Their Bodies Flamboyant: An Exploration of Self Through Figuration and Flower

Gabriel Cortese

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THEIR BODIES FLAMBOYANT:
AN EXPLORATION OF SELF THROUGH FIGURATION AND FLOWER

by

GABE CORTESE
B.F.A. University of Central Florida

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
in the School of Visual Arts and Design
in the College of Arts and Humanities
at the University of Central Florida
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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores my relationship to artmaking through the exploration of my identity. As a gay, Puerto-Rican, Argentinian, American man, my relationship to art has always been a way for me to make sense of my intersectional experiences. Chronologically recounting past and current bodies of work, I explain how my personal growth coincides with my artwork. From once shameful, hidden figures to later flamboyant, unapologetic bodies, this thesis links the sequential evolution of my figuration and ideas. I also investigate the process of reclaiming moments in art history as being inherently queer and explore the ways in which they manifest in my own work. Additionally, I expand on formal aspects like composition, color, and mode of making, and how this interacts with the content in my work. Through this recounting and analyzation of my work, I invite viewers to empathize with the universality of my queer experience.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES .................................................................................................................. v
INTRODUCTION ....................................................................................................................... 1
EARLY WORKS .......................................................................................................................... 2
  Self-Portraiture ................................................................................................................. 2
  Subtropical Fever .............................................................................................................. 4
CHRONOLOGY OF WORK & PROCESSES ........................................................................... 7
  My Shadow Does That ........................................................................................................ 7
  Back .................................................................................................................................. 9
  Francis Bacon .................................................................................................................... 11
  Wrapped in You Tangled in Yours & Boys in My Bed ...................................................... 13
  Twenty-five in two weeks ................................................................................................. 17
  Beach Film ......................................................................................................................... 18
  Doorway drama ................................................................................................................. 20
  Legs .................................................................................................................................. 23
  Lucero in the Red Tide ...................................................................................................... 25
  floppy boys & Into and Out Of ......................................................................................... 29
  Collision .............................................................................................................................. 36
  Crushers, Pluckers, and Fuckers ...................................................................................... 40
  Crier .................................................................................................................................. 43
  Sore Loser .......................................................................................................................... 45
  A Bonfire in My Backyard ................................................................................................. 50
  As If You Are Alone ......................................................................................................... 52
  Religion, Mannerism, and Sobremesa ............................................................................ 55
  Resting Window ................................................................................................................ 60
  Lying Figure ....................................................................................................................... 63
CONCLUSION .......................................................................................................................... 67
  Future ................................................................................................................................ 68
REFERENCES ......................................................................................................................... 69
## LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Dimensions</th>
<th>Year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Upside down self-portrait</td>
<td>30” x 48”</td>
<td>2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Double portrait (pussy bow)</td>
<td>48” x 48”</td>
<td>2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>everything I want</td>
<td>48” x 60”</td>
<td>2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>It's Always Sunny Down Here</td>
<td>48” x 60”</td>
<td>2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>My Shadow Does That</td>
<td>48” x 48”</td>
<td>2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Back</td>
<td>50” x 80”</td>
<td>2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Figure on Bed</td>
<td>50” x 70”</td>
<td>2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Francis Bacon, Two Figures</td>
<td>60” x 46”</td>
<td>1953</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Wrapped in You, Tangled in Yours</td>
<td>58” x 94”</td>
<td>2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Boys in Bed</td>
<td>72” x 96”</td>
<td>2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Left: Bed Boy #1, 8” x 8”</td>
<td>2019</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Right: Bed Boy #2, 8” x 8”</td>
<td>2019</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Paul Cézanne, The Bather</td>
<td>50” x 38 1/8”</td>
<td>1885</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Beach Film #1, 9” x 12”</td>
<td>2019</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Beach Film #5, 9” x 12”</td>
<td>2019</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Doorway Drama #1, 9” x 12”</td>
<td>2019</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Aperture, 9” x 12”</td>
<td>2019</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Closet, 9” x 12”</td>
<td>2019</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Legs, 9” x 12”</td>
<td>2019</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Legs #1, 45”x 60”</td>
<td>2019</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Legs #2, 45”x 60”</td>
<td>2019</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Legs #3, 45” x 60”</td>
<td>2019</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Legs #4, 45” x 60”</td>
<td>2019</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Lucero in the Red Tide, 8’ x 4’</td>
<td>2019</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>detail of shoes in Lucero in the Red Tide</td>
<td>2019</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>Eugène Delacroix, The Death of Sardanapalus, 154” x 195”, oil on canvas, 1844</td>
<td>29</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>Red Room #1, 23” x 35”, Acrylic and charcoal on paper</td>
<td>2019</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>Red Room Corner, 22” x 30”, Acrylic and charcoal on paper</td>
<td>2019</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>Floppy Boys Series, 11” x 14”, Screen print, acrylic and oil on panel</td>
<td>2019</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>Into and Out of, 48” x 48”</td>
<td>2019</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31</td>
<td>Left: Expulsion, 9” x 12”, Acrylic on wood panel</td>
<td>2019</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32</td>
<td>Right: Masaccio, Expulsion of Adam and Eve from Eden, Brancacci Chapel, Santa Maria del Carmine, Florence, Italy, 7’ x 2’ 11”, 1424–1427, Fresco</td>
<td>37</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33</td>
<td>Collision, 6’ x 8’, acrylic and charcoal on wood panel</td>
<td>2019</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34</td>
<td>Crusher, 30” x 22”, charcoal on paper</td>
<td>2020</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35</td>
<td>Plucker, 30” x 22”, charcoal on paper</td>
<td>2020</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36</td>
<td>Leapers, 42” x 30”, charcoal on paper</td>
<td>2020</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37</td>
<td>Crier, 50” x 72”, charcoal on paper</td>
<td>2020</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38</td>
<td>Crop of Crier</td>
<td>2020</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 39: just don't get it in my eye, 48” x 60”, acrylic on canvas, 2017
Figure 40: Sore Loser, 22’ X 30”, Pastel and oil pastel on black paper, 2020
Figure 41: A Bonfire in my Backyard, 45” x 30”, Charcoal and pastel on paper, 2020
Figure 42: Crop of A Bonfire in My Backyard
Figure 43: As if you are alone (first panel), 22” x 30”, Charcoal and pastel on toned paper, 2020
Figure 44: As if you are alone (unfinished), 22” x 30”, Charcoal and pastel on toned paper, 2020
Figure 45: Figure Jacopo da Pontormo, The Deposition from the Cross, 123” x 75”, 1528, Oil on wood panel
Figure 46: Sobremesa (commune), 45” x 70”, Charcoal and pastel on paper, 2020
Figure 47: Resting Window, 45” x 30”, Charcoal on paper, 2020
Figure 48: Pieter Bruegel The Elder, Two Chained Monkeys, 9” x 7”, Oil on wood panel, 1562
Figure 49: Lying Figure, 45” x 65”, Charcoal and pastel on paper, 2020
Figure 50: Andrea Mantegna, Lamentation of Christ, 1480, tempera on Canvas, 27”x 32”
Figure 51: Crop of foot, Lying figure
INTRODUCTION

