonialism, both historically and in the present. Stephanie Syjuco's practice has been a touchstone for me during my graduate study. Syjuco addresses camera-based visual culture, textiles, and their role in the construction of colonial depictions of race and difference. She uses historical clothes to symbolize the values of their times, and the ways their legacies affect life in the present. *Antebellum South* (2018) from *The Visible/Invisible* is an elaborate period gown made in chromakey green. Syjuco constructed the gown using a pattern available from Simplicity, available at any Joann's retail location around the country. A Civil War era gown executed in the green of a green screen makes a strong connection between constructions of whiteness and its entanglement with systems of media and image production throughout history. The work reveals how dominant white supremacist culture uses technologies of representation to sustain colonial oppression, and attempts to turn them on themselves.

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<sup>12</sup>Stephanie Syjuco, *Antebellum South*, 2018, hand-sewn chroma key backdrop fabric (cotton muslin), silk, polyester, ribbon, hand crocheted lace, commercial lace, and dress forms, dimensions variable, Artist's Website, Accessed May 15, 2020, <https://www.stephaniesyjuco.com/projects/the-visible-invisible>.

The aesthetics I connect to queer flamboyance today have not always had the same associations, but they have always been deeply political. Before the Industrial Revolution, the cost of weaving, dyeing, and labor made flamboyant clothing cost-prohibitive. Flamboyant dress was a form of conspicuous consumption only accessible to the wealthiest class of people in Europe and the colonized Americas. Circa 1750-1850 CE it became a status symbol for extremely wealthy Europeans to have enslaved African servants dressed in the finest liveries. As skilled musicians, skilled horsemen, and educated conversationalists these individuals (primarily men) were able to participate in various capacities at the highest levels of society. They began to skillfully utilize codes of courtly dress in ways that challenged European norms of gender and sexuality, and essentialized notions of race and class. This movement of black dandyism<sup>13</sup> ran parallel to the English dandy movement, which rejected expressive color, emphasized sophisticated tailoring, and was largely practiced by members of the upper classes. As a trend among white Europeans, I wouldn't describe dandyism as a critical practice, but black dandies (as enslaved and free men) challenged colonial representations by wielding flamboyance as a political strategy.

At the same time, what is known as the Great Male Renunciation was a movement in Europe and the Colonies that attempted to push back against European monarchs and early American presidents by focusing on their modes of dress. On powerful white male bodies, understated and uniform clothes started to be connected to a sense of gendered moral goodness. There was a new progressive idea that leaders should wear clothes that looked practical and economical. In this context, politicians and diplomats wanted to ensure that the public didn't believe that they were embezzling tax money to buy clothes. This is the beginning of the same gendered political strategy at play today. A tailored suit can cost thousands of dollars but exists within a narrow range of cuts and colors to avoid drawing attention to its wearer. This understated and uniform style is a component of the propaganda used to maintain heteronormative power structures. It doesn't take much digging to realize this approach is purely optical, as our ruling class has contributed to the highest levels of wealth inequality ever recorded in the US.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Miller, *Slaves to Fashion*.

<sup>14</sup>

<https://markets.businessinsider.com/news/stocks/income-inequality-reached-highest-level-ever-recorded-in-2018-2019-9-1028559996>

British-Nigerian artist Yinka Shonibare CBE (RA)'s work deals directly with the complexities of postcolonial identity by producing garments in aristocratic European styles from Dutch wax batiks. A product of colonial trade, these batiks have come to symbolize an African aesthetic, and their origins shift the range of interpretations of the headless figurative sculptures typical of Shonibare's practice. Both Syjuco and Shonibare modify historical fashion as a means of re-examining the societies that created them. In their thesis on Shonibare, Madeleine Drace coined the term "postcostume"<sup>15</sup> to describe his practice of fabricating clothes based on manipulated patterns. According to Drace, a postcostume becomes a layered artifact of the relationship between two distinct times and their ideologies.



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As a rhetorical strategy of thinking about the future, in addition to the past of queer flamboyance, Jacolby Satterwhite uses 3D animation to manifest queer black fabulousness into

<sup>15</sup> Drace, *Costuming the (Post)Colonial*.

