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Portal

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Portal

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of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Art

by

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Abstract

Portal is a series of large-scale multimedia collages that work to show the intersections between three very different and Tim-specific imagery. The imagery utilized, and the intersections highlighted aim to acknowledge a deep cultural history of how black men have been stripped of their personhood in visual media, and how that history has negatively impacted/impacts the way that black men are able to exist in reality.

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Introduction

Throughout American history, black bodies has been burdened with navigating their lives while attempting to reconcile with oppressive, inescapable circumstances and a systematic lack of bodily autonomy and agency. This history began and stretches back in time to the centuries of enslavement that black Americans endured.

Images, like the Zealy daguerrotypes and the infamous medical examination of a formerly enslaved man, regarded throughout history as Peter, laid the groundwork for how visual media strips black people of personhood. As a byproduct, that history has extended into contemporary culture time and time again. Today, black Americans are forced to consume images that strip them of agency and distort the reality of their existence, thus distorting their perception of themselves.

A prime example of that practice in contemporary culture exists through the way that gay pornography depicts gay black men, portal works to map an internal conversation into witnessing of the continual "collapse of the black man into phallus" - a term coined by artist Glenn Ligon. Influenced by the writings of Glenn Ligon, Adrian Piper, and Lauren Deland - each collage, executed to represent the specificity of my identity as a gay black male, acts as a portal into a state of being that can only be achieved via living through inescapably oppressive circumstances designed to retain control. Each portal comprises recognizable images of enslaved humans and screenshots of imagery from porn sites that depict black men in exclusively stereotyped ways.

Portal 1

This year, in my studio practice, and as a part of my thesis research, through the investigation of both content and time-specific imagery, I created what I call *Portals that worked*

to illustrate the journey of finding one's own identity as a gay black male; as I am fed harmful images of self. I executed these portals by engaging in a highly specified and experimental process that referenced the layers of conceptual complexity that enveloped the work it created. To do so, I relied on a few different modes of image construction - the first being the use of the flatbed photographic scanner. The scanner became an integral tool in bridging the conceptual gaps between the imagery utilized and the means to create highly abstract images. The first image that was splayed across the bed of the scanner was an image that was used as the conceptual foundation for the first portal in my thesis show (figure 1).

The image discussed, taken of me as a child through a disposable camera, pictured my first encounter with the shame of being gay in a culture (black culture) that instills heteronormative values from a very young age. In this photograph, I am pictured sheepishly playing with a Barbie doll - something I was taught was inherently feminine and something boys were not supposed to do. Even at the tender age that the photo was taken, I knew when that image was captured, it pictured me doing something that challenged the way I was taught I should exist as a black boy that would eventually grow into a black male. The memory that the photo enveloped forced me to reconcile with hyper-masculine mask that I created to survive as a closeted queer boy - a mask that I would only begin to shed through my thesis work and the investigation of the scanner.

Knowing that the scanner has been used repeatedly as a distortion tool in the canon of art history, I learned and used it to do the same. I began my investigation of this image by dragging it along the bed of the scanner as the scan was in progress, and the distortion it created spoke to me. The way the scanner distorted the image created an avenue of thought I had yet to explore in my research.

While the abstraction that the scanning process created was purely physical, it also provided me with the language to express how the event it pictured distorted the perception of how I was taught I could/should exist as a cis-gendered black male. That distorted perception of my reality catalyzed the survival-based hyper-masculine mask I had been wearing since the image was captured. Along with this highly abstract imagery, I wrote a text that worked in tandem to reconcile with that reality and acknowledge where I existed in juxtaposition to it contemporarily. The accompanied text was written as a eulogy that worked on signaling the act of the shedding of the inherent femininity, I possessed to create the mask discussed, and it read:

This splaying of words and images is dedicated to the young and beautifully effeminate boy whom I starved in order to survive in a world that does not leave space for young black queers to be free.

Your priorities were always different from the other boys your age, and those around you never let you forget it. While brothers, cousins, and friends were huddled into groups screaming about their favorite sports teams and flipping coins to decide who'd be all-day QB, you were inside wearing a t-shirt on your head like it was a 30" lakefront pretending to be one of the final two on America's Next Top Model. That was a joyous time where you couldn't help but to be anything other than yourself - I'm sorry I cut that time short.