I identify as a man. I identify as a gay man. I identify as queer. I identify as masculine and feminine. I identify as Latino. I identify as Puerto Rican and Argentinian. I identify as the son of an immigrant. I identify as a painter, a draftsman. I identify as an artist.

I have always felt my identity was unavoidable. It is something I know will always reflect on in my work. The “death of the author” does not apply to me.

For marginalized people, our first impression has often been pre-decided for us. As a result, that impression is projected onto us. My skin, face, voice, sway of my hips, and way my weight shifts from one leg to the other, form a stereotype. I have never had the advantage to forget who I am in the eyes of others; however, I purposely challenge this by choosing to highlight my identity and its relation to my work. To forget myself would be to erase myself. If I did, it would feed into a recurring narrative of people who have not been allowed to speak. It would be an underrepresentation of my lived experience– an experience as valid as any other. That understanding has shaped my practice. My work, at its core, is autobiographical.

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EARLY WORKS

Self-Portraiture

My work began as a reaction to my identity and started with self-portraiture (see Figure 1). I used inward inspection to speak quietly about things that were unresolved in my life like my sexuality, body, and psychological state. These paintings were usually devoid of expression, allowing the physicality of paint to act as an ambiguous agent. The space my body occupied was one that was heavily psychological, non-specific, and transient. This stuck-in-limbo feeling mirrored my life at the time. Empty spaces housed my body, as if they were a liminal space that could hold me in care, but also in transition. The intensely psychological figurative painting of Lucian Freud guided my work at this time. Thinking about the awkward pose, strange relationship between painter and subject, and the transformation of paint to flesh, opened my mind to the power that figurative work could provide.

These paintings desperately wanted to be vulnerable, but somehow remained closed and internal, and mirrored my inner struggles. Coincidentally, my personal journey of acceptance of my sexuality had come to a crossroads, leading me to come out to my family and friends as an openly proud gay man. In the same way that the weight was lifted from my shoulders, the subject matter in my work followed suit with the inclusion of new bodies in my work as friends and lovers were introduced.
Figure 1: *Upside down self-portrait*, 30” x 48”, Acrylic and gesso on canvas, 2016
Figure 2: *Double portrait (pussy bow)*, 48” x 48”, acrylic and charcoal on canvas, 2016

**Subtropical Fever**

In the series of work, *Subtropical Fever* (Figure 3 and 4), sweating bodies lay dormant in a space that shields them in a protective, over-lush, and stifling landscape. I decided to shift my gaze from self-portraiture to full body figure paintings of friends and lovers. In making this shift, my work served as a vehicle depicting how I could explore identity further in my work, now
relying on the vulnerability of bodies other than my own. This shift was integral to my progress as an artist and as a human. As I personally grew in confidence, I was able to transcend past limitations in my work.

Figure 3: everything I want, 48” x 60”, acrylic on canvas, 2017

Vulnerability, voyeurism, and collaboration helped push the limits of my work and myself. Through this passage, I was able to make the work less about the specificities of my struggles and, instead, use these new figures as placeholders to speak to bigger topics and a wider audience. *Subtropical Fever* extended beyond my undergraduate research and into my graduate program acting as a starting point that held greater possibilities for future exploration.
Figure 4: *It's Always Sunny Down Here*, 48” x 60”, acrylic and pastel on canvas, 2018
CHRONOLOGY OF WORK & PROCESSES

My Shadow Does That

I used my undergraduate work as the catalyst for the commencement of my graduate research.

Though I had worked with an internal sense of shame and repression of my sexuality in my past body of work Subtropical Fever, I had not considered the shame that was being projected onto my identity from an external point of view. In My Shadow does that (Figure 5), Homophobia, hate crimes, and violence disturbed the peaceful rest of these figures, appearing in a symbolic fire behind the bodies that pushes them into almost complete obscurity. This idea led me to make some compositional decisions unlike the choices I had previously made before. Elements of fire, explosions, and disturbance began to invade the previously peaceful landscapes. The awakening of bodies and the powerful force of fire was a new development in the work and would lead to a more physical handling of paint and subject matter in my future.

Shifts in my work mirrored changes in my life during this period, like moving from my parent’s home, entering a graduate program, and feeling the isolation that comes from existing in the midst of transition. I had relied on the comfort and love that surrounded me in my undergraduate degree. The proximity of family, the support and inspiration that came from friendships, and the comfort of consistency within my artistic practice had all shifted. I was awakening from a previously peaceful and undisturbed comfort and was being provided a moment of reflection and loneliness that would lead to pivotal growth in my work.
Figure 5: *My Shadow Does That*, 48” x 48”, acrylic on canvas, 2018
Back

After *My Shadow Does That* (Figure 5), I began to reimagine new spaces for my figures to occupy. I began making large scale 50” x 75” drawings bringing the figures into a domestic space for the first time. I suddenly felt a strong pull towards drawing – especially the immediate mark of contour line and the rendering of subtle value. Drawing had always been a place of comfort and stability that allowed me to recalibrate and reorient my hand and mind. By shedding the beauty and abundance of a subtropical Floridian landscape, I distilled the environment, reinterpreting the idea of “landscape” as a horizontal drawing of a simple bed with a single figure at the center. This intentional shift from landscape to a domestic interior, allowed me to advance the work.

