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Dirt Circus: Queering sports and home through filth

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Dirt Circus:
Queering Sports and the Home through Filth

Hannah Patteson

A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

In

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the degree of

Masters of Fine Art

School of Art, Design, and Art History

May 2023

FACULTY COMMITTEE:

Committee Chair: Greg Stewart

Committee Members/ Readers:

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Beth Hinderliter

Dedication

Dedicated to my coconspirators, Trusten Murrah and Jack Patteson.

Acknowledgments

I'd like to thank my committee head, Greg Stewart, as well as my committee members, Dymphna DeWild and Beth Hinderliter. I'd like to thank my friends and cohorts throughout my time at James Madison University for your continued support, friendship, and encouragement, and constant help lifting items-- Sarah Phillips, Caley English, Nava Levenson, Emmy Garcia, Ryn Duong, Camelia Elci, Mia Greenwald, Yulin Yuan, Kareena Solanki, and Michelle Smith. I'd like to thank the graduate coordinator, Corinne Diop. I'd like to thank Eric Morris for endless help and guidance in the woodshop. I'd like to thank my parents for letting me do this in the first place, and for being a call away. I'd like to thank my partner Trusten Murrah for bearing the brunt of this, and being the reason I'm still going, and giving me the energy and support to do what I love, and lastly I'd like to thank Greg Stewart again for his many years of pushing me, inspiring me, teaching me, and above all, making me laugh. Night School forever!

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Abstract

This monograph accompanies the MFA Thesis Exhibition, “Dirt Circus”. I outline the history of circus and carnival culture and the ways in which queer identities are expressed through these artistic modes. I describe the nonconforming expressions of gender in these arenas through bearded ladies, aerialists, clowns, and the freak show. I then explore various groups from the 70’s to present day, including Bread and Puppet Theater, The Cockettes, and Split Britches, who utilize performance to further their ideologies of gender freedom, anti-capitalism, and sexual liberation. I compare our differing uses of cheap art and public engagement within the realm of performance and activism. I then discuss how these elements of queer activism and performance can be displayed in a domestic space through nostalgic home goods and carnivalesque game play. I end by investigating the social construction of the definition of ‘dirt’ and ‘freak’ and how these concepts relate to the queering and camping of intimate spaces.

Introduction

A strength testing machine that measures braiding, the fuzzy static of a camcorder feed, old nursery rhymes laboriously embroidered onto children's bicycle tires, seats made of sports ribbons tightly woven to hold your weight.

In my exhibition *Dirt Circus* I take advantage of the queer otherworldliness of circus culture and carnival contraptions by combining nostalgic material, home furnishings, and sports equipment. This frankensteining of objects fleshes out a world that is simultaneously bound and freed from the bodily regulations of sports, gender, consumerism, and spectacle, all while investigating the socially constructed definition of 'Dirt'.

I start this paper with the theatrical nature of circus and carnival. In the circus, danger is performed, varieties of genders are performed, humanity is performed—all for a crowd that has willingly suspended their disbelief in order to experience the impossible. The notion of the 'freak' within these worlds is investigated through race, gender, sexual orientation, and a general 'unbelonging'. I utilize this concept in my work by taking traditional domestic material, fabrics, furniture, and home video, and reconfigure it into fantastical carnivalesque contraptions imbedded with queer language and a filth that would fall under "freak" within the home. I then talk about the economics within the circus and carnival and what is considered 'capital' (and how that differs in the realm of sports). In circus, capital comes from one-of-a-kindness, and breaking of expectations, wherein sports, capital comes from complete and perfect

adherence to expectations and regulations, and strict record keeping comparing performances to one another.

In section 2, I talk about capital within art, specifically around ‘cheapness’. I compare the different realms of the cheap through examples from Bread and Puppet Theater, The Cockettes, and the Split Britches who, through fragility and ephemerality of material, make art, entertainment, and politics available to the masses. I use cheap material, cheap building skills, cheapened words and labels to take the preciousness out of tightly held cultural taboos.

Lastly, in section 3, I situate us in the home and delve into how the above-mentioned concepts of freakdom, performance, and cheapness exist in domestic space. I use objects and aesthetics from the early 2000s to incorporate the freedom of the Freak identity into the world of the nostalgic home- a space inhabited through distorted memory and utopian absurdism. Home objects are queered and made into a dirty realm of peeping Toms, soiled sleepovers, excess color and patterns, and desecrated sports equipment. This prescribed dirtiness within the home is scrutinized and played with. Dirt cannot be defined molecularly. Dirt can only be defined through a process of categorization of “things that belong” and “things that don’t”. Here I question this process, and what is consciously or subconsciously subjected to this categorizing.

In all I strive to place the audience in an uncomfortable, yet joyful world where the mechanisms of the circus and carnival can allow for an avenue to reclaim, campify, and queer our own histories.

PART 1: Circus and the Spectacular Body

*Plus loin! Plus haut! je vois encore
les boursiers à lunettes d'or,
des critiques, des demoiselles
et des réalistes en feu.
Plus haut! Plus loin! de l'air! du bleu!
Des ailes! des ailes! des ailes!*

*Enfin, de son vil échafaud,
Le clown sauta si haut, si haut,
Qu'il creva le plafond de toiles
Au son du cor et du tambour,
Et, le coeur dévoré d'amour,
Alla rouler dans les étoiles.*

*Further! Higher! I can still see
The brokers with their opera glasses,
The critics, the young girls,
And the avid realists.
Higher! Further! Air! Sky!
Wings! Wings! Wings!*

*Finally, the clown
Sprang so high, so high,
That he burst the canvas ceiling
To the thunder of horns and drums,
and, his heart devoured by love,
He went roiling among the stars.*

-Theodor De Banville, 1972, *Oeuvres Complètes 1*
Translated by Naomi Ritter, 2016, *Art and Androgyny: The Aerialist*.

Circus and Carnival as Theater as Art

Brass instruments bump and twiddle on, almost singing the motion that the slowly settling audience will be witness to that night. In a semi-dim light- a light that construes the notion that we are not here nor there, but in anticipation- players often meander the bleachers, engaging the audience in the peculiarities of conversation that would only happen between someone who belongs and someone who doesn't. Introductory remarks are made from the Show Runner- not about the "outside-the-tent" subjects of silencing phones and fire exits, but about the "in-the-tent"-the freshly erected world that will be occupied for the night. Subjects of danger, of the pure originality of what you will see, of the impossibility of the actions performed for you and *only* you.

"Did you close the grate on the window before you left your apartment? Did you remember to turn off the stove? Is your house on fire?" The crowd catches on, by this point, and gasps in mock horror.

*'Did your mother love you? Did your lover ... leave you? Well these problems, they are small ... for today is the day that the CIRCUS COMES TO TOWN!''*¹

Lies and truths consume the audience in equal delight. Performers explode from a backstage area as if thrown into existence at that very moment. They don form-
accentuating (sometimes form distorting) leotards and costumes. This, along with their bold glittery makeup, accentuates and exaggerates emotion and elicits the drama of each act. Partners relegated to “presenter” overly signify the appearance of imminent danger through gasps, pointing, and the leading of zealous applause when death is defied (as if that was not the plan).

I have begun to nurture an obsession with the artificiality and illusions of these acts balanced with the equally amazing, yet often downplayed, truth that lies in the sport of it all. Equally important is the audience’s role as reactor. The audience adheres to the strict socially outlined, theatrically necessary canon of the circus. The canon that determines what audiences believe, when they are amazed, what they know to be possible, and what is truly at stake. This is evident in a story of a hand balancing act performed by Willy Capelli for Jimmy Brown’s Circus in the ’70s. This feat was established to be one of a kind, never been done before, bigger than ever. The same audiences would come year after year to see him perform, only for it to be the same exact act. There was no reason to change it or to add more daring stunts, for the audience knew and accepted the canon of the circus that what they are seeing is, above all, like nothing else. Recounting this phenomenon in *Marginal Body: The British Acrobat in Reference to*

¹ Mark Sussman. “A Queer Circus: Amok in New York.” In *The Routledge Circus Studies Reader*, ed. Peta Tait (Routledge, 2016), 204.