<sup>16</sup> Yinka Shonibare, *Diary of a Victorian Dandy: 19.00 hours*, 1998, unglazed C-type print in fake gilt frame, 72x48", Victoria and Albert Museum, Accessed May 15, 2020, <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O1263376/diary-of-a-victorian-dandy-photograph-shonibare-yinka/>.

digital space. Virtual environments are places where expression can be safer for queer expression, but only if by design. Real world biases follow us into digital space, but there is a capacity to use the technology to create worlds of liberation, experimentation, and play. Satterwhite creates alternate universes by populating his environments with models based on a massive archive of compulsively drawn designs for consumer goods left behind by his mother after her death. *Reifying Desire 5* (2013) is a carnivalesque exploration of the kind of erotic fantasies (from titillating to grotesque) we can fulfill in digital space. Dozens of avatars of the artist float around on metallic objects with a vague similarity to couches and gondolas, or are ejaculated by a horse-hung character with long hair, tight capri pants, and the kind of impossibly perky breasts that have become a cliché for female video game characters.

These examples are certainly not a canonical history of performativity, or the flamboyance associated with queer or postcolonial shame, but they demonstrate a variety of approaches taken by artists and theorists. As it stands between histories of performance and trade, the postcostume is uniquely suited to address complex intersectional issues.



COMING SOON: *Afterlife*

As I approached the end of my first year of graduate study and started imagining the many possibilities of what my candidacy exhibition could be, I had a desire to create a project with a lot of moving parts. I had the opportunity to use a defunct hair and nail salon; it felt auspicious to repurpose a space of transformation and aspiration. The location became a set and exhibition space, and I was the director, instigator, camera operator, and performer on-screen and in person.



<sup>17</sup>

I made the storefront into a set divided by a series of thresholds that formed a portal to an afterlife. (I mean this as a double-entendre – life after death as well as the reuse of the salon.) The way I used color blocking to communicate transitions is reminiscent of an iconic scene from Alejandro Jodorowsky's film *The Holy Mountain* (1973). When the protagonist enters into a mysterious tower, Jodorowsky uses color to communicate a transition from the

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<sup>17</sup> Alejandro Jodorowsky, *The Holy Mountain*, 1973, 115 minutes, Amazon Prime Video, Accessed April 30, 2020, <https://www.amazon.com/gp/video/detail/amzn1.dv.gti.2aa9f737-d74d-2047-13bf-3a2dcc75a644?autoplay=1>.

dirty space of the town below into a space of spiritual enlightenment.<sup>18</sup> The colors I used were not the nuanced colors of life, but references to infrastructures of performance: red and navy of operatic curtains, and Chromakey green. The space was full of mirrors, which most film crews would think of as a liability, but they allowed me to make the witness of the camera visible.

The documentary style of the footage refers to *RuPaul's Drag Race* (2009–2020) and *Paris is Burning* (1990), which look at the dressing room as a paradoxical site of performativity. It's backstage and behind the scenes, and becomes the central arena for the performance. I compressed everything from the work's pre-production to the end of the exhibition into an instant by presenting the final video work on a TV and a projector in the set itself. In our words and gestures the other performers and I chose to lean into tropes related to queer representation, to highlight how they have affected our own lives, and the ways they can bring us together. For days of filming we preened in the mirrors and to the camera, ate snacks, used cosmetics to contour our faces, and burned through outfits. We told our stories about coming out, bad boyfriends, anxiety about anal sex, and being harassed on the street. Sharing traumatic memories is a central way of creating queer communities; by revealing one's abject past we let our guards down and create connections through collective memory.

For one part of the installation, I directed Rollie Fisk (a startling doppelgänger of myself) to remove a set of five layered shirts one by one while dancing to unheard music. As Fisk stripped and danced, I moved the camera around him in 108° increments. With a little movie magic, in the final video each shirt ends up as the bottom layer against Fisk's skin after it's removed. By including 10 shots, the camera's three revolutions and the removal of 5 shirts, the video loops seamlessly, and Fisk is stuck taking off his clothes forever. I thought about these hand constructed garments as veils or boundaries between the wearer and the world. As props, the performer removes them with no progress. The gesture of removing one's clothes is constant, but there is no possibility of removing them all, or making progress. Does this loop amplify or negate this act of intimacy? It's reminiscent of a Greek conception of the underworld, where eternal life is an inescapable and ironic cycle. I find this approach to time fascinating because the loop is constantly moving, but with no sense of progress, like a glitched video.