![Back](image)

Figure 6: *Back*, 50” x 80”, Charcoal on paper, 2018
Figure 7: Figure on Bed, 50” x 70”, Charcoal, pastel and gesso on paper, 2018
I began to think of the bed as an opportunity to explore the possibilities of domination and submission. I shifted my focus to studying the work and life of Francis Bacon (1909-1992), a painter whose work emerged in the 1950’s, whose use of multiple male figures in interior spaces served as my inspiration during this time. I was captivated by the visual splendor of the
biomorphic bodies, the psychologically charged rooms, and how he incorporated coded representation of homosexual desire into his work.

Depicting homosexuality has been a challenge that many artists have faced in their work, but none so coded, physical, and psychological, as the work of Francis Bacon. Bacon decided to face this subject in a multitude of diverse ways using abstracted figuration and simplified interior space. Inspired by the work of his contemporaries, Bacon blended surrealism and expressionism to create his iconic handling of the body. His figures, riddled with agony and desire, quite literally swirl into and out of one another. Bacon’s work is among some of the few representations of homosexuality in the canon of painting before the rise of postmodernism in the 1960’s.²

In the painting *Two Figures* (Figure 8), Bacon takes on the subject of homosexual relationships in an ambiguous domestic space. The acts depicted are intimate, violent, and voyeuristic, reflecting his life, relationships, and times he was living. The two figures are central in the painting and show the blurring between love and domination, drawing comparison to the similarities of wrestling and sex. The two bodies weave into one and allude to a sense of pain and pleasure, as if the bodies are fighting over who gets to be on top. Bacon often spoke about sex in a casual way saying, “I think there are a great many men who don’t really know what they are sexually,” breaking the mold of usual conversation and shining light on his private life.³ At

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the time, his words could have been taken as a direct threat to the law, but to Bacon, the
crassness of conversation was just his usual way of communicating.

In *Two Figures* (Figure 8), the role of the voyeur is played by the audience. These works, taboo at the time, placed unseen moments in front of an audience. Bacon’s decision to do this is, in my opinion, reaching for human empathy to create commonality between homosexual and heterosexual. In addition, the riskiness of this painting extended far beyond the individual, as it was displayed in the Hanover Gallery in London during the 1950’s, a time when homosexuality was a criminal act. This painting whose subject was one of intimate love between two men, became a political statement of rebellion. The way it made an illicit, private act public – was risky and potentially controversial.⁴

Wrapped in You Tangled in Yours & Boys in My Bed

I knew I wanted to pursue the lineage of Bacon's work by imagining his male wrestlers in my own bed. While researching the work of Bacon, specifically *Two Figures* (see Figure 8), I felt a sense of homecoming, as if my own struggles were represented visually for the first time. Not only were these paintings psychologically intense, but they also had all the seduction and beauty that I have always been attracted to in painting. This beauty I speak of is not of prettiness

⁴ Salter, G. “*Francis Bacon and Queer Intimacy in Post-war London.*” 2017.
or superficial satisfaction, but of undeniable attraction. In Dave Hickey’s writing “The Invisible Dragon,” he calls for a reconsideration of the role of beauty in art. Hickey states that:

“In images, beauty is the agency that causes visual pleasure of the beholder, and, since pleasure is the true occasion for looking at anything, any theory of images that is not grounded in the pleasure of the beholder begs the question of arts efficacy and dooms itself to inconsequence.”

He goes on to say that beauty is the “bête noir, the snake in the garden,” comparing the strike of a serpent to the strength of the allure of beauty in art. The comparison recalls the stealth of seduction and how it leads to potential danger, or in this case realization that there is more to the work than just that of visual satisfaction. Although provocative, Hickey's words run through the core of my practice. Through Hickey’s reconsideration of the stigma of beauty, I understand the importance of it as a tool of manipulation when considering how the viewer could interact with my work.

In Wrapped in You, Tangled in Yours (Figure 9), The fleeting bodies bending and twisting into one another, merge the endings and beginnings of their limbs. I chose to be physical with the paint application and with subtractive methods of mark-making by scratching, rubbing, and ripping parts of the paper surface.

The bodies, though violent and physical, display a conflicted sense of closeness. While I composed this work, I began thinking about the complexities of desire, especially in situations of

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repression. Closeness takes on new meaning as these figures are on top of each other, wrapping around, and tangled in a desperate attempt to fuse into one another, as if they are both colliding and repelling simultaneously. In Bacon’s work, violence takes over and everything is dark and brooding, but “Wrapped in You, Tangled in Yours” takes on this subject with contrast and conflict. Love and danger, violence and desire, fear and excitement, are all words that led my decision making in the formation of this work.

Inspired by my earlier charcoal drawing Back (Figure 6), Boys in Bed (Figure 10) positions figures within my room and, more intimately, my bed. I began imagining swirling bodies and intimate acts in my room, an experience too common to those who repress intimacy at a young age. As a painter, my intention was to create a voyeuristic feast of male performance, a rush of dominance, submission, and raw physicality, held together by the stability of the room. While the composition is focused on the intimate act, I also include peripheral information like an open closet, carpeted flooring, and even an empty orange chair in the foreground. This chair is a reminder of the voyeuristic act of looking upon a painting.
Figure 9: *Wrapped in You, Tangled in Yours*, 58” x 94”, Acrylic, charcoal and pastel on paper, 2018

Figure 10: *Boys in Bed*, 72” x 96”, acrylic and charcoal on paper, 2018
Twenty-five in two weeks

As a challenge, I was tasked by a professor to make twenty-five paintings within two weeks. I titled this series of small acrylic on wood panel paintings *Bed Boys* (Figure 11 and 12). The subject matter was the same as my earlier work; figures in beds and on the floor occupying physical, interior spaces. This was an intentional challenge to learn about the limits of our image-making, to push our studio practice, and to come to compositions quickly. I began by experimenting with gesso-primed wood panels. I started by taking strategic approaches to small scale figurative painting, which I had never tried before. I learned that to complete the work quickly, I needed to push myself to make looser marks, broader details, and use more experimental color. From this assignment, I discovered how reduction gave me the ability to create illumination from subtraction. Rather than additive light, I could subtract the darks and let the illumination come forward.