Sport, Yoram S Carmeli states, “Willy’s hand balancing act was thus repeatedly presented to circus audiences in Britain for over 20 years without being remembered and without being compared to itself, and Brown knew that he could still hire Willy in 1975 to perform the very same hand balancing.”² This staging of expectation and roles is pertinent in creating a fully immersive world in which each present body is fully performed.

I necessitate a performed audience in my work through this use of circus imagery. Ring leaders manipulate language to dramatize the *spectacularity* of the objects in front of them and signify the audience’s role as participant. The social order of the circus and the theatrical roles prescribed, will call the audience member to fulfil their part in the big tent. Whether that part be hair-braider, bicycle reader, bed jumper, or peeping Tom.

Sport is inherent in the symbols of my work, much like it is in the circus- the image of a strong man machine, children’s bicycles meant to instill a sense of activeness while kids are still impressionable, spring-boards, pull up bars. However, the bastardization of the strict order of sport, of the use of equipment, the rearranging of the theatrical elements of sports and circus initiate these objects into a new world. Carmeli outlines the importance in the framing of body physicality saying, “Some of the distinctiveness of the spectators’ expectations and perceptions of the body in circus vis-à-vis their perceptions of the body in sport can already be outlined. A handstand framed within the paradigm of sport implies that the performance is regulated by rules; the performer is matched and competes with other like performers. She/he is situated in the public’s experience within a social realm, potentially an object of public identification.

² Yoram S Carmeli, “Marginal Body: The British Acrobat in Reference to Sport.” In *The Routledge Circus Studies Reader*, ed. Peta Tait (Routledge, 2016), 320.

The gymnast simulates the bourgeois order. The performing body itself becomes an embodiment of that order.”³ The theater of the circus itself is what makes it incomparable to sport and its rigid adherence to order.

The FREAK Gender

The notion of “freak” (particularly in the carnival sense) much like sport, manifests from a cultural hierarchy of body regulation. Rosemarie Thomson writes about the use of the freak show as a tool for audiences to be reassured of their citizenship in unexceptionality⁴ saying, “[T]he figure of the freak is ... the necessary cultural complement to the acquisitive and capable American who claims the normative position of masculine, white, nondisabled, sexually unambiguous, and middle class.”⁵ In the early 1900’s, Freak Shows often competed with anthropologists in the exhibition of mysterious “human oddities,” often forgoing nuance of various rich indigenous cultures, lumping together any non-white body into one culture under “freak.”

One heinous examples of these exhibitions are one in which the Bronx Zoo kept a 23-year-old man named Ota Benga, stolen from a Congo pygmy tribe, in an enclosure alongside an orangutan for the public’s viewing in 1906. A second instance of this exploitation was when the Hearst Museum of Anthropology at the University of California, Berkeley, kept Ishi, a Native American from the Yahi Tribe, on Display from 1911-1915, advertised as the last Stone Age Man⁶. It is important to start this section with

³ Ibid. 320.

⁴ Rachel Adams, “Freaks of Culture: Institutions, Publics and the Subjects of Ethnographic Knowledge.” In *The Routledge Circus Studies Reader*, ed. Peta Tait (Routledge, 2016), 241.

⁵ Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 64.

⁶ Adams, *Freaks of Culture*, 237.

the “Freak” label’s roots in white supremacy, colonialism and capitalism. Esteemed institutions dividing one from another and not only profiting from the spectacle and entertainment of the degradation of humans, but also in claiming faux scientific/anthropological value in these crimes. My work engages with freakdom through more of a gender and sexuality lens, and the marginalities that exist within that framework, but those structures that distribute the label of freak onto queer populations cannot be disentangled from those that oppress black, brown, and indigenous peoples. The bigotry that exists in the world of freak shows must be addressed to give context to the celebration and reappropriation of freakdom that I apply in my work.

“The aspirations of this acrobat spring from social protest, for he soars into the sky in order to escape the petit-bourgeois audience. Thus the vaulter attains a blazing immortality; he becomes a member of the galaxy. His act liberates the performer from all earthly bounds. Translated into metaphor, the artist escapes the petty human world through art.”⁷

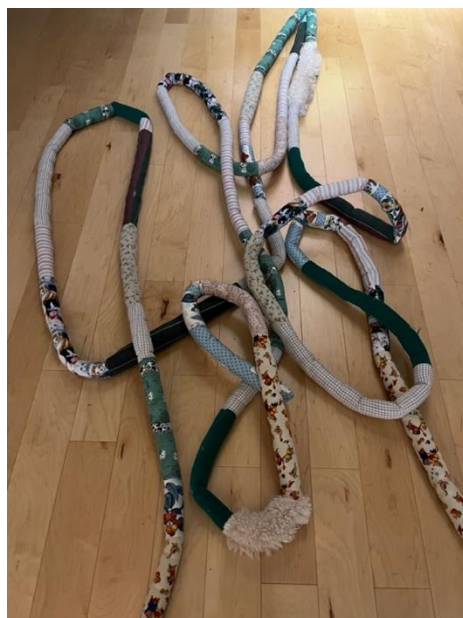
-Naomi Ritter

Carnivals and Circuses operate to transport audiences into a world of impossibilities- bent rules, bent laws of physics, bent behavior. Within this world exists an opportunity for the applauding of the outcast. The more “other”, the more applause, the bigger the crowd. Gender is overaccentuated to a degree that it could be called camp. Strongmen have muscles bigger than their heads and wear unitards that don’t cover their tops and that barely fit over their bulging legs. They exaggerate the difficulty of tasks in order to establish the bruteness of their acts. The aerialist women wear form fitting glittery suits that hide their broad shoulders and thick biceps and make their movements look sleek, organic, and angelic. Their acts are often painful- balancing their full body weight on one part of their leg on a static trapeze, the skin and fat of their stomach

⁷ Naomi Ritter, “Art and Androgyny: The Aerialist.” In *The Routledge Circus Studies Reader* (Routledge, 2020), 137.

pinched against the rope. To make these acts more graceful, they require more pain to be endured, and hidden.

My art utilizes these exaggerated kitschy demonstrations of gendered activity paired with gendered material in a similarly performative and satirical way. I implore audience members to take part in a braiding challenge in a piece entitled “First Ever Microscopically Enlarged Strands of Hair to Ever be Braided to Measure YOUR Strength!!” Braiding has rich cultural significance in Black cultures- traditional tribal patterns of braids, braids as a tool during slavery to mark escape paths, braiding as a source of bonding and pride. Braiding is an extremely gendered activity and is packed with maternal connotations. For me personally, braiding is waking up early most mornings before elementary school to have my mom braid my freshly showered hair into two tight French braids. It’s the pain of my mom pulling on my hair, and then once I got older, the pain of holding my arms above my head to braid my own hair. The pain of gender. I use this slightly absurd representation of gender expression and pair it with a collection of gaudy home fabrics sewn into three 18-foot-long stuffed tubes resembling a microscopic view of strands of hair.