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<sup>18</sup> Corkidi, "Holy Mountain".





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Almost a year after I filmed *COMING SOON: Afterlife* (2019), I realized an uncanny similarity between a film still in which my camera and I occupy the center of the frame and two works by other artists: *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* (1882) by Manet and *A Picture for Women* (1979) by Jeff Wall. Wall's photograph was an intentional homage to the Manet painting. All

<sup>19</sup> Édouard Manet, *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*, 1882, Oil on Canvas, 38<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>x51", Public Catalogue Foundation, Accessed May 15, 2020,

<https://artuk.org/discover/stories/douard-manets-a-bar-at-the-folies-bergere>.

<sup>20</sup> Jeff Wall, *A Picture for Women*, 1979, Transparency in lightbox, 56x 80<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>in mm, Cinematographic photograph, Tate, Accessed May 15, 2020,

<https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/jeff-wall/jeff-wall-room-guide/jeff-wall-room-guide-room-1>

three works use a mirror as a dominant pictorial device. In the history of painting, mirrors and the reflections they produce are often used as symbols of vanity and narcissism. A mirror is also a way of addressing the non-neutral role of the artist in the formation of the image, and divulges the process through which the work is made. This emphasis on the visibility of the construct was something that I wanted to focus on within this work. A photograph has an air of veracity, but it can be composed and manipulated as a fiction to achieve a deeper truth.

All three works point to the construction of the self as an image, and of the image of the self as a product. In the painting by Manet, the oranges in the bowl in the foreground signify that the bartender is also a prostitute, who sells their image and sexuality alongside the beer and wine that line the marble bar. Manet was working during the Belle Époque, and it was during this period of stability in France that we see photography start to affect the ways people thought of themselves as visual phenomena.<sup>21</sup> In a tourists' guide Alfred Delvau wrote:

To live at home, to think at home, to eat and drink at home, we find this boring and inconvenient. We need publicity, daylight, the street, the cabaret, the cafe, the restaurant. We like to pose, to make a spectacle of ourselves, to have a public, a gallery, witnesses to our life.<sup>22</sup>

Wall makes a similar connection between the creation of the self-image and the spectacle of entertainment and commerce by using lightboxes to display his photographs.

*COMING SOON: Afterlife* was a sandbox; by moving through the portals, my co-performers entered into a space of play, insulated from exterior concerns. Play (role play, play acting) allows us to expand our own potential, and to create new models of behavior that can become part of our day-to-day life. Play is often a space where we mimic or repeat behaviors, and I wanted to highlight the ways in which pop culture and pictorial representation have influenced how we construct and perform ourselves. Similar to the work of Cindy Sherman, the "...project is to question whether selfhood is something that can be unveiled at all or if surface is not, in fact, part of the self after all. The body, veiled or not, is part of the self in the world, and its performance is one means of self-identification. Performance is the space of human interaction. The artist in performance is part of the artist's identity in this sense."<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> "Better Know Manet's A Bar at the Folies-Bergère," Youtube video, 09:20, The Art Assignment, August 9, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3XPnf9GvLRQ>.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Caraco, "Artifaction", 97.

*Paul by Paul by Paul*

# *Paul by Paul*

There is an ironic humor in the metaphor of the closet. Even though I have escaped from the closet, the closet has not escaped me. The shared imagination of the closet is a site of secrecy and constraint; where one is unable to fulfill one's needs and desires.