Figure 11: Left: Bed Boy #1, 8” x 8”, Acrylic and charcoal on panel, 2019
Figure 12: Right: Bed Boy# 2, 8” x 8”, Acrylic on panel, 2019
Beach Film

The last of my twenty-five paintings depicted an overcast beach scene with a nude figure emerging from the water, titled Beach Film #1 (Figure 14 and 15). I decided to take inspiration from the compositions of 35mm film photographs of my boyfriend and my friend at a beach littered with driftwood. In many ways, these paintings were reconsiderations of my earlier work of figures in psychological landscapes, Subtropical Fever. The small-scale paintings taught me to loosen my brushstrokes and speed up my production, while engaging in meaningful subject matter. Two nude male bodies inhabit a romantic overcast beach. They appear to be in complete isolation. They navigate the beach and interact with an intimate awareness of one another.

Figure 13: Paul Cézanne, The Bather, 50” x 38 1/8” Oil on canvas, 1885 Artstor, Accessed on March 16, 2021, https://library.artstor.org/asset/AMOMA_10312311087.
During this time, I was inspired by the looseness of brush marks, the clarity of composition, and the eroticism of Cezanne's *Bathers* (Figure 13). His work served as the basis for my own interpretation of intimacy, eroticism, and romance. I often think of the importance of representation within the lineage of art history. It was becoming increasingly important to me to express my own experiences as a gay man by making my own “Bathers” as an addition to the history of art.

The idea of differentiating between nude and naked, helped lead my questioning of the eroticism in my work. The tease of the unseen or the ambiguous, prevailed over the obviousness of exposure, giving the figures agency over what they reveal. In ways, separating those definitions helped define what was important to me about the “tease” I wanted to create with my work and its subject matter. This would eventually lead to answering important questions when considering nudity and nakedness in my future work.

*Figure 14: Beach Film #1, 9” x 12”, Acrylic on panel, 2019*
The small works allowed me to sift through imagery, composition, and mood, faster than ever. The process was like the allure of printmaking; for the first time I was able to see multiple images of similar subjects and make comparisons between works. Through this new form of juxtaposing and editing, I chose to focus on a series of nine paintings of the nude male body within domestic spaces (Figure 16, 17, and 18). These paintings were meant to be an honest analysis of my new apartment and how bodies could inhabit that space. The focus of the work dealt with portals, thresholds, and in-between spaces. I wanted to create paintings that depicted bodies in awkward or unseen poses, juxtaposed with concrete orthogonals that defined the spaces around the figures.
In these works, like *Doorway Drama #1* (Figure 16), I focused on strange pairings of colors. The overall pink, blue, brown, and acidic yellow tones make up the space and the bodies. The underpainting shows through the additive paint to reinforce the similarities of the bodies depicted in their enveloping spaces.

Through these experiments in composition, color, and paint application, I was able to delve into why these paintings were important to me at that time. Like the earlier work, these paintings depict my domestic interior space, riddled with psychological charge, and weighted with the task of the body interacting with its environment. As I begin to analyze the simplicity of the subject, figure in space, I reflect on why I was obsessively making compositions about compromise between the organic forms of the body and the planar structure of this space.
At the time, I was experiencing what felt like a new moment in my life, the beginning of adulthood, a time in which I had first experienced the restrictions of moving into a shared apartment, an emotional disconnectedness from my living space, and a curiosity of moving through the spaces of my apartment. The feeling of inhabiting a new space and navigating the limitations, felt all too familiar to the restrictions I’ve felt in public spaces as a queer person. Always conscious of my effeminate voice, the sway of my hip as I walk, and the projected stereotypes that are cast onto me, public space has always felt uncomfortable and has forced me to gauge how I can move through the space in a protective manner. These works although technically in my bedroom, bathroom, and closet, show a disconnectedness between figure and space, that mirrors the dissonance created when private and public space overlap.

Figure 17: *Aperture*, 9” x 12”, Acrylic on panel, 2019
The series *Legs* (Figure 20, 21, 22, and 23) was a conscious decision to reverse my thought process when constructing paintings. Armed with a new openness to alternative ways of working through form and ideas, I decided to focus on larger experimental pieces. These 41” x 50” paintings on paper, riffed off the composition of a smaller work I called *Legs* (Figure 19).

The subject of the series is jutting out of a closet-like space. The mirrored door reflects another version of the legs, to show another aspect of the subject. The floor is littered with shoes and the commonalities of the space (floor, walls, and doors) are changed in each iteration. This series of four paintings span from most representational to most deconstructed. In each, the legs, space, and objects are all handled in dramatically diverse ways in my effort to be as experimental...
as possible. My process involved consciously deciding to execute the opposite of my initial ideas.

Figure 19: *Legs*, 9” x 12”, Acrylic, oil, and color pencil on panel, 2020

Left to right:
- Figure 20: *Legs #1*, 45” x 60”, Acrylic and charcoal on paper, 2019
- Figure 21: *Legs #2*, 45” x 60”, Acrylic, watercolor pencil, tape, and tracing paper on cut paper, 2019
- Figure 22: *Legs #3*, 45” x 60”, Acrylic on paper, 2019
- Figure 23: *Legs #4*, 45” x 60”, Acrylic and charcoal on paper, 2019
Lucero in the Red Tide

Figure 24: Lucero in the Red Tide, 8’x 4’, Acrylic and charcoal on wood panel, 2019

Using the composition of The Death of Sardanapalus (Figure 26) by Delacroix as the catalyst for creating Lucero in the Red Tide (Figure 24), I built an image of my own room to house three figures that are scattered around the space.

Delacroix’s painting was inspired by Lord Byron’s romantic play from 1821, centered around the fall of Assyrian King, Sardanapalus. The work depicts the pivotal moment in the story when Sardanapalus sits atop his funerary pyre, made completely of his luxurious treasures,

concubines, and horses. He watches apathetically as the chaos ensues and the slaughter of his people takes place around him.

In the *Death of Sardanapalus*, the scene enters our space bringing us up close to the violence. As the viewer enters the painting; the work transforms and places the viewer in the chaos of this theatrical orgy. Although lofty and romantic, I wanted to subvert Delacroix's painting and Lord Byron’s story, replacing the opulence with the mundane chaos that ensues in a shared bedroom. Taking the place of the luxurious treasures of Sardanapalus, are possessions my boyfriend and I tossed to the floor and discarded among piles of yesterday's clothing. Items flow through the composition adding accent to the avalanche that clutters the floor, showing the realities of two twenty-something-year-old men cohabitating for the first time. During the creation of *Lucero in The Red Tide*, the stability of defining “my room” had, for the first time, began to blur into “our room.” Even more so, the space began to warp as we learned to navigate around shared furniture and each other’s bodies.