Detail of fabric tubes, Hannah Patteson 2023

The gender of color, of fabrics, of sewing, of texture, of length of hair, of the participation in and subsequent judgement of braiding. In another piece entitled “Stuck Philosophically Somewhere Between ‘The Ultimate Melancholy is to Lose Desire Itself’ and ‘Desire is the Root of all Suffering’”, I use the material of the nursery rhyme/hand clapping game that my mom taught me as a child, that I would then force her to do with me every night before bed. The song goes:

*My little playmate
Come out and play with me
And bring your dollies three
Climb up my apple tree
Slide down my rain barrel
Into my cellar door
And we will be best friends
Forever more, more, more*

This melody almost haunts me and fills me with the ennui that I feel I can only attribute to various female* identifying relationships. The sadness that exists between a mother and daughter, desperate for commonalities, for the mom to be willing to play, for the daughter to be able to share the mother’s values of “decency”. The romance of the female friendship. The longing for deep and lasting soul connections. The fiery passion and heartache of these connections in childhood. This song encapsulates these gendered relationships for me in a way that feels very raw and primal, but also silly and simple.

The song continues in a verse that is left out of the piece-

*My little playmate
I cannot play with you
My dollies got the flu
Boohoo hoo hoo hoo hoo*

Something about this last verse filled me with deep sadness.

Balanced against this half satirical/half celebratory exhibition of mother daughter dynamics is the defiance of gender altogether. In the circus, we don't have an ignorance towards gender- but a defiance of the limits of one's gender and one's expression of it through physical abilities and appearance. Women flaunt their beards as a source of pride and an object of longing for the audience- the male gaze is turned back on the men in the audience. Her identity is owned and declared by her and only her, and she is "displaying" herself in her own accord. Mark Sussman writes of a bearded lady who performed with the contemporary circus *Amok* in New York saying, "Her beard is never simply an object of display; it functions as an occasion for thoughtful looking, a medium through which to show the fluidity and playfulness of gender identity—in this case, her queerness expressed through a heterogeneous mix of elements: flying machetes, consumed fire, improvised storytelling, circus tricks and the beard."⁸ Men see themselves in the bearded, and they may lust with her permission, so they then find themselves simultaneously identifying with and desiring the same being- an inherently queer act. Androgyny is also used as a tool of wonder and spectacle. Aerialists in full body costumes can be seen as either male or female, and all perform at the same level of difficulty. Clowns forgo typical binaries and obscure facial features in order to adhere to their own invented binary (White-face clown, or the straight man, and Auguste clown, or the funny man). This illusion of ambivalence to sex adds to the spectacle and the bodily inhabitation of the audience identifying with performers. Beyond using exaggeration, and androgyny to stretch the limits of gender, some go as far as to defy one's limits as human. Without our humanity we cannot be gendered. Performers evolve into creatures- alien, insect, animal. They walk on stilts that double their size and alter their body's

⁸ Sussman, *A Queer Circus*, 200.

composition in space, they contort in ways that shouldn't be physically possible and they don extra appendages that allow for extra-human capabilities. The two works described previously both go further to illuminate a cynicism and playfulness of gendered language and material. Firstly, in "Stuck Philosophically Somewhere Between 'The Ultimate Melancholy is to Lose Desire Itself' and 'Desire is the Root of all Suffering'", I have embroidered this hand clapping game onto the tires of children's bicycles.



Detail of "Stuck Philosophically Somewhere Between 'The Ultimate Melancholy is to Lose Desire' and 'Desire is the Root of all Suffering" Hannah Patteson, 2023

Embroidering into the thick rubber of these tires bared similarities and differences to embroidering onto fabric. The rubber was not able to be pierced by a sewing needle, so each hole needed to be marked and drilled before it was stitched. While this is a much louder, messier, and physically demanding process, it resembled traditional embroidery in the repetition of movement, the piercing of material, the hunching over a canvas, and

wrist exhaustion. After that first step, I was able to embroider the words on slowly and add tufting to soften the texture. The material of the children's bike harkens to the sport and athleticism of circus as well as the perceived responsibility of parents to keep their children not only outside of the house, but in nurturing the glorified art of 'entertaining yourself.' *Toughness and softness, carelessness and craft, entertainment and the entertained.* These deconstructed bicycles not only exist in the grays of gender binaries, but in the grays between adulthood and childhood.

Secondly, in "First ever Microscopically Enlarged Strands of Hair to Ever be Braided to Measure YOUR strength!!", the long strands of fabric tubes are placed below a 16 ft tall strong-man machine. The machine, mounted to the wall, made of salvaged planks of pallet wood and lined with large ornate bed posts, has 11 rankings of "strength" that are prescribed to participants based on their braiding competency. The rankings are as followed, from bottom to top: Pip squeak, Tiny baby arms, Nancy, Doughboy, Pack of Powerful Squirrels, Bossy Bottom, Sporty!, Ready to Breed, Bull Dyke, Testo-Junkie, and lastly, Genius.

Each participant is given 90 seconds to braid as far as they can, and once their time is up, their braid is hoisted via pulley system up against the rankings to measure their braid, and subsequently their strength. The words in this piece are imbedded with strong LGBTQ+ connotations. Firstly, Pip Squeak, Tiny baby arms, Nancy and Doughboy are all meant to emasculate (mostly male identifying individuals). What does it mean to de-man a man? There is a sort of a glory and salvation in this. Pack of Powerful squirrels

lies at the middle of the rankings, acting as an embodiment of chaos (?) or neutrality, possibly androgyny. The top half of the rankings are queer signifiers that range from a celebration of willful and consensual submissiveness, to the appropriated and satirized act of “breeding”, to the terms Bull-Dyke and Testo-Junkie (coined by Paul B. Preciado, referring to the ‘biology’ of transness and the act of trans men taking testosterone). At the very top, sits ‘Genius’ the epitome of a valued member of society, especially in art. All of these terms utilize reappropriated language from the ‘ruling class’ definition of freak, and applies it to a reward system for being capable of braiding. In participating in the social gesture of braiding, you receive a label and a community and almost a re-gendering. In this piece, skill is redefined as well as the social order of what it means to be of value. The power of the freak comes from finding a cohort of like-minded.



Detail of "First Ever Microscopically Enlarged Strands of Hair to Ever be Braided to Measure Your Strength" Hannah Patteson, 2023

I imbed the innate queerness of circus and the spectacle into my work. There are so many performers that portray queerness and the *spectacularity* that comes with it, without an implied sex act, and there are performers who play with queerness and the liberation of the sex act- both of which are necessary and both of which I respect equally. Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan are two lesbian artists who have worked together on performances and installations since 1989. Many of their works, such as “Lesbian National Parks Services,” and “Astroart Space Corps” act as ways to insert Lesbian retellings of history into traditional canon. In their work queerness strives to infiltrate the ruling class and regularize their own belonging- in space, in history, in the creation of history. However, in other works like “Wild Ride”, Dempsey and Millan attempt to disrupt the mundane dialogue and depression of the 2008 financial crisis through carnival and the queer strength of prospering during turmoil through radical fun. They installed two carnival rides, “Avalanche” and “Super Fun Slide” on Bay St, Toronto’s financial district. Carnies wore “drag” as businessmen running carnival rides, re-assigning the role of freak. In this act, they shifted expectations of mourning, and established a new world through their lesbian happenings and reclaimed space for their lesbian bodies, saying “Bay Street, usually empty on a Saturday night, was returned to the people who paid for it.”⁹ The relation to my work that I find in these pieces is the redistribution of joy in public spaces through the occupation of weirdness.

Besides queer liberation through the claiming of space, queer liberation is achieved through the expression of freakdom. Queer expression through freakdom can be seen in John Waters’ gross out movies starring Divine, such as *Pink Flamingo* where

⁹ “Shawna Dempsey & Lorri Millan Installations.” Accessed January 13, 2023, <http://www.shawnadempseyandlorrimillan.net/#/installations/>.