The closet and the archive are both queer spaces; they contain, organize, and render (il)legible certain aspects of LGBT life. Inside both the closet and the archive are systems of logical organization and also systems of secret keeping. They both hold things. They both also show things. They spill their secrets forth. Coming out of the closet, that metaphor so central to public disclosure of a previously held secret, locates and constitutes sexual and gender identities not only within the speech act itself, but as Eve Sedgwick reminds us, within a multifaceted web of privileged, circulated knowingness. The archive, much like the closet, exposes various levels of publicness and privateness— recognition, awareness, refusal, impulse, disclosure, framing, silence, cultural intelligibility— each mediated and determined through subjective insider/outsider ways of knowing. These relationships strike a delicate balance between reachability and remoteness, between precariousness and pleasure.<sup>24</sup>

In my imagination and in my work, the closet is an archive, full of wonders, artifacts, and memories that form a rich history. The closet contains examples of beauty alongside profound suffering. In my final semester, I focused on the creation of a group of wearable garments as conceptual sculptures that form a collection I'm calling *Paul by Paul*. In this context "collection" has a double meaning, referring to groups of garments presented as a body of work and to an accumulation of objects. *Paul by Paul* is more like an accumulation; it avoids

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<sup>24</sup> Out of the Closet, Into the Archives : Researching Sexual Histories, edited by Amy L. Stone, and Jaime Cantrell, State University of New York Press, 2015. ProQuest Ebook Central, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/vcu/detail.action?docID=4396631>.

homogenous aesthetics, and employs a variety of strategies for transforming second hand materials into one of a kind clothes.

The collection is a circular creation, based on experiences of inventing my own personae and performing myself again and again. Each piece is a novel combination of materials and historical references, informed by a cyclical way of thinking about time. There is no blank slate. I collect materials whose histories overlap with my own, and frame what I do as being the afterlife of that material. I find almost everything through organic means, like sifting through the wreckage of history. Using dismantled clothes, deadstock, and second hand home decor textiles, I sidestep big business and make the most out of the habits my frugal mother passed down to me. I treat thrift stores, antique stores, Etsy, and eBay as ad hoc cultural archives. The materials that exist in these informal historical collections are ripe for remaking, and I remix them to find areas of overlap between different moments in the histories of queer experience and the aesthetics we now associate with queer expression.

I imagine the collection of garments as gifts for myself as a child. Each garment is like a toy, made for the simple reason that I would have loved to have worn it when I was younger (and still would!). Each garment mixes gender cues to embody the playful exploration my parents punished, and my community pressured me to hide. One of my cohort told me that a cognitive behavioral technique used in recovery is to recall a difficult or painful memory and feel sympathy toward and forgive that younger version of yourself for not knowing how to get out of the situation. It made me realize these gifts are a way for me to project more than sympathy – to give my blessing and to enable pleasure and play. I tailored each garment to my current measurements, so I am able to wear them and never stop the innocent and playful exploration. Pleasure is good for you – so are clothes that are fun to wear and that allow you to explore fantasy. I made the collection to reflect my fluid and flexible approach to gender expression, in hopes that it can touch the lives of others with similar experiences.

The materiality of performance is not fixed, but one thing it can be is a small and dynamic reflection of light, bouncing off a sequin, safety pin, a rhinestone, or a steel stud. It's something that catches the eye and gains attention. It's a delight to look at. A disco ball is an enduring symbol of disco aesthetics; it's an object that uses simple mechanisms to create a transcendental space of togetherness. The reflected light of the disco ball or a performer becomes an anchor of the space, and gives everyone present an opportunity to leave or come in closer. I think a lot of queer people can relate to this way of thinking about extravagant self-performance as a mechanism through which we form community. As a way to explore the

physical materiality of performativity and flamboyance, these garments refer to histories of entertainment and performers' costumes. I want to look at how spectacle is constructed, and how the psychologies that are embedded within it can be reified.

As I was planning the thesis exhibition (when it still existed) as an installation, I wanted to play with the idea that I could make performativity the content of the work without making it the medium. Additionally, I was thinking about what it means when people expect there to be a performance. What creates this expectation, and what remains when that expectation isn't fulfilled? The plan was for each garment to hang from the ceiling on a motorized spinner; the spinning would animate them into disco balls, and make each one its own performer. A motion detector positioned at the entrance of the room would control the fleet of spinners; when the room was empty the garments would remain stationary, but spin up when they had an audience. In this way, I wanted to give the installation the ability to perform itself. By omitting a human performer, I want to emphasize the performativity embedded in the garments and allow their materiality to be the central element.<sup>25</sup>

*Welcome to my closet!*

*—Paul*

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<sup>25</sup> I also wanted the installation to resemble a museum setting, to signal that I intend for the clothes to be ahistorical artifacts. The spinning serves to ensure that viewers are able to scrutinize every aspect of the garment. It also signifies an indecision, as though the spinning figure doesn't know where to look, and the past is all around them. It rotates and is immobile.