That photo marks the day I began to lose you - the day I became too ashamed of who you were to breath. I remember it like it was yesterday - do you? Daddy has just swooped us, face covered in dried tears, from Ayo's custody - one of your least favorite days of the year. However,

all was not lost because on your way back to the hell that was Ohio you'd stop in Onxy Hill Maryland to see your favorite cousin.

Before that picture was taken, you and Jamaka were behind a closed door playing with her barbies (black ones of course). Suddenly, Aunt Van burst into the room, disposable camera cocked like a gun. I could feel the chills cover the surface of our skin, like scales, as the joy turned into fear and shame. You knew after staring into the barrel of that camera that the picture that it would produce, one of you doing something a real boy would never, would live in some book for the rest of your life.

At such a delicate age you'd been given the rubric to manhood, and you were doing a shitty job at checking the boxes. To you, this photo would be a constant reminder to your dad, who seemed to crave a normal boy, that you would never be what he wanted. I remember the intensely heavy feeling that filled your chest when we saw Auntie playfully disclosed to him what she had just captured on that shitty fucking camera. I remember the look on his face, seemingly, mortified of you, but too prideful to show it. I remember how small that made you feel.

Looking back, that is where the distinction between you and I was born. I began to shrink and hide you - unsure if who you were and would become was acceptable. I also remember the day, just a few years later, when I killed you. Already weakened by the verbal and physical lashings you'd received from myself and others, you could hardly stand. I looked at you in your cloudy eyes and told you that you'd taken your last breath.

That day I began the production of a mask that I still wear today. I deepened the sassy voice that you left behind and practiced in the mirror until the switch in my step was no more. Was it worth it? I don't fucking know, but it was not in vain - it worked. Shit, I got so good at

*pretending that I forgot who I was. I'm 25 now and this mask is starting to make my face itch.
When I look in the mirror I don't see myself, I see the absence of you. I miss you.*

This text, a written reconciliation of what that image signaled, became pivotal to the execution of the rest of the work that worked to solidify my first portal. In response to the scans of the original image and the text that accompanied it, I created a collage that, in its physicality, referenced the steps that followed my initial exploration and furthered my use of the scanner as a photographic instrument.

To create these collages, I created physical using the original image captured by the disposable camera, imagery that preceded the moment it was taken, a risograph, and another round on the flatbed scanner (figure 2). To start the process, I photographed images of myself as a child and proceeded to the picture of me with the Barbie in time. I did this to reference the visual teachings I'd received until that point that would produce the shame that existed. I then focused my view to only myself in that image and framed it with candles to reference the text's tone that reconciled with the symbolic death of the boy within it. After, I slipped the original image between both layers and returned to the scanner - this time also scanning my own body simultaneously. These collages and the multitude of ways and times that I exist within them worked to visually compress the time that existed between their execution for the viewer. This compression creates continuity in chronology, strips each image of its individuality, and forces the viewer to acknowledge their connection to the present created by including their present self. I was following the execution of these individual collages.

After the execution of these individual collages, scanning myself, related imagery, and objects that referenced who I'd become in the present became a regular practice in creating the

rest of the work that comprised each portal in my thesis show. This process began by slowing down in a purposed production-centered creation process and experimentally engaging with the scanner. To start, I began only scanning my body, absent of any other imagery. As a result, I discovered the increased level of distortion the scanner could create. This more severe distortion enabled me to further the language I began to scratch the surface of with my previous scanner experimentation.

I found that if I used the scanner more intentionally, lifting and repositioning my body as the image was captured, I could distort my likeness and exist in multiple points (figure 3). This more intentional experimentation and the complex compositions that I was able to achieve as a byproduct began to solidify the scanner as more than just a tool of exclusive physical distortion and abstraction. The newer discovery that I could exist in more than one place at a time within the image created room for a more complex conceptual infrastructure that enveloped the work. Before scanning, collaging, and then scanning again, I used repetition and layering to compress time and create chronology.

With the addition of the repetition of my contemporary presenting identity, I was able to signal the multiple consciences that I occupy while thinking and executing the work as a cis-gendered, gay black male. Following this, I married both modes of repetition into one and created highly complex compositions packed with rich concepts dealing in the specificity of my experience. These images are distorted in physicality and compressed chronologically to illustrate how culturally specific teachings and experiences distort the perception of how we, gay black men, imagine we should exist in reality.