Divine walks down a sidewalk in a skintight dress and stops to eat a pile of dog poop and competes to be the filthiest person alive. It lives in the Cockette's 1970's drag shows where people of all genders danced around nude, donning glitter on their pubic hair,¹⁰ or in Steven Varble leading unofficial tours of SoHo galleries wearing costumes made of food waste, street trash, and stolen objects.¹¹ All of these acts use circus spectacular, genderqueering, and bodily performance (sexual or otherwise) to liberate the label of "the freak."

New Capital

Once you step foot in the jurisdiction of the carnival, you are a player in a new economic system. Sure money is involved, but the process of exchange is so distorted into game play, that money feels like a distant token on which entry into this new realm of capitalism is granted. Capital lies in new value system- mastery of skill and strength (throwing darts, squirting a water gun through a hole, shooting basketballs) is bartered for stuffed figures of pop culture icons. Tickets are bartered for access to rides- and the capital of a ride is based on the richness of the thrill/danger that the ride poses. Cuteness and youth are often bartered for extra chances at games. Much of these values are at the core of an audience's investment in the circus as well- extremely specific skills have been mastered, strength is beyond measure, and danger is constantly looming.

Just like circus' present, yet contested relationship with 'sport', the reward systems of the carnival and of sport have similarities yet operate under starkly different

¹⁰ Pam Tent, *Midnight at the Palace: My Life as a Fabulous Cockette* (Los Angeles, CA: Alyson, 2005), 37.

¹¹ "Rubbish and Dreams: The Genderqueer Performance Art of Stephen Varble." David J. Getsy. Accessed January 13, 2023. <https://davidgetsy.com/rubbish-and-dreams-the-genderqueer-performance-art-of-stephen-varble>.

contexts that one would not confuse one for the other. In both cases, one does not consider (unless you are the 'ruling entity'- the parent paying for participation or the organization buying trophies) the cost of prizes in comparison to what is needed to earn said prize. Twenty dollars is spent to play a carnival game where the prize may have cost five dollars. However, the acquisition of this prize also adds to the capital- the prize is not just the material, it is the ownership of your skill- a priceless thing! Trophy stores sell first place plaques, any size trophy, any color medal. It does not cost more to buy a plaque that says 1st place than a plaque that says 6th place, nor does a gold medal cost more than bronze- for they are not of varied value of material. They are, for the most part, faked. Plaques are made of cheap MDF and covered in a wood pattern sheet. Medals are molded from silver, or nickel and covered in a finish. However, the cost of skill is far higher for a gold than for a bronze- so the value inherently goes up. Carnies deal usually in childish desires- softness, huggability, pop culture references, fun and disposable. No one player is compared to another, and passerby's will walk by with the same award, just as proud. Sports deal mostly in institutional signifiers. Trophies tend to have the organizations name, country emblems, and have times and places to constitute record keeping and maintain the posterity of your achievements. You represent a larger being and are in competition with other players.

I investigate these transactions of goods, achievements, skills and rewards in my exhibition. Audience members enter the gallery through a specific opening in the walls to signify a sense of process in granting access to the space. Participants are given a certain number of tickets that they will need to get stamped at each 'game' as proof of

engagement. After each ticket is stamped, they will be able to exchange their tickets at the front for a prize.



Prizes available for winning at "Dirt Circus" Hannah Patteson, 2023.

The rewards will involve hand-made trinkets that display a valuable personal investment and connection to the human: repurposed plaques that are able to be self-decorated (thus truly owned), plaster copies of composer busts that were given to me as rewards for participating in piano recitals- a faux mass created representation of the nostalgic “participation trophy.”

Rewards are similarly utilized in another piece titled “Resting on my Laurels”. This piece incorporates two sitting apparatuses made from woven ribbon taken from my family’s childhood medals won through gymnastics, swimming, diving, track and field, etc. The dismantled awards now act as the basis for the reward of rest. They initiate the watching of the TV, of leisure, of contemplation- an often unrewarded act.



Detail of chairs in "Resting on My Laurels" Hannah Patteson, 2023.

My investigations of alternate currencies within and through art hold inspiration from a piece by artists Jon Rubin and Lenka Clayton entitled “Circle Through New York”. This piece, as described on the Guggenheim Museum’s website,

“create[s] a complex system of social and material exchange that brings together city communities often separated by cultural, economic, geographic, or circumstantial boundaries. The artists have drawn an imaginary circle through Harlem, the South Bronx, Queens, and Manhattan’s Upper East Side and invited six public venues along the circle’s path to participate in a system of social and material exchange. These spaces, which include a pet store, a high school, a TV network, an academic research institute, the Guggenheim, and a church, serve as the project’s cocreators and hosts. The artists worked with the venues to select aspects of their identities...that will rotate among the six locations over a period of six months.”¹²

¹² “Lenka Clayton and Jon Rubin: ‘Circle through New York.’” The Guggenheim Museums and Foundation, Accessed January 13, 2023. <https://www.guggenheim.org/exhibition/lenka-clayton-and-jon-rubin-circle-through-new-york>.

This project not only exchanged space and people, but traded culture, traded new insight, shared resources, and used material not as charity, but as mutual research and social engagement. The items that were rotated were “A talking parrot, a high school drama class, a Punjabi TV show, the oldest song in the world, a museum artwork, and a congregation’s call to action”¹³ (which also acts as the full name of the piece). These are not objects, rewards, or currency, but valued pieces of identity that are being used in the trading, sharing, meshing of life. What constitutes value? what do we expect in return?

¹³ Ibid.

PART 2: Cheap Art and Queer Politics

the WHY CHEAP ART? manifesto

PEOPLE have been THINKING too long that
ART is a PRIVILEGE of the MUSEUMS & the
RICH. ART IS NOT BUSINESS !

It does not belong to banks & fancy investors
ART IS FOOD . You cant EAT it BUT it FEEDS
you . ART has to be CHEAP & available to
EVERYBODY . It needs to be EVERYWHERE
because it is the INSIDE of the
WORLD .

ART SOOTHES PAIN !

Art wakes up sleepers !

ART FIGHTS AGAINST WAR & STUPIDITY !

ART SINGS HALLELUJA !

ART IS FOR KITCHENS !

ART IS LIKE GOOD BREAD !

Art is like green trees !

Art is like white clouds in blue sky !

ART IS CHEAP !

HURRAH

Bread & Puppet Glover, Vermont, 1984

The Cheap Art Theatrical

The word “cheap” is a delicate one to use here. Its negative implications of breakability, unimportance, and low-quality, are unrelated to the use of cheapness in this context- maybe not unrelated, but they are not the point. The word cheap in this sense is talking about availability, it is talking about anti-permanence, it is talking about the everydayness of art and its materials that will soon return to the earth, unpreserved.

Bread and Puppet Theater, the creators of the “Why Cheap Art Manifesto” shown above, is a prime example of the richness in culture, in historical relevance, in activism that can exist in a show made of cardboard and paper mache. Huge heads, animals, body parts, and everyday objects are constructed through a process developed by Peter Schumann, the creator of Bread and Puppet, to represent various players in societal catastrophes. This process is taught freely to members of the public and resident artists in the making of new shows every summer. The process itself is not cheap in forethought. It has been tweaked and perfected by Peter Schumann over his 50-some years of puppet making. Clay is gathered from a constantly recycled clay deposit on the Bread and Puppet property and is placed on a table and shaped to resemble whichever character is being constructed. Cardboard is then soaked to be able to separate the thick paper from the corrugation and is then paper mached onto the clay figure. This entire process costs nothing except the sweat equity of the artists who are paid tenfold in the nutrients of community, of activism, of learning, and of bread.

The availability of this art, of the public to see it, of artists to learn it and participate in it, of the free materials, is where the cheapness lives. Bedspreads are painted as backdrops, a huge collection of donated clothes is used as costumes, and a

barn is used as a fantastically dirty ‘cathedral theater.’ Entrance is free, or whatever you can pay; Sometimes weed is left in the donation bucket. Shows happen every weekend and begin with an hour of open performances by the public in the lawn outside of the Cathedral. Storytelling, artmaking, and an audience are fully available to the public—whether their artmaking is ‘poor’ or well-studied, whether they are a seven-year-old or seventy, whether their story is of their favorite cat or of surviving war.