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I intentionally left the figures gestural with loose brushstrokes so I could focus on space and the symbolic elements that clutter the room (see Figure 25). In Delacroix’s painting, these items are gilded with gold and are as heroic as the original epic story. In my painting, I wanted the scattered items (gold Casio watch, Puma sneakers, and Apple laptop) in the room to be symbols of my life in its current state. Taking inspiration from my daily life, I inserted sneakers, dumbbells, and an avalanche of papers to create the chaotic movement that swirls around the composition. The importance of these elements is heightened by their level of finish, making them appear as staccato marks that accent the overall chaos.

The toy horse appears as if stuck in an eternal state of rearing on its hind legs, positioned at the edge of the desk, and watching over the bodies in the room. The horse, traditionally a symbol of masculinity, is now reinterpreted as a static plastic toy resting on my desk.² The

plasticity of the horse contrasts the gilded and jewel encrusted horse gallantly fighting for its freedom in the original work by Delacroix.

This was the first time I took the compositions of an art historical work and appropriated it for my own use. The process allowed me to better understand the western canon of historical visual representation. Breaking down the composition allowed me to pinpoint moments, lines, and shapes, and recognize how Delacroix controlled the swirling chaos in such a deliberate manner. It was important to me to create a space that was personally relevant to me as a 23-year-old gay man, coexisting with another person in a small space and failing to maintain equilibrium in the facets of our lives. Previously tackling the subject of figures within space, this piece went further to depict the realities of a room in disarray. In my work, the tragic figures and symbolic elements in Delacroix’s piece are replaced with mundane figures surrounded by cluttered chaos in the room.

Like “The Death of Sardanapalus,” the central figure of the work sits atop the red bed, while the spillage of yesterday's schoolwork, discarded clothing, and endless pairs of shoes scatter across the floor and flood the space with a variety of color and visual noise. I intentionally created a sense of claustrophobia within the work to reference the original piece, but also to mirror the mundane tragedy of a cluttered room and how it reflects the internal mind of the figures. The figures lay dormant among the wreckage, becoming part of the mess, while the figure on the bed, illuminated by a light source, rests his head on his hand.
floppy boys & Into and Out Of

Through experimenting with figuration in my drawings and paintings for several months, I came to realize that I needed to decide how I wanted to develop the figure in my work, to control and manipulate the body in ways that would link my research on queer theory and the history of figurative painting.

In Jose Esteban Munoz’s “Cruising Utopia,” Munoz discussed the idea of “futurity” through breaking down the term “queer.” Throughout the years, “queer” has been used as a way to describe something “odd” or “strange,” then transformed into a derogatory word to shame.
someone who engages in homosexual activity\textsuperscript{10}, and more recently has become a term of empowerment that encapsulates the endless spectrum of sexuality and gender. Munoz’s begins this book by stating “Queerness is not yet here. Queerness is an ideality… Queerness is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to feel beyond the quagmire of the present.”\textsuperscript{11} Reading this, allowed me to understand the limitlessness of my content and how that endless opportunity had not yet entered the form of my drawings and paintings. By stating that I was attempting to depict queer subject matter in my work, I also needed to consider queerness, or my experience of it, in both content and form. For this reason, I decided to look at other contemporary figurative artists to dissect how they constructed their figuration.

The challenge to develop my work further, required an active decision to reanalyze my previous teachings of anatomy, structure, and proportion. Looking at artists like Lisa Yuskavage, Peter Saul, and Nicole Eisenman, I was inspired to experiment with exaggeration and elongation of the form. This pulling and stretching required a more gestural movement and a rhythm to the line, unlike the stoic and still figures in my past work.

In Lisa Yuskavage’s work, she uses exaggeration to flirt with the viewer. The bodies she paints are full and curved in impossible ways, making the figures resemble a tactile response rather than perfect anatomical correctness. Blurring the lines between fantasy and reality, Yuskavage corrects the limitation of the body to elicit a response from the viewer. In the work of Peter Saul, the limitations of the body are stretched to impossible lengths to lead the composition


around from object to object. In his work, grotesque subjects of rape and war are paired with bright colors and fluid lines. His figures, noodle armed, distorted, and impossibly smooth, have a distinct deformed quality that perfectly combine to give a strange sense of discomfort when confronting the work. Nicole Eisenman, queer figurative artist, works with brightly colored, gender nonconforming, dopey eyed figures who slouch in impossible u-shapes across her compositions. The limitlessness of her color, compositions, and stacked figures, perfectly reference and reject the history of painting, adding to the complexities of queer representation in art.

As I researched artists who develop their own handling of figuration, I found I was drawn to the fluidity of line, the teasing of the body, and the use of exaggeration as emphasis through elongation of the limbs. I used these as a way to develop a handling that felt more authentic to my work and that could fuse form and content. The elongation and undulation of the form provided me with a unique opportunity to exaggerate gestures, play with stereotypes, and infuse comedy into my work.

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Figure 27: Red Room #1, 23” x 35”, Acrylic and charcoal on paper, 2019

Figure 28: Red Room Corner, 22” x 30”, Acrylic and charcoal on paper, 2019
I began by contorting figures in corners of rooms and breaking limitations of bodies by using forced perspective to warp limbs. This exercise helped me to merge my love of observation with my love of figurative abstraction. Those two approaches to working enhanced and reinforced my multiple perceptions for how I could record and depict the world of my experiences. As I began to use both observation and imagination to form bodies I was reminded of how gesture and curve could be powerful devices in seduction. I decided to continue this line of thinking and push the fluidity of the bodies, almost making them soft and fluid male bodies. Leading me into this larger painting, *Into and Out of* (Figure 31), where I am further investigating soft and fluid bodies, slippery movement and constricting space. This exploration of how to paint bodies in movement led me into new avenues in my practice.
Figure 29: Floppy Boys Series, 11” x 14”, Screen print, acrylic and oil on panel, 2019
Figure 30: *Into and Out of*, 48" x 48", Acrylic on wood panel, 2019
Collision

As I was driving away from the studio one day, I noticed a clearing of trees that looked onto a soccer field. There seemed to be something strangely seductive about a little peek that was just visible through the trees - the fenced off arena and the field lights illuminating the bodies of the players. I could not shake the idea that I had to reimagine the soccer players’ bodies through paint. The spark that set it all off was the strangeness of these bodies in motion. I considered the possibilities of making the entire painting about colliding soccer players, while making a work that was about far more than just playing soccer.