After discovering increased distortion and more complex compositions, I began scanning a red pump. The red pump is a shoe I'd chosen as I explored drag culture after I began to shed the heteronormative teachings I had been fed and signaled my growing comfortability as a gay man in my personal life. I would dance with the pump on the scanner as I'd already been dancing with my collages - using repetition and strategic placement to arrive at the conceptual land points that I'd eventually prompt my viewers to explore when the installation exists in its final form. Finally, I left the scanner again to arrive at the installation and began printing each collage as large as possible. I knew before its execution that I wanted the petal that this imagery created to be massive in scale to envelop the viewer in the journey of thought I had engaged in to arrive at this work as a landing point. To do so, I collaged elements of as many of the individual collages as possible.

This final step of collage which pictured each layer of experimentation and depth of concept worked to produce the large-scale photographic collages that comprised my first portal (Figure 4). After the collaged compositions were solidified, they were sealed/laminated with clear packing tape. While it is evident that the tape holds the collages in place, it also highlights the visual phenomena that the scanner creates. Additionally, its gloss finish makes a beautiful but non-linear reference to the conception of the image - the scanner bed. This portal also introduced my use of new imagery - an image of a medical examination of a formerly enslaved man regarded throughout history as Peter.

After solidifying the highly specified and multidisciplinary process used to create the portal pictured above, to create the other two portals that comprised the show, I would repeat that process to explore different imagery. For the second portal, I researched and paired two types of imagery that existed at other times but were intersections in ideology and treatment. The first is

the medical examination of the formerly enslaved black man mentioned previously and screenshots from gay porn sites that utilized heavily stereotyped depictions of black men - that I argue distort how we imagine we can exist as sexual beings in reality.

I paired these two types of imagery to highlight the similarities in their treatment of their subject. Although in different ways, both types of imagery strip their black male subjects of their personhood as a means to an end, thus depicting black men in inhuman ways. The image of Peter, taken before the start of the civil war, was adopted by the abolitionist movement at the time and was used to spread awareness about the gruesome realities of slavery. While the abolitionist was successful in their projected use of the image, to do so, they reduced their black subject from a human with individualized experience to a symbol of mere pain and suffering. This reduction of the black subject in photography was quite common at the time of its production and would open the door to creating the type of imagery it was paired with in the installation I created.

Portal 2

The second type of imagery also reduced the black men they depicted to a tool as a means to an end. The imagery derived from screenshots of two specific gay porn sites that I frequented as young gay male in my most formative years. The sites from which the imagery was sourced were named *Blacks on Boys* and *Thug Hunters*. Both sites exclusively depict black men in stereotyped ways, both visually and in action. The first, *Blacks on Boys*, depicted black males as aggressive, domineering, and sexually violent people who craved the attention of their helpless white counterparts, even if it meant attaining it by force. The second, *Thug Hunters*, participated in the pure exoticism of the black male, relying on the highly stereotyped physical

depiction of black males. This site would produce scenes where white men would enter black neighborhoods and pay them to subvert their assigned presentation and its implications by allowing a meek-mannered white male to fuck them in their asses in public places. These images were paired with the imagery of Peter not only because of their shared practice of stripping black men of their personhood but also because of their shared history of the exoticism of the black body. A lot like the men depicted in the movies on *Thug Hunters*, Peter and other enslaved humans alike during their time were heavily exoticized as a means of humiliation and control.

Their pairing would highlight the similar ways they depicted black men and emphasize that the porn imagery's exploitation was a continuation of the exploitation of black men that originated during times of slavery., the second portal I worked to show that, like in most cases, the circumstances that black men face today are a direct byproduct of practices created upon our arrival to this country as enslaved people. I facilitated this visual comparison and second round of compression of chronology by engaging with them precisely as I engaged with the imagery that preceded it. I started by creating collages of the imagery sourced from the porn sites and dragging them along the scanner bed (figure 5). On the scanner, I would discover that the language of distortion that I found in my previous experimentation was also applicable to this imagery and for similar reasoning.