A necessary aspect of cheap, available theater is the acquisition of material. This does not, however, necessitate a drab, colorless, tattered aesthetic. The Cockettes, a drag performance group set in 1970’s San Francisco is a prime example of this. In her book, *Midnight at the Palace*, which details her time as a member of the Cockettes, Pam Tent reminisces about the many hours spent at thrift stores trying to find fabrics such as “Sequin-covered tinsel, rhinestones, crepe paper, lace, fur, tulle, silk, chiffon”¹ and altering these pieces to suit their needs. The thrift store itself became a symbol of wealth disbalance, as it “not only offered a vast assortment of vintage clothing but also held the extravagant costume castoffs of socialites who tossed them away after one wearing without a backward glance.”²

Outside of the thrift store, creativity lent itself to money saving solutions. Wigs were made from the satin lining of coats, a performer by the name of Tahara cut the bottoms and tops off of aluminum cat food cans to fashion himself bangles, a dead green parrot made a fashion statement on a hat, and performing after a Chinese Opera made for an opportunity to “collect” invaluable robes for their performance “Pearls over Shanghai”. Large head pieces, angel wings, set pieces all started with a base of

¹ Tent, *Midnight at the Palace*, 37.

² *Ibid.*, 115.

cardboard, often leading to the ephemerality of their work. In one instance, an artist named John created a showboat for The Cockettes show, “Gone with the Showboat to Oklahoma!”, in which the set piece didn’t last through the night, folding in half and falling on top of the line of chorus girls downstage. The performers remained hardly pressed about these events; however, as “The ingenuity of the sets coupled with the possibility of calamity became an integral part of the show”³ For these shows, thrifting and amateur craftsmanship adds to their aesthetic of chaos, creativity, and ‘never seen before’ness.

A similarly drag focused performance group named “Split Britches”, led by Peggy Shaw, Lois Weaver, and Deborah Margolin, found a new way to utilize ‘cheapness’ in theater through a lesbian and feminist lens. In their performance, *Little Women*, we see a conflicting, never solved, weighing and shifting of binaries: the binary of heaven and hell (or good and bad), the binary of real and pretend, the binary of audience and actor, the binary of porn and art. The set of *Little Women* consists of two cardboard ‘flats’ on either side of the stage. On the audience’s left, the cardboard is lit by red lights accompanied by billowing wind to represent Hell. Heaven is positioned on the audience’s right and is indicated by painted clouds and the character’s pronouncement that “they have arrived at Heaven”.⁴ Each cloud was constructed from blueprints of the paradise described in Nicola Sabbattini’s 1963 manual for theatrical scenes and machines. Printed on the clouds are the plans from the book itself, outlining how to make the illusion they have created. This quite literally sets the stage for dismantling the self-

³ Tent, *Midnight at the Palace*, 40.

⁴ Vivian M. Patraha, *Split Britches in Little Women: The Tragedy: Staging Censorship, Nostalgia, and Desire* (Kenyon Review 15, no. 2 1993), 7.

referential “real” and “pretend” worlds. Heaven and Hell are deliberate (and poor) illusions.

Two-dimensional cardboard is used to emphasize the façade of the environments, while the clouds of heaven are literally marked with the instructions on how to “construct” it. This set design not only refers to the binary of real vs. illusion, but also of spectator vs. performer, wherein the audience is let in on the ‘secrets’ of the business and a fourth wall is broken. Similar audience involvement and illusionistic facades are on display in more glamorous and self-indulgent themes in the Cockettes’ performances. However, these performances maintain a sense of truth telling and secret sharing with the audience, as well as a free for all participation style breaking the boundary of who can be on stage and who must remain seated: As described by Malik Gaines, “There is an ambivalent attitude toward form: men are partly women, sets are erected and collapse, songs are sung in many keys, seats are for standing on, attention is half paid.”⁵

For this section, I will touch on my work only to describe the nature of its cheapness, within its materials and intended social paradigms, and I will reach deeper into its political relevance in the following segment focused on cheap art’s role in radical change. My work often starts with an examination of a new object or new material. I will find something on the side of the road, I will see an abundance of objects at yard sales or Facebook marketplace or thrift stores that are consistently cheap and I will find a way to fit it into the narrative of my art. I have attempted to work the other way around, landing on a concept that I find significant to my work and then trying to find it for cheap, however this method usually succumbs to endless fruitless searches for a specific object

⁵ Malik Gaines, *The Cockettes, Sylvester, and Performance as Life.* “Black Performance on the Outskirts of the Left” (2020), 150.

and stale, manufactured concepts that lack the improvisation needed to work with something unexpected. The former method of working also lends itself to a more impactful collection of objects with history. Discarded objects tend to be of a domestic nature, often over worked and showing of age- one which fits with my ideas of the mourning of youth and the home. Many objects are also connected to growing. Items that children no longer want, no longer fit into, or are no longer age appropriate for. Are these items cheap because of their limited use? Are they cheap because I didn't pay money for them? Or are they cheap because they are no longer new? Because they are distorted from their original product in some way?

I have a lot of luck finding chairs on the side of the road, specifically wicker chairs that are frayed and show a heavy amount of use. I also have luck finding cheap children's bikes at yard sales and thrift stores. A bike can only grow with you so much. Do I cheapen this object by rendering it utterly unable to perform its intended task? Do I cheapen the chairs by taking their main signifier of value (its worn wicker) and replacing it with a new material? Or are these objects received by me in cheap fashion and are made more valuable through artistic intervention? The latter is obviously not the answer, it is however a mode of questioning that I find humorous, and circular. Other object acquisitions are the mattress used in "Peeping Tom", as well as the comforters used to construct the tent, and the chair and TV within it. The bed posts were collected from thrift stores for a deal, due to their lack of popularity and the shop's overabundance of them, and the pallet wood was harvested from pallets from behind Home Depot. Other notably free/cheap objects are CD's, children's books, an armoire, a kid's TV, and a children's dresser.

These examples of the breaking of professional standards via cheap design facilitate the ability of artists and performers to act as political disturbers and voices of the people. Benjamin Shepard summarizes this use of play in the world of radical performance, saying, “Play’s contrast with work and drudgery manifested itself in cultural and political projects organized around community building and the possibility of creating cultural space outside of a capitalist bottom line. And for a short while, play subverted a system, rather than supported it.”⁶ I will delve deeper into the political significance of these works and how cheapness lends to their success in the following section.