Figure 31: Left: *Expulsion*, 9” x 12”, Acrylic on wood panel, 2019
I created a fast gestural painting of two soccer players colliding into each other. To my surprise the two figures felt much like the painting *Expulsion of Adam and Eve From Eden* (Figure 32) that it sparked my interest in transforming the image into a large-scale painting. I reintroduced these figures as a single panel 4 ft x 6ft composition with two massive figures colliding in a suggestive way. The rubbing of bodies was created by a shift in momentum, and yet it was heightened by the movement of their shifting soccer shorts. During the process of making this work, it expanded into a two-panel painting containing four figures.
In the above painting, *Collision* (Figure 33), each of these figures represent a formal and conceptual exploration of thought and process. They are built upon the research of figurative abstraction I had been dealing with in my earlier work. In this painting, I was able to exaggerate form, without the limitations of observed accuracy. This new elongation and elasticity of the body allowed me to bring fluidity to the figures and give these colliding bodies a sense of movement through their contorted pose.

Along with the formal change of my figuration in this painting, the bodies were beginning to feel like an honest representation of my lived experiences. Throughout my journey as a figurative painter, I had been focused on attempting to capture my experience of queerness.
Queerness began to take on new meaning after seeing and reading about the works of Nicole Eisenman. Eisenmann uses figuration that defies the limitation of reality, swirling into one another at times and reduced to complete abstraction at another. She states “I reflect a certain desire in my work, I want my work to be authentic and reflective of my body, and what it’s interested in.”

I was fascinated by how her figures were both cartoonish and emotionally resonant, almost as if the bodies she paints are awkward, honest and inclusive.

Figurative abstraction held the essence of what I wanted to achieve in my work and provided an opportunity to shift in new directions. Through this careful union of figurative abstraction and realism, I feel a greater connect between the formal and conceptual aspirations in my practice.

Throughout this exploration of subject matter, I had uncovered truths from my past and unpacked them within the work. I am of Argentine descent and have a huge cultural kinship to the game of soccer. Soccer has been a definable standard of male excellency within my family and culture. I grew up watching my family scream and cry over a match, while obsessively following the lives of each player. The extreme display of the audience’s emotions rising with the performative display of male virility and stamina. As a young gay boy, I watched these games through a much different lens than my family had. I watched sweat glistening male bodies glide across perfect green grass, running into each other with force; fighting to dominate one another. The spectacle of soccer reminds me of the spectacle of a church. Adoration of a young

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male body, a congregation of devotees, a narthex defined by chain link fence, and a sublime
sense of omniscient light.

Crushers, Pluckers, and Fuckers

Throughout the making of each piece, I would single out new elements to further inspect. Each new piece began as a drawing of a single element like the shoe, chain link fence, and daisy. These elements were the symbols that were undervalued in the bigger work and needed to be analyzed as the central subject of a new composition.

This pushing of symbols has evolved into a new way to go about making and conceiving my work. By placing importance on each element in my compositions I am not centering everything on the figurative aspects. In this new world I am creating, I can decide how a cleat moves through space or how a daisy reacts to touch. For this reason, world building has become important to me and my process.

Figure 34: Crusher, 30” x 22”, charcoal on paper, 2020
Figure 35: *Plucker*, 30” x 22”, charcoal on paper, 2020

Figure 36: *Leapers*, 42” x 30”, charcoal on paper, 2020
In the *Crusher, Pluckers and Fuckers* series, the mixing and reconfiguration of symbols has led to loosely defined and ambiguous story telling. Although confusing at times, a series of tangential narratives thread through the body of work. A daisy under a shoe, has now become a strange relationship between the dominating male body and a fragile flower. The contrast of the two elements runs through the work in different scenarios and moments in time. As I am allowing myself to wander through compositions that build from one piece to the next, a visual story strings together through the process. Although these stories are not premeditated, I purposefully manipulate the gesture, pose and arrangement to create discord and resolution within the larger body of work.

In *Plucked* (Figure 36), I began by working through what the faces of these characters might start to look like as they ran down the field, huffing and puffing as they tried to catch their breath. In a way this piece evolved to be a continuous narrative about the possibilities of the daisy and the man and what their relationship was. As you read the work from left to right, the figure is repeated with slight differences. The plucked daisy that was once being held has now been released. I would revisit this relationship throughout the rest of my graduate body of work.
For example, in *Crier* (Figure 37), the man lays horizontal to the picture plane with his hand covering his face. The overall stiffness of the body is contrasted by his serpentine cleats that seem to be falling apart like wisps of smoke. The humiliation of losing the match is met with his dramatic sobbing as he gets pelted with rain and fails to hide a wobbly erection. The story gets foggy as we begin to piece together this Christ-like body, the boner, and his obviously failed performance on the field. There was a moment in constructing this work that I began to laugh at the piece, and in that laugh, I found a profound sense of importance in my practice. Humor,
absurdity, and humility was a new piece to the equation and in making those decisions I felt a wave of authority over the images I was making.

The animation of the boner (Figure 38) comes from the abbreviated movements of 1940’s animation, showing movement through repetition. I often think about the clarity of those animated sketches when constructing these works because of their perfectly effortless and effective few lines that define movement in a piece. These repeated lines remind me of the pentimenti, or the history of how the drawings shift and change through the process of adjusting the gesture. Through each adjusted form, the illusion of movement was created and insinuated the path that comes before and after. I found this reference to early animation was meaningful as it began this lineage of categorizing these queer moments in art history as I recognize them, especially in the flamboyant and theatrical animations of Fantasia.

In my piece, the crier’s erection is wobbly and contradicts his tragic crying as he is pelted with rain on the soccer field. The reference to animation also allowed for nuanced comedy to subtly enter the work, introducing a tragicomic balance. Formally, I found that the vertical elements of this work, like his serpentine cleats, his erection, and his arms extended over his face, worked to contrast the overwhelming horizontal of his body and the paper it is drawn on.
From the series *Crushers, Pluckers, and Fuckers*, the next step was to discover what happened beyond the soccer field. The specificity of the subject felt like a limitation that I needed to break to investigate further themes. What would happen beyond the chain link fence?