The physical distortion of the black subjects depicted would open the door for me to begin to tackle how the implications of their depiction worked to distort the way that black men, in their aging we, can exist as authentic sexual beings in reality. An additional tool that would aid me in furthering that language was an article titled "*BLACK SKIN, BLACK MASKS: THE CITATIONAL SELF IN THE WORK OF GLENN LIGON*" by Lauren Deland.

In the article, I found a quote from Afro-Caribbean political philosopher Frantz Fanon that read: "*The white spectator, viewing the black subject through a distorted lens of racist projections is no longer aware of the Negro, but only of a penis; The Negro is eclipsed. He is turned into a penis. He is penis*".

This quote helped me ground the existing conceptual groundwork I had been engaging in as I explored the dehumanization of black men in gay pornography. It was through that language, paired with the visual experiment, that I learned I was working on mapping an eternal conversation. This conversation I was mapping was the reconciliation of my continual witnessing of the "collapse of the black man into a phallus," a term coined by Glenn Ligon himself. The scanner would allow me further to distort the distorted delegation of black men and further collapse the image of the black male to signal how the intake of that imagery collapses our perception of self.

I revisited the risograph the first time I engaged in the making process of the work that preceded it. Again, I created collages that would compress time and create a visual chronology for the viewer as I compare imagery that exists in vastly different times. This time, I used the collaged pornographic imagery that the risograph produced to act as the first layer of the collage. While in the process I engaged in before, I layered the imagery to create a highly accurate chronology of the events that took place and the impact they produced; this time, I worked backward. This time, although its existence followed the image of Peter, I used the pornographic collages as the first layer and the pier as the second - forcing viewers to embark on a journey of thought in a similar chronology as my own (Figure 6).

Like most gay black youth, I was viewing the harmful, pornographic images discussed in my formative years and in secret due to embedded homophobia in the black community that I would argue are derivative as slavery. As a result of this forced hidden intake of these harmful images, I did not have access to the necessary prerequisite education required to understand the toxic way that my identity was being mishandled. Furthermore, because I was not being taught about myself as a gay black male, I learned how to exist sexually through this imagery. It and my heteronormative teaching of a child worked together to distort my perception of self-further. It wasn't until my recent research, shedding the mask through and looking inward, that I could understand just how deeply this imagery had conditioned me. As a result of this more contemporary understanding, I created the awareness necessary to find the intersections between how Peter and the black men in gay pornography; had been stripped of personhood. This less accurate but compressed chronology of the collages produced is a visual reflection of that journey backward in time. However, one collage created by my repetition of this process sent me down a few different avenues of thought that wouldn't converge with its original ideology until the work existed in its final iteration.

As I explored this imagery on the scanner, initially only with the tensions of using the physical distortion to signal distortion of self, I found even more related language. Before, I had been primarily focused on how the wrong way gay black men were, but a discovery made on the scanner helped me create language about other components of the same media further that stereotyped narrative. As I engaged more intentionally with the scanner as a tool to create distortion, I initially focused exclusively on the distortion of black men. However, just like in the porn media they derive from, their white counterparts were also being distorted at the same level, both physically and figuratively!

As discussed, the website I sourced a lot of the imagery from portrayed black men as aggressive, domineering, and forceful, but the way that white men were portrayed was designed to further this narrative. White people, in the same movies were described as meek, weak-willed, and easily overpowered. This exaggeration in the opposite direction made only further emphasizes the false and racially charged narratives that the work I've been making opposes. As I developed this language through making, the scanner gave me the final push I needed visually. Through engaging with the original exclusively pornographic and looking for new forms of distortion, I noticed that the white figure began to morph into a figure resembling some angel/cherub-like figure. The association with an angel, a symbol of purity, really lent itself to the way I had been discussing how whiteness existed in juxtaposition to blackness in pornography - so I chose to run with it. I isolated the figure from the rest of the original collage, digitally manipulated its form until it more closely resembled an angel, and then returned it to the same composition that it derived from (Figure 7). After creating my language about the implications of the racist porn media, highlighting the connection between Peter and this more contemporary imagery, and then solidifying ideology for how whiteness helped to perpetuate these narratives, it was time to return to the scanner.