The Political Cheap

In 2019 I spent 3 weeks over the summer at Bread and Puppet’s art farm. We slept in the tent forest across the road from their residence and woke up daily in the freezing wet air of early summer Vermont. Everything there was communal. Work was communal; Every person signed up for an equal amount of shifts preparing food for meals, and washing dishes after meals. Everyone ate at a single long table, was served the same food from the same serving dishes, dumped their leftover in the ‘pig food’ bucket- even the pigs ate from the same food. We would then empty ourselves into a compost toilet, where our excrement would lie together in one communal heap, ready to become soil to grow more sustenance for it to all happen again. The cheapness of resources allowed for the richness of communal art making and allowed for Bread and Puppet not only to function- as not much money was being made, and the resident artists needed to

⁶ Benjamin Shepard. “Play as World Making.” In *The Hidden 1970s: Histories of Radicalism*, ed. Dan Berger (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 177.

be able to survive on collective farming and cooking- but it allowed Bread and Puppet to live up to its political messaging that their puppet shows revolved around. Their shows often deal with very specific current issues; The 1960's shows addressed Vietnam, a 1975 show revolved around Ishi, the Native American on display at Berkley that was mentioned in my previous section, to address Native American injustices of the time, early 2000s shows criticize the Bush administration's anti-muslim rhetoric and the newly amped patriotism culture in America. However, these specific moments always address the same message of anti-capitalism, anti-war, and the 'possibilitarian', or the ability to free oneself from proletarianism under the foot of the bourgeoisie. "DON'T LET THE BIG FOOT CRUSH YOU!"⁷

The politicalness of cheap art cannot be de-twined from its theatricality. To theorize politics is one thing, but to perform and act on your ideologies ritualistically is a first step in internalizing and living your ideologies. In the Cockette's performances, their anti-capitalist nature didn't stop at their gathering of goods in stealing and thrifting, but was also evident in their distribution of services. Without producing marketable objects for purchase, and by merely providing experience, The Cockettes adhered to the Situationists' mode of subverting the free market. Gaines states, "[in order] To combat the commodity image, Debord and the Situationists called for 'situations' rather than bourgeois art, or 'the concrete construction of momentary ambiances of life and their transformation into a superior passional quality.'"⁸ In one instance, in protesting the Palace Theater's insistence to charge all audience members, Hibiscus, the founder of the Cockettes, threatened to perform the show on the street for free, and then theatrically

⁷ Peter Schumann, Elka Schumann, and Lila Winstead, *The Foot*, (Glover, VT: Bread & Puppet Press, 2013).

⁸ Gaines, *Black Performance*, 159.

threw open the back doors of the Palace and let over 300 waiting audience members clammer in.

Commodity in Cockettes performance also concerns itself with the commodity of the body. Anti-pornography groups of the time argued that porn inherently robbed women of agency and dignity. Agency, according to these groups, typically meant females not participating in sexual acts. Performance art theorist Rebecca Schneider points out, “historically, the demarcation between art and porn has not been concerned with the explicit sexual body itself, but rather with its agency, which is to say who gets to make what explicit where and for whom.”⁹ In The Cockette’s case, while performers tended to be male (with about 4 or 5 exceptions), they still subverted efforts at privatizing and censoring sexuality by performing scantily clad, sometimes nude, and always proud of it.

Debates surrounding pornography and art also fit into the “Binary Terror” of which the Cockettes were amplifying. Binary Terror, a term used by Rebecca Schneider in *The Explicit Body in Performance*, can be defined as the dread that comes with the breaking of the binary code of conduct, as seen in subjects of gender, race, sexuality, performer/audience, good/bad, wherein performers place themselves stubbornly in the middle. The Cockettes fought hard to subvert all binaries, not only for the sake of moralizing a middle-ground, but for the pure sake of performing anything classified as “out of the norm”.

Pornography debates flourished in these cheap theatrical settings, as these theaters and performers were untethered to the necessity of monetary success (or were at least ambivalent to it). Nudity and touchy subjects were fair game, and glitter and excess were

⁹ Rebecca Schneider, *Explicit Body in Performance* (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2013), 20.

often aesthetic goals. The scantily clad and nude body was also valued as they were free of gender and added less to the financial overhead of the production. Split Britches' *Little Women* participated in this dialogue of the controversies of nudity and sexuality in cheap theater. Their work often makes satirical accusatory claims of the audience's sexual desire for them- allowing the audience a space to acknowledge and be at peace internally with their sexual natures through humor.

Little Women, taking place in a moral gray area between literal set pieces of heaven and hell, revolves around a fire and brimstone preacher talking to a 'whore'. The preacher and whore paradigm also references sexual desire, but less internally and more socially. The rise of 2nd wave feminism in the 1970s gave way to anti-porn groups, leading to a heated debate at the Barnard College conference of 1982 between pro-porn and anti porn activists. Anti-porn advocates such as Catherine Mackinnon and Andrea Dworkin saw porn as an unredeemable commodification of women and suppression of their desire. Pro-porn advocates responded that this position censored and erased the sexual desires of women. As theater professor and movement specialist Vivian Patraka states, "Censorship, then, not only maps and tries to make invisible that which it deems should not exist, but it looks back to a time when these disruptive elements were absent in order to restore that time."¹⁰ This binary of porn and art is addressed through lesbian activity on stage, skirting the issue of sexuality as "male centered" or "male pleasing" and locating it only in the realm of female desire. These actors not only looked inside of themselves to subvert binaries but overtly confronted the audience. Patraka describes this moment, saying, "They throw back our gaze (and make us aware of our own looking) by peering at us with binoculars and snapping our pictures. They flash their naked bodies at

¹⁰ Patraka, *Split Britches*, 11

us for a moment, then insist, as if they were speaking for us, that they be shown again. Hidden under the curtain, they frustrate our desire to see by invisibly miming the sounds of orgasm.”¹¹ They forced the audience to do what The Cockettes aimed to do themselves every performance: the risky act of exploring their own persona.

These messy, exploratory, and controversial criticisms of the status quo and of authority could not be possible without the denial of large institutions, huge overheads, and reliance on capitalistic commodities. I believe that my collection of work is powerful inside of the gallery context because of this disconnect between the circus and carnival atmosphere/mode of behavior/audience, and that of a formal art gallery. I am hoping to disrupt the precious nature of art by inviting the audience to touch and play, by giving away items, and by displaying work that has not been professionally manufactured or constructed and that has the shoddy, impatient undertones of urgent, cheap art. Inside this disruption of the preciousness of art, I am disrupting the preciousness of the audience’s gender, sexuality, memories and childhood memorabilia.

All of my pieces in this show involve domestic home materials that have been defiled in some manner. Each piece and each material is embedded with new politics, that I will go on to describe. In “First Ever Microscopically Enlarged Strands of Hair to Ever be Braided to Measure YOUR strength!!”, bed posts are piled on top of each other gratuitously, bordering the words of mostly queer associated labels. These words are written cleanly and fashionably on flimsy, raw, and dirty discarded pallet boards. Is this saying talk is cheap? In reference to words used to belittle or bully? Maybe that labels are cheap and flimsy? Even in the labels that are self-prescribed in order to find community or comfort in one’s identity? Or maybe the whole game is cheap? Using a specific skill to

¹¹ Ibid., 12.

rank people is cheap- even if the skill is an unusually measured one (braiding) and the rankings are sexually liberating?

This flows into the imagery of another piece entitled, “Peeping Tom” in which a small, child sized circus tent is constructed out of used comforters and is resting on an overturned chair. The chair has a see-through TV screen imbedded into its seat that allows the person in the tent to see into the next larger room. This room is enclosed by silky red curtains, much like a stage, and surrounds a twin-sized soiled mattress that when one jumps on, triggers a boxing glove to punch a pillow on the wall. The pattern on this pillow references a specific ‘angry pillow’ made by my mother for my brother to punch.



"Peeping Tom" Hannah Pateson, 2023.



Detail of "Peeping Tom" Hannah Pateson, 2023.

There was a radical cheapness in home making that happened when we were younger- the radicalness of creating your own objects to save money, the subsequent and ironic increase in value through this maternal craft. There is also a sort of radicalness in the act of a mother teaching anger coping skills and fostering safe self-expression in her sons. This piece encases the longing and nostalgia of maternal support and meshes it humorously with the filthiness imbedded in being a “peeping tom” (a dirtiness that, in John Water’s frame of thinking, is inherently connected to the prescribed dirtiness of homosexuality). The nostalgia and innocence of childhood homosexuality is touched more upon in the following section, however, these signifiers of home, cheapness, and queerness all lend itself to the investigation of belonging in place and the desecration, or unintended use of institutional space.