## *Old Queers Wearing Dated Costumes*

*Old Queers Wearing Dated Costumes* is a garment that is meant to imply the memory of a flamboyant (fictional) performer. It has thousands of steel studs and safety pins in a decorative scheme based on Appalachian folk art and costumes worn by Liberace. The base is a sleeveless blue worker's jumpsuit, inset with a white shirt with billowy sleeves and ruffles at the neck. The shirt was given to me by a friend, passed down from his father who had worn it in discos in the 70s. It's wonderful to receive something organically; an object's sentimental provenance augments its magical presence for me.





## *Two Cute Sundresses*

Simultaneous to my pursuit of traditional sewing practices, I have been developing ways these can be extended into digital spaces. I discovered pattern making software that uses 3D simulation to allow for lifelike digital draping. I wanted to accelerate the learning curve to design my own garments for clothing construction, then realized the software made it relatively simple to create animation sequences that performed the garments.

I made a few variations of this garment. The first was a virtual dress that had a simple bodice cut at the waist, a knee length A-line flared skirt, a Peter Pan collar and short puffy sleeves. The collar was white and the print was based on a photograph of a small section of patchwork quilt I made out of scraps in my studio. In the animation, the dress bounces as the avatar dances to unheard music. Watching the video made me want to wear the dress, so I copied it onto an avatar with my current measurements and re-tailored it to fit. I made the dress with a zipper down the front and two big inseam pockets to give it some of the same conveniences that are embedded within menswear.



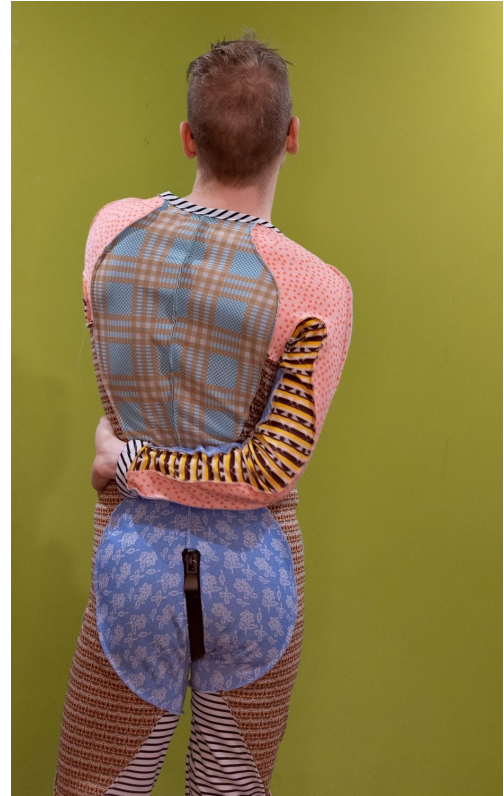


## *Flight Suit*

This piece is inspired by the undergarments astronauts wear, which has felt really appropriate for me these days! I try to imagine I have to teach, talk, cry, and fuck over Zoom because my house is a spaceship moving through the vacuum of space.

The garment is made of double knit polyester, which I love because it comes in such amazing patterns and because people don't like to wear it anymore since it doesn't breathe as well as natural fibers. It was manufactured in such fun colors and patterns, and there's still a massive surplus of deadstock from the 20th century. Making things out of new plastic is reckless, but what better to make art out of than plentiful cheap materials that are durable, colorful, and aren't in high demand?

The mixture of various patterns is a direct reference to the friendship quilts that I encountered growing up. These are frequently made by women's groups in churches, especially in the Midwest. Friendship quilts are objects that are designed to provide warmth and comfort, and materialize collective thrift. I wanted to contrast the reputation of the polyester against the complexity of pattern cutting which is normally associated with performance garments or designer athletic wear. The counterintuitive and complex shapes are designed with 3D draping software to make a perfect fit to my measurements.