My return to the scanner looked strikingly similar in practice to the first time I'd engaged in my experiments just weeks prior, but there were a few changes. This time, separating the imagery by what they portrayed, I simplified the process to ensure all the new work was touched by the same level of distortion as the work that preceded it and the work it would exist in juxtaposition to. As I continued to drag imagery along the scanner, the precise repetition across each collage made it clear how their connections would be forged in their final iterative form. A distortion is a tool for conceptual signaling in the portal that preceded it. Still, in the second

portal, the distortion would become the glue that held together a highly complex journey of thought that the viewer would be forced to engage in (Figure 8).

First, I would exclusively engage with my angel figure on the scanner for weeks at a time, seeing just how far the scanner could distort this imagery, thus furthering the ideology that enveloped it. Then, I would complete that process repeatedly until I left with hundreds of highly abstracted multidisciplinary collages that would eventually work together to make the second portal in my thesis show.

Following this imagery's last visit to the scanner, again and for the same conceptual erasing as before, I printed each collage as primarily as possible and began collaging the compositions into one. I allowed the distortion created by the scanner to inform where the separate energy would forge connections in the space. As a result, unlike the installation that preceded it, abstraction destroyed uniformity and created a sprawling form that lived as precariously as the journey of thought followed to reach it as a finished work. In its final iteration, the second portal spanned a two-wall space (figures 9 and 10). It forced the viewer to watch unarmed black bodies be distorted alongside Peter's, which was distorted alongside my own, which was distorted alongside but in service of whiteness. These images are distorted in the same way their origins distort the perception of how we, gay black men, imagine we can exist as authentic sexual beings. Each image strips black men of their personhood and uses their likeness as tools. I distort the photos further, alongside each other and my own, to remind viewers that the circumstances that we, black people, are working to liberate ourselves from are a direct result of centuries of enslavement. Porn strips me of my personhood in the name of the fetish, like the abolitionist stripped the man in the image discussed of his personhood in the name of progress.

Portal 3

The last portal, the most straightforward of the three, was created through slowing and re-acknowledging what had become one of the most extensive physical tools in all of the work I'd made thus far - the image of Peter (Figure 11). It was the first image that I'd seen imagery of slavery at just six years old in the library of my elementary school, but I would continue to see this image for years to come. I wanted to acknowledge the redistribution of this image and its many contexts over the decades by repeating its presence. I furthered that thought by utilizing the scanner - I again photographed this new image with the scanner, thus contributing to its reproduction but through the lens of someone descendant of that time in history. I then dragged the shot across the scanner as a visual metaphor for how carelessly this image has been extracted through history and used as a tool for fear and education - even at the cost of stripping the individual portrayed of their personhood. As I did this, I again dragged my own body across the scanner to force the personhood of a black body into the context of viewership of an image in which a black man has been stripped of such. I would again take the photos produced, print them on a large format printer, and collage them on a much more significant scale. However, unlike the portals before it that were comprised of components of a multitude of collages, the third portal was created from just one collage.

The collage, produced on the scanner, dissected Peter's distorted likeness into two sections - one white and the other red (Figure 12). As a result of a studio visit, I was made aware that the separation of color resembled the stripes of the American flag. After discovering the resemblance to the flag, I decided to make a flag exclusively out of reproductions of that same collage. For the final time in the execution of my thesis show, I would print the recurrences of this collage as large as I could and begin stitching them together to create what I called *My*

Historically Accurate Flag (Figure 13). This flag, this portal, worked as a moment of acknowledgment for Peter and the impact of the black people that lived when he lived. As I discuss, through the making of work, imagery stripping black people of their personhood as a means to an end would be impossible for me not to recognize that I have engaged with imagery similarly.

Although I mention Peter by name, I still used his likeness as kindling to start the essential conversations - much like the abolitionist did initially. However, due to my proximity to the history that envelops me and Peter, I consider my engagement with treating his identity as far less violent. Still, I wanted to create a moment in the show where he and this image were acknowledged in the proper context, so the flag was made. The flag, my third portal, was completed with 17 stripes, each embedded with Peter's image to acknowledge how each American colony was built on the backs of enslaved people. Furthermore, to recognize the violence throughout the land necessary to solidify each state - I created 50 scars instead of stars.