At this time, I was experiencing the beginning effects of quarantine. I was back at my parent’s home constantly staring at my undergraduate body of work hanging in every room of the house, like in *just don’t get it in my eye* (Figure 39).
These massive paintings of male bodies enveloped by subtropical foliage were a constant reminder of where my work started. Although visually different, my ideas and motivation to make work has always remained consistent. I felt a strong urge to confront these pieces with my new knowledge. Although I still loved and respected these works as they paved the path for me to explore my identity in art, I also recognized that my perspective had shifted. I was no longer repressed, ashamed, and tormented by what makes me different, but instead was able to manipulate those elements in my new work.

Throughout this journey of healing from past wounds and facing new obstacles, I have found that my work relies on the past but utilizes it in ways that are relevant to the present. For example, in Crier (Figure 37), I find parallels in subject to my earlier works like It's always sunny down here (see Figure 4). They are essentially the same men, reinvented, and placed in a new environment. The attitude, however, has shifted from pain to one of resolve. Throughout my
journey coming out and coming to terms with my identity in all it’s complicated facets, I have shed the pain that had once plagued me and controlled the content of my work, and now have renewed my ownership of those experiences of trauma, pain, and guilt.

In the piece titled *Sore Loser* (Figure 40), I merged the old and the new in an attempt to reconcile the similarities and differences of my past and present work. It was a piece made to be in direct conversation with my undergraduate body of work. Elements such as the male body, lush colorful landscape, and purposeful covering of the face were reanalyzed with my current understanding of purposeful altering of figuration, theatricality, and humor. It was made with pastel, colored pencil and oil pastel on black arches paper. The man runs off to a clearing in the forest to seek a moment of refuge and is struck by a surprise in the distance. His initial disappointment is interrupted by an accidental encounter. His sweeping hand wipes a tear from his eye as he shifts his focus from disappointment to curiosity.
This motion to move away from the specificity of “soccer” as a subject, also allowed me to extend my limits of the worlds these figures occupy. They no longer needed to be contained by a fenced-off arena, but now, they could be in deep woods, their backyard, or in their bed.

As I discover the worlds I am creating, I think about the multifaceted nature of moving through space. As a queer person, I have found that performance is part of life. Performance can
be protection, defense, and spectacle. This understanding has led me to decide the difference between private and public space and how the figures in my work react to both. In public spaces, like a soccer field lit by an exposing light, the perimeter is defined by the chain link fence, spectators watch from the sidelines and the performance plays out on the stage like a theatrical performance of domination. A public space makes the figure conform to the space and assimilate. In private spaces, like a backyard, bedroom, or bathroom, the space allows for feelings of vulnerability and gestures of softness along with explorations of love and tenderness.
A Bonfire in My Backyard

In the piece titled, “A Bonfire in My Backyard,” (Figure 41) I am exploring what happens after the soccer game in a celebratory dance around a fire. This is a large-scale ink and charcoal drawing. When I began this drawing, I had been feeling the effects of six months of total isolation. In a way, this work acts as a talisman of what I yearn for most: a moment of uncontrollable laughter and closeness with friends. The humor and lightheartedness of their expressions is balanced by the dark shadows mirroring their dance around the fire.
The specificity of the figures’ faces is important as it shifts in this piece and the works that follow. The faces of these figures are modeled from the essence of my boyfriend, Erickson. He is the person I see most often daily and someone with whom I have experienced personal growth, confidence, and life’s events. I found that during quarantine, I would subconsciously make drawings in reference to his image. In ways, these pieces are love letters to him, and in other ways these pieces are a form of love letters to myself. As I grow in confidence as a human, artist, and partner, these pieces mirror my progress.

Figure 42: Crop of A Bonfire in My Backyard

The importance of this specific piece is that I no longer cover their faces, instead, I allow them to exist in an unashamed state of ecstatic happiness. The middle figure (Figure 41) taunts the other two men with his wagging finger while the two peripheral bodies react in a chorus of
laughter. The bodies sway in and out of one another and are conscious of their proximity. Their bodies flamboyant and serpentine, mimic the dance of the implied fire before them. Their bodies mirror the insinuation of fire in the title, creating the question: are the bodies the bonfire themselves? The symbol of fire, light, and illumination began to lead the next works. I began to investigate light formally, while also using it as a conceptual tool as a way of depicting the figures’ internal bodily desire.

As If You Are Alone

In the piece, “As If You Are Alone,” (Figure 43) I wanted to explore the moment between fear and laughter. The spark of excitement for the smiling men in “A Bonfire In My Backyard” (Figure 42) fueled my exploration of absurdly happy facial expressions and dark looming shadows in the background. While listening to a podcast with guest Wolfgang Tillmans, a celebrated photographer who makes work about his experiences as a gay man, he spoke about the shared trauma of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. In his interview he said “This romance can kill you, [but] people are dancing, there is joy. I cannot think of happiness without tragedy.”14 This contrast of tragedy and happiness reminded me of the conflicting narratives in my past work “Crier.”

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14 Tovey, Russell, and Tillmans, Wolfgang. Talk Art Podcast. April 30, 2020.
The looming shadow hovers over the figure, while a precariously balanced candle melts in his hand. The curving of fingers is shared between the physical body and shadow, joyfully stretching their hands in both a tense and fluid gesture. The ambiguity of narrative and opportunity to explore space beyond the edges of the picture plane, is what led this drawing to grow into a multiple panel work (Figure 44) that is still in the process of revealing itself.

The curation of objects, surfaces, and decoration is similar to how I set up my space at home. Through the process of thrifting for antiques, finding forgotten furniture, and collecting beautiful objects, my home is the vessel that holds the relics of forgotten pasts. The objects that have once been forgotten, now speak to one another with thrilling stories of their objecthood.
Although largely ornamental in nature, these collected objects represent the beauty and femininity that I had rejected in my formative years.

Figure 44: As if you are alone (unfinished), 22” x 30”, Charcoal and pastel on toned paper, 2020
Religion, Mannerism, and Sobremesa

Paying homage to the recurring presence of religion throughout my life, I approach my work stylistically in a manner reminiscent of classical altar painting depicting scenes of young male bodies, worshipped for their beauty and tragic stories. As a student of art history, I have always been fascinated by the stories, drama, and spectacle that revolved around the religious works of the Early Renaissance, Baroque and Mannerist period.