## *Hi-Dis Prairie Dress*

Visibility politics are central within contemporary discourse and struggles for queer rights. For some people visibility or visible difference can constitute a grave threat. For many trans and gender non-conforming people, who are frequently targets of violence, being visible can feel like having a target on your back. But flamboyance can also be a way of fortifying oneself and taking charge of when one is visible as a way of recovering from the encounters with profound shame we have lived through.

I was interested in this material, retro reflective polyester, which is primarily used in safety equipment and industry. Within this material there's an inherent value judgment that visibility correlates to safety. I used it to make myself this fun, hyperfeminine prairie dress. The prairie dress was originally invented by women in the American west to be a practical garment for a working woman; the ruching and smocking that the dress is known for allowed it to be modified over the course of a woman's life as her body changed.

The prairie dress is back in style, and was also quite popular in the 1970s, near the beginning of the postmodern era. I'm interested in this period because of the many examples of utopian dress and unisex fashion that came out of it. However, the time period wasn't defined by this aesthetic. Hyperfeminine women's wear and feminized men's wear were also in style simultaneous with an increased interest in gender equality. It's sad and fascinating how these issues have not been much resolved.



## *Just Like Anna Wintour*

This piece is a rabbit fur coat commercially produced out of remnants from the production of more expensive garments. I purchased it secondhand for less than \$20 including shipping, dismantled it, and rebuilt it to resemble a Chanel suit - a symbol of feminine power and authority. It represents the no-nonsense female figures that have always been appealing to me. They were the role models I wanted to emulate. The existing patchwork allowed me to cut the coat apart and piece it back together in a way that disguised the new seams. It's short sleeved because it was a size small and in order to get it to fit me, I had to cannibalize the sleeves to make it a little longer and wider. This coat attempts to embody the status associated with fur, but its composition is intended to shift its relationship to the issues of class at play.



## *Lab Coat after Charles James*

This lab coat is made out of fabric from a set of curtains I found at a local thrift store in my first year of graduate study. The set was large enough that taking it apart yielded about 25 yards of fabric, which I've been using instead of muslin to make samples and mock-ups. The high contrast floral pattern is garish in a way only something that is intended to be in good taste can be, but I realized that if I use the reverse as the outer side, it can actually be quite chic. Being able to make something kind of dumpy, old or unwanted into something fabulous and new is really important. This piece is designed to be a lab coat to think about the future in relation to science and technology, and features complex tailoring based on a sleeve pattern fashion designer Charles James spent more than \$20,000 to develop.<sup>26</sup>



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<sup>26</sup> James, "Couture Secrets".



## *Cheers to 100 Mars*

With this piece, I was trying to create something that has an ambiguous temporality, like a forgery or a dupe. If one found it in a dead relative's closet or a shop, it would be easy to believe that it's much older than it really is. Its style lines are from the 1970s, and the wool blankets I made it out of are much older. I hand appliqued the text "100 YEARS ON MARS" on the back, to use language to create a playful linkage that connects its dated look and feel to a speculative narrative. I bet that after 100 years on Mars, Earth-Martians will probably have a strong nostalgia for Earth, so a garment to celebrate a colonial centennial that refers directly to Earth history and culture makes perfect sense to me.



## *Sequined Denim Shirt*

This piece is a direct reference to the elaborate, rhinestone encrusted shirts and suits made by Nudie Cohn. Popularized by country and western musicians, Cohn's work was a complicated exception to the rules of heteromasculine presentation that have dominated the last 300 years. It's a sequined chiffon blouse from the 1980s combined with a thrifted denim button-up to form a glamorous shirt for myself as a rhinestone cowboy. I'm fascinated by the creation of the image of a cowboy (separate from real cowboys) as a homoerotic icon. Upon close inspection, the edges of the black chiffon are left exposed to reveal the shirt's history.



*P. E.*

The closet is a history, but it's also an armory and a toolbox.

I made this playful new wardrobe to send back in time, but I can only send it forward.

This work is open ended. I want to emphasize each garment's dynamic potential energy; even on a hanger they vibrate with activity. Once they've lived as sculptural objects they can have another life. The strength of these objects is that they suggest action. They make me want to dance!

This work can go anywhere. The whole collection can fit into a suitcase.

This work is gregarious! What we wear affects our community and as a performer, I put myself out into the world with the humble goal to make someone's life a little more full.

*—Paul*

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