Portal, comprised of manipulated imagery, representative of a dehumanization of black men in visual media across an expanse of time work both separately and together to explore their individual specificity of existence as well as their intersections. However, they work to not only acknowledge this history, but provide a window into how this hidden and violent history has distorted the perception of the way that black gay men imagine they can exist in the world.

Conclusion

This work is only the beginning of what will come from this line of research in the future. Moving forward, I plan to expand the depth of my research into how visual media dehumanizes not only the gay black male but the black body in general. Gay black men are not the only beings

within the black diaspora who suffer and are affected by this violent history, and in the future, I plan to use what I have learned to make work that touches all who are. After only begging to scratch the surface of how the scanner and my specified process can grow, I am excited to go deeper and make work that challenges the history of dehumanization in hopes of liberating the black body.

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Figures



Figure 1. Childhood Photo (original scan) 2023. Scanner manipulation, my hand, photograph 11” x 17”. Image credit M’Shinda Abdullah-Broaddus



Figure 2. *Childhood Photo Collage 2023*. Original photo, collage, my face. 11" x 17". Image credit M'Shinda Abdullah-Broaddus



Figure 3. *The Scanner and Me*. Scanner manipulation, my face. 11" x 17". Image credit M'Shinda Abdullah-Broaddus.



Figure 4. *Portal 1*. Clear packing tape, wood, collaged scans. Image credit Forrest Frederick

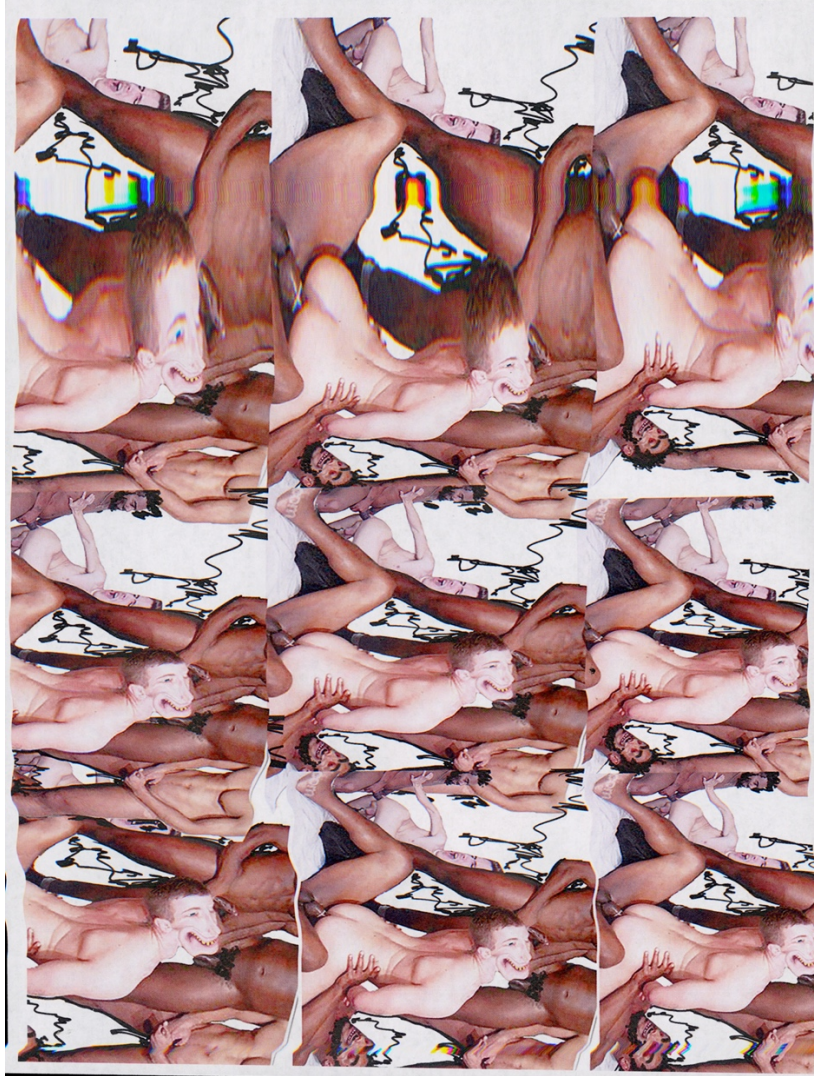


Figure 5. *porn collage 2023*. Collaged imagery, scanner manipulation. 11" x 17". Image credit M'Shinda Abdullah-Broaddus