The cheapness and fragility of the chairs that I ask viewers to sit on in “Rest on My Laurels” gives context to the woven ribbons that make up the seat. The cheapness of both objects is contested- The wooden chairs’ original cheapness is unknown to me. I am unsure if these chairs were mass produced by a large corporation, or lovingly carved by a craftsman, intended for intergenerational use. What I do know is that the material of the wicker had broken down, and the item was deemed ‘garbage’ by an owner. The ribbons, I do know, are cheap and synthetic. They often don representations of American flags- a cheap symbol of ‘greatness’, and live in storage boxes for years with no functional value. However, value is intended to be symbolic in this object, as it is a representation of an achievement, usually physical in nature. The combination of these two items asks the viewers to put the realm of sport, achievement, and ‘greatness’ into

home life. How does sport interact with the craft of weaving? How does it interact with the domestic life? How could sitting and weaving become a radical act?

Part 3: Dirt in the Home; Nostalgia as Material

Bowling Balls

“C’mon, one more game! I wanna beat you one more time!” James’d whine.
 “It’s not about winning but how you play the game,” Dad’d lecture.
 “What’s the point if you don’t win,” James’d strike back.
 Later, head hard as a bowling ball,
 James got married and had children.
 Zachary, his 1st, was a 10 ½ pounder.
 Austin came in at an even tenner.
 James stopped with Hannah
 Who was only a nine and a halfer.
 James’d launch them on swings,
 Trampolines, off cliffs, behind boats,
 And even pushed them out of planes.
 Where other parents would run
 To pick up their child when they fell,
 James’d moan, “Ahh shit! Gutter ball!”
 His cry from the bleachers
 Before aghast parents was
 “Win or don’t come home; win or don’t come home!”
 Still, strike, spare or gutter ball,
 They’d come rolling back up the rubber padded stiles
 To clink together round the ball corral.
 There James’d tally their scores and
 Berate their awkward form.
 Then belching would rise,
 Give their holy domes a fond, fatherly polish,
 Reassuringly sink his fingers down the well-worn holes
 And with a sure grip
 launch them back out the door.
 As the three grew
 They stopped rolling as straight.
 Perhaps it was rebellion,
 Or maybe the old man was just losing his grip.
 On the final day
 The kids rolled up the worn ball stiles
 To the familiar corral
 Where they clinked around the tomb
 To behold their father’s last message
 Not the letters R.I.P.
 But rather W.I.N.

David Patteson (X-Mas 2009)

Home and Dirt

What makes something dirt? What makes something home? These are two undefinable, fluid, subjective terms that are used ambiguously in our everyday life. I will start with an investigation of dirt. Dirt cannot be molecularly defined as one substance or another. Much like an electron whose precise location cannot be known, and the act of locating itself determines that it is no longer at that location, dirt cannot be defined as one substance, and the second a substance is defined or categorized, it is no longer dirt. Mary Douglas puts it simply, “If we can abstract pathogenicity and hygiene from our notion of dirt, we are left with the old definition of dirt as matter out of place.”¹ Societal distinctions are structured through the defining and categorizing of dirt and non-dirt.² We can see this overturning of the ‘dirt of society’ in the queer camp performance art of The Cockettes and Split Britches outlined in earlier sections. They use excessive expressions of their marginal identities to accentuate their proclaimed dirtiness. Ingrid Holtz-Davies expands on this notion of dirt in camp saying, “Critics of camp have long been troubled by the presence of a seamy underside to it in that they have acknowledged that while it is frivolous, stylized, aestheticised *and all that*, there is simultaneously a presence of the low, the bitchy, the downright nasty, the vulgar, the blasphemous, the decidedly polluted rather than the pure.”³ Much like in John Water’s films, filthy behavior is used as an action to question taboos. In his thought, one must subject oneself to the filth of society (whether that’s someone eating dog poop, someone stomping on Christmas presents for not getting their ‘cha cha heals’, or a woman in a crib eating eggs), in order to truly

¹ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (London and New York: Routledge, 1980).

² Ingrid Holtz-Davies, Georg Vogt, and Franziska Bergmann, “The Jewel in the Gutter: Camp and the Incorporation of Dirt,” In *The Dark Side of Camp Aesthetics: Queer Economies of Dirt, Dust and Patina* (New York ; London: Routledge, Taylor et Francis Group, 2019), 19.

³ *Ibid.*, 15

debunk what the ruling class has categorized as dirt. To have pride in the former is to completely free oneself and one's identity to take pride in the latter.

How does dirt manifest in the home? The poem at the beginning of this section is one that my uncle wrote about my dad. Here, he demonstrates the nature of belonging (non-dirt) in my home, and the nature of un-belonging (dirt). One belongs when they have mastered a skill, when practice is not done for enjoyment or enrichment, but for the sole purpose of being the best. We are his bowling balls and to stray is to land in the gutter. In my art, this glorification of sport is satirized and repurposed in a queer domestic space. Strength doesn't go by traditional labels of greatness. It is no longer tested through brute force. Bicycles no longer have pedals, but sing lullabies to you. Beds are no longer for resting for you to perform at your peak the next day. They are now for playing. Ribbons are no longer for display of achievements, but are used for resting.

Queerness is imbedded into these objects as an act of reclamation and repurposing of these things that have been stitched into me. In "Resting on My Laurels," moments that were caught on our camcorder throughout my childhood have been transcribed onto a phenakistiscope- an early form of animation that is achieved through the spinning of a flat disc that has progressing frames of a movement.



Detail of phenakistiscope disc in "Resting on My Laurels" Hannah Patteson, 2023.

The participant chooses from a selection of these discs, protected by a casing made from hard cover children's books and using the 'clip in' mechanism of CD's, both forms of entertainment that are intellectually stimulating, but not physically. Through a series of mechanical operations that I will go into more detail about in following sections, the animations are played and audience members are invited to sit and watch. These moments are extracted from clips that are about 2-4 seconds long and show what seems to be mundane movements progressing in difficulty as I age. These vignettes construct a cabaret of bodily performance in everyday life and the audience members view them through the lens of a peeping tom. This peeping tom aspect brings in the 'Freak culture' of queer expression, especially that of John Water's work, and lets the audience accept their place as onlooker, outsider, pervert, and freak- and thus the dirt in my home.

The Domestic Child

Part of this dialogue about nostalgia and childhood must incorporate the aesthetics of growing up. For me, that means the aesthetics of the early 2000s. There are multiple elements to the nature of this aesthetic, which I can attribute to use of color, excessive layering, and new technologies marketed to kids. In clothing, this manifested as combinations of gaudy bright colors paired with each other, overly cutesy and kitsch imagery and layering upon layering of clashing clothing. Perfect examples of this style can be seen in the outfits of early Disney Channel TV shows and Nickelodeon red carpets, but were also exhibited by adults in more prestigious fashion venues. Electronics were becoming more heavily marketed towards kids, and thus had to become smaller, more affordable, and appeal to this new aesthetic. Game controllers came in bright neon

colors and often used see-through plastic, showing the layers and a maximalist view of the inner wiring. Screens were tiny and often had specific cd's that were compatible with only that player. I remember a media player I had when I was around 10 years old called the Video Now, whose screen was about 2 inches wide on which you could only watch Video Now specific DVDs. Cheap plastic electronics were marketed with Barbie imagery, Ninja Turtles, Superheroes, and performed subpar tasks that were none the less spectacular and magical to a kid.