Figure 6. *Peter and Porn* 2023. Manipulated scan, risograph collage, blood stain. 8.5” x11”.
Image credit M’Shinda Abdullah-Broaddus

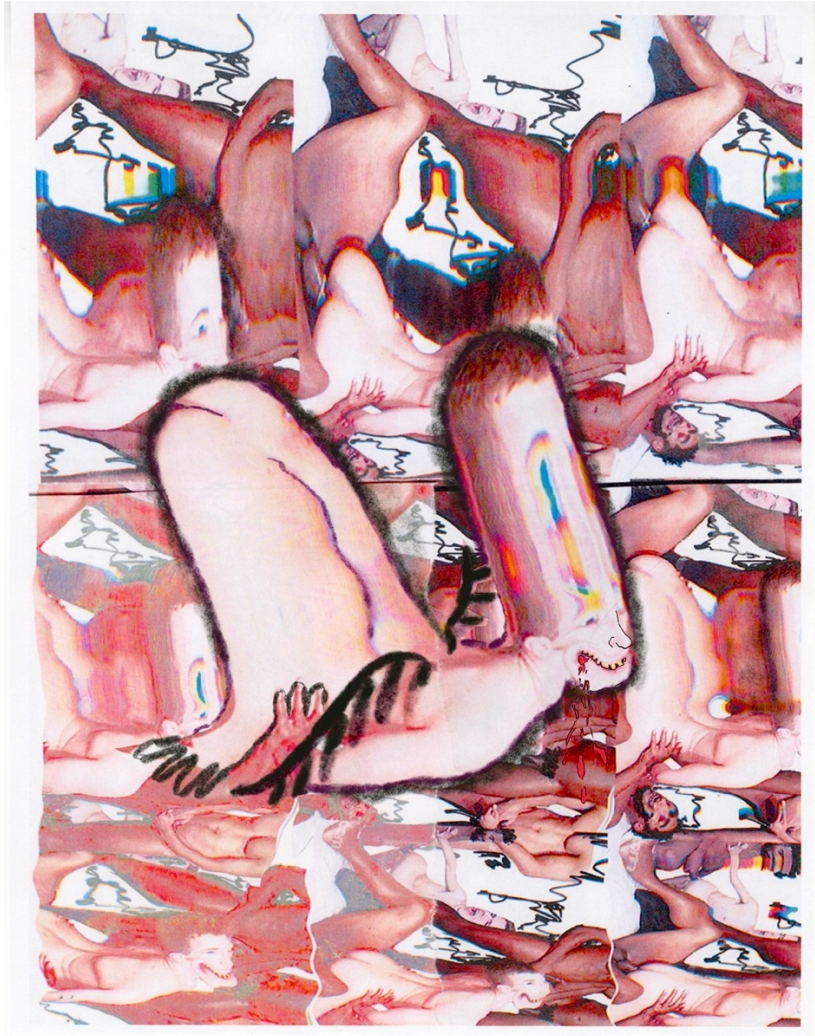


Figure 7. *Cherub 2023*. Collaged imagery, scanner manipulation. 8.5” x 11”. Image credit M’Shinda Abdullah-Broaddus.



Figure 8. *Untitled 2023*. Collaged imagery, scanner manipulation, my hand. 11" x 17". Image credit M'Shinda Abdullah-Broaddus



Figure 9. *Portal 2: Wall 1* 2023. Clear packing tape, collaged imagery, wood. Image Credit Alec Logan Smith



Figure 10. *Portal 1: Wall 2* 2023. Clear packing tape, collaged imagery, wood. Image credit Alec Logan Smith



Figure 11. Medical examination of the escaped enslaved man, Peter



*Figure 12. Black, Grey, and Red 2023. Collaged imagery, scanner manipulation, 11" x 17".
Image credit M'Shinda Abdullah-Broaddus*



Figure 13. *Portal 3: My Historically Accurate Flag* 2023. Clear packing tape, collaged imagery, wood. Image Credit Forrest Frederick