I have talked about my work reappropriating queer language for use in a circus atmosphere to reclaim space and agency in identity. I use this same method of reappropriation as a reliving and re-worlding of childhood space. I remember vividly the constant fights with my father in attempts to have agency over my time- all from things that I was very privileged to have- piano lessons, dance practices, gymnastics practices, swim practice, basketball. Free time was a sin. The fights with my mom revolved more around agency of my body and space; I'd want to get a haircut, but it wouldn't suit my curls, I'd want to put those twisty rope braids into my hair, but it pulled a small chunk of my hair out. Wearing makeup, wearing baggy clothes, or clothes with crazy patterns or colors, and gaining weight all ended in that quiet subtle judgement and disapproval. In terms of space, I'd always attempt to customize my room to little success. I'd want stickers on everything, colored pencil on the dressers, the most abhorrent wall color you could imagine- all of which were compromised to a dull, agreeable, neutral space. These moments are not unique to me in the slightest and demonstrate the hardwiring in a home of what is dirt and what is not.



Detail of dresser and wallpaper in "Resting on My Laurels" Hannah Patteson, 2023.

My work utilizes the childlike urgency of self-expression and over exaggeration of youthful design and dirtiness to contextualize queer activity, freakiness, circus mechanisms and their gendering, into the innocent, playful, noncommittal, nonjudgmental, exploratory realm of a kid's utopia. The fabric of the tubing in "First Ever Microscopically Enlarged Strands of Hair to Ever be Braided to Measure YOUR Strength!!!" are clashing colors, patterns, and textures. The fabrics have various origins and look as though they might have been cut and harvested naughtily from clothes around the home. The wallpaper on the back of the cabinet is patterned with the design of an old shirt of mine, that is also placed on the cabinet, framed. This shirt is bright pink with a cutesy dog picture and is bejeweled. Wild stuffed puppets crowd the cabinet doors and

overwhelm the visual senses, and laying underneath you while you sit, probably with dirty shoes, is an extra soft white carpet that begs for you to accidentally fall asleep on it.

This sense of agency in childhood is not only connected to outward expression of clothing and decoration, but also in bodily autonomy. There is a seldom talked about realm of childhood sexuality and early exploration of queer relationships and friendships that I want to honor and reminisce on in my work. These moments pay tribute to the ability of kids to experience and explore their body safely, contributing to their sense of internal control and their ability to hear and respect signals from their body. There is a silly sort of freedom in these practicey acts of touch, where no one really knows what they are doing or why, and stigma is, for the most part, limited and replaced with curiosity. There is a beautiful poem by Marie Howe, entitled ‘Practicing’ that I think sums up many a queer femme’s experience growing up:

Practicing

*I want to write a love poem for the girls I kissed in seventh grade,
a song for what we did on the floor in the basement*

*of somebody’s parents’ house, a hymn for what we didn’t say but thought:
That feels good or I like that, when we learned how to open each other’s mouths*

*how to move our tongues to make somebody moan. We called it practicing, and
one was the boy, and we paired off—maybe six or eight girls—and turned out*

*the lights and kissed and kissed until we were stoned on kisses, and lifted our
nightgowns or let the straps drop, and, Now you be the boy:*

*concrete floor, sleeping bag or couch, playroom, game room, train room, laundry.
Linda’s basement was like a boat with booths and portholes*

*instead of windows. Gloria’s father had a bar downstairs with stools that spun,
plush carpeting. We kissed each other’s throats.*

*We sucked each other’s breasts, and we left marks, and never spoke of it upstairs
outdoors, in daylight, not once. We did it, and it was*

*practicing, and slept, sprawled so our legs still locked or crossed, a hand still lost
in someone's hair . . . and we grew up and hardly mentioned who*

*the first kiss really was—a girl like us, still sticky with moisturizer we'd
shared in the bathroom. I want to write a song*

*for that thick silence in the dark, and the first pure thrill of unreluctant desire,
just before we'd made ourselves stop.*

Phallic forms that are a mix between grotesque sex toy and kid puppetry, find themselves in the tubular fingers inside the cabinet, and in the long, skinny, wriggly tubes of the strong man game. The piece, “Peeping Tom,” incorporates the sleepover element of a twin-size bed, of jumping, of theatrical play and fort making, and meshes it with a distinct dirtiness of a soiled mattress and of the perverse act of being a ‘peeping Tom’. The inevitability of the dirtiness of a kid.

Myths of Memory

In Saya Woolfalk's *No Place (pre)Constructed*, a gallery is turned into an idyllic universe where, as described by Naomi Beckwith, “Hand-painted murals on the walls and patterning on the floor created a Technicolor skyline. The garden-like landscape was peppered with gilded totemic objects cobbled together from recyclable containers; these objects operated somewhere between machines and architecture. The fantasy world's inhabitants, the ‘No Placeans,’ also known as the “Selves,” were dressed in hand- made tunics of patchwork quilting or an over- abundance of overlapping silk tongues.”⁴ These objects act as a method of world building, placing the audience on an awkward line between viewer of a completely new culture, in which they are colonizing, and

⁴ Beckwith, Saya Woolfalk's Utopia, 152

anthropologically exploiting, or of inhabitant of a new world, in which they would need new ritualistic understandings of their surroundings and culture. This installation acts as an examination and critique of anthropologic othering and investigates the concept of nostalgia and utopia within that framework. How does nostalgia operate to simultaneously further nationalism, through glorification of a ‘simpler’ more oppressive past, and push non-white cultures into a primitivism that furthers the polarity of these groups. Saya Woolfalk, in a similar visual language to mine, uses moderate technical expertise to construct abstracted objects and landscapes to demark a cynical childlike hand in her utopia. In this childlike land lives the myths of wonderment and joy that happen in the distortion of memory through nostalgia. Things used to be so much better, things used to be so much brighter, things used to be strange.

In one video piece of this installation titled *Paradise Imagined*, two puppet like characters wearing bright, soft, round outfits, as if stuffed animals, play with each other—at first in a wholesome, kiddish manner, which then turns into a more scandalous mating ritual of thrusts and entanglements. Beckwith describes this transition of behaviors saying, “This sleight of hand, which moves the viewer from public television to pornography—with the attendant emotional move from pleasure to shame—ushers us into Woolfalk’s invented worlds, self-contained utopias where objects are drawn, stitched, and pasted together in a formal conspiracy against the language of sculptural mastery.”⁵ This specific piece reminds me of the inconspicuous act of playing with dolls and then rubbing them together in a generically sexual manner. There is an uncomplicatedness in this imagery that also has an undertone of bitterness, as you play

⁵ Naomi Beckwith, “Saya Woolfalk's Utopia: Sensation as a Space for Critique.” *African Studies Companion Online* 2009, no. 25 (2009): https://doi.org/10.1163/_afco_asc_828: 151.

the part of the surveyor of the whole scene. You are the peeping Tom and are subsequently implicated in the ‘wrongness’ or ‘innocence’ of displaying these acts in public. I use this meshing of warped memory and adult sexuality to evoke the distorted utopianism of nostalgia.

In my piece, “Resting on my Laurels,” the recordings of moments in my life have gone through so much distortion that the memories are unrecognizable as my own. Frames of the video have been traced onto the phenikistascope boards, leaving out visual nuances of background details and color. The phenikistascopes are then spun at various speeds by participant pedaling bicycle pedals that are attached to a spinning knitting machine, allowing for distortion of time and the success/failure of the animation. Then this image is captured by a camcorder which is sending a live feed to a small TV on the other side of the wall where there is room for a larger audience to sit and watch. This camcorder/television feed set up distorts the original animation by adding a framerate-without which the animation would be unintelligible. Lastly, on occasion, another layer of distortion is added, wherein someone may attempt to record of photograph the television with their phone. The televisions frame rate does not match that of an iPhone and leads to a black streak being visible down the middle of the screen. In the strong man machine, bed posts are distorted to be larger than life and towering over participants. Bedroom and home material are distorted to be spaces of wonderment, color, and otherworldliness. These distortions are partly from the nostalgia of childhood and use of warped memories as a healing agent, and partly a willing re-appropriating of memory (through spatial memorials to the home) to serve the adult need to queerify and freakify space and time.

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