Although visually seductive, the subject of religion is one met with discord in my life. As a queer Latino, I have never felt the community, love, and care that religion promises its congregation, and in turn have found very little interest in organized religion as an essential part of my daily life. However, my work has always dealt with the sacred, subverting religious iconography, stories, and imagery. Understanding this has led to major breakthroughs in how I construct the world I am building, as the lore and myth of religious storytelling is what I still hold onto. This is important as I see my work not being just genre scenes of gay domestic life, but an idealized world that unfolds as each new piece is created. Each piece begins to add to the universe and the story.
Figure 45: Figure Jacopo da Pontormo, The Deposition from the Cross, 123” x 75”, 1528, Oil on wood panel Artstor, Accessed on January 16, 2021, https://library.artstor.org/asset/AHSC_ORPHANS_1071313527.
Inspired by Mannerist paintings like Jacopo da Pontormo’s *The Deposition from the Cross* (Figure 45), I decided to similarly stack perspective and figuration in *Sobremesa* (Figure 46).

As I was drawing, I had an “Art of The Ages”\(^{15}\) art history book, opened on my dining room table flipped to the section about mannerism. As an avid art history student, Mannerism stuck out to me as being a queer time in the history of visual imagery. Whenever talked about, Mannerism was described as gaudy, overly theatrical, dramatic or grotesquely exaggerated.\(^{16}\) Although relatively negative, I quite liked all those attributes, and recognized all those things in my work. Pinpointing this felt like a true full-circle moment as I hadn’t yet understood the power of attributing moments in history as moments I deemed “queer.”

This idea of queer categorization is one that started to lead my compositional and referential choices. I began to understand these references and how they relate to one another, like my earlier call to 1940’s animation. As I progressed throughout my graduate body of work, I would continue to add moments in history and how they could lead my formal decisions. This spark led me to make *Sobremesa* (Figure 46), a fully dramatic and elongated composition of theatrical allegorical characters interacting around a dining room table.

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“Sobremesa”\textsuperscript{17} is a term my mom used when we would gather around the table after a meal to enjoy each other's company and conversation. This was the moment when truths would be revealed, laughter would be had, and controversy would ensue. Literally meaning “on the table”, \textit{Sobremesa} (Figure 46) was created out of the want to investigate the body in all of its poses and gestures, almost creating allegorical personifications for each of the figures.

\textsuperscript{17} Sobremesa is the Spanish tradition of relaxing at the table after a heavy meal. It begins after dessert is served, and typically lasts between half an hour and an hour.
In a way this work became an experiment in what gestures, poses, and expressions looked like in this world, almost acting as an extended character study. This idea of commingling around a table and fighting, laughing, arguing, and creating was what led each reactionary decision in the composition. Starting with the figures on the right corner, who engage in a close and intimate moment of agreement, to the figure opposite in the top left who is reacting in shock, to the man disengaged in the foreground focused on this obsessive drawing of the daisy. It also allowed me to explore the question: what is inside of their house? And what items do they collect on their table? So, I then started to set the scene, adding a dessert fork, plates, a plucked daisy, and a candlestick that seems to be melting as the chaos ensues around the table.

This symbol development grew out of my earlier body of work “Crusher, Pluckers, and Fuckers,” now appropriating those symbols like the daisy, within the domestic space. Now plucked and resting limply on the table, the daisy engages with the figure in the foreground as he obsessively draws the flower while the heated conversation happens around him. The relationship between man and daisy is one I would further consider and develop in my body of work.
Resting Window

Figure 47: Resting Window, 45” x 30”, Charcoal on paper, 2020

In Resting Window (Figure 47) I wanted to make a work that wasn't figurative but left the evidence of the body within the space. I was curious to explore what the window of this house looked like. Like in Sobremesa (see Figure 46) the items that rest upon the windowsill are the same items I have built this world around. The plucked daisy from the soccer game, the dessert fork from Sobremesa, and the little chain-link fence drawing taped to the windowpane. These items begin to be relics of the stories' past, as if fragmented memories that lay around this man’s room.
While making this work, I had built the architecture of the space to further investigate what the house looked like. The arched window I had developed in *Resting Window* (Figure 47) seemed to be plucked out of the composition of Pieter Bruegel *Two-chained monkeys* (Figure 48) painting from 1562. I found this painting in the midst of creating this drawing and noticed the striking similarities between the works. Bruegel’s painting was peculiar in its subject matter and
in its strange sense of perspective and foreshortening, leading me to appropriate its elements and understand it in this world I was creating.

As an homage to the piece, I included the subtle detail of the chain links still attached to the windowsill, only now they hang loosely off the ledge as if the monkeys have escaped. I find there is a sense of power in relating this work to Bruegel’s, in that the symbolism of those monkeys chained is a dominance over something “exotic,” “strange,” or “other,” in an act of wanting to suppress and keep that locked away. Now broken, the symbolism of the chain link adds to the history and the aura of the mystery of the space.

Even more mysterious is the overexposed window that leads outside of the domestic space. I see this mystery as an opportunity to explore in future works because it reopens the closed interior space to explore tangential narratives that happen simultaneous to the main narrative. Although these new routes are open to explore, I focused my next piece on understanding what is lying in front of the window in his bedroom.
In this work, *Lying Figure* (Figure 49), I return to my previous subject matter of the bed and figure. This subject is one that has constantly been reimagined in my practice, beginning as the restful bodies within *Subtropical Fever* (see Figure 3), then with *Wrapped in You, Tangled in*...
Yours (Figure 9) in its violent and heated dynamism, in *Lucero in the Red Tide* (Figure 24) when the bed becomes the dominant subject, and now in this world as a single bed that holds a large body. Inspired by the foreshortening in Mantegna’s *Lamentation of Christ* (Figure 50), I decided to explore the possibilities of this character now resting on a bed in his room. His body, long and lean, is accented by a river of highlight that leads us up the figure’s legs, through his torso, and up to his close-eyed grin.

![Figure 50: Andrea Mantegna, *Lamentation of Christ*, 1480, tempera on Canvas, 27”x 32” Artstor, Accessed on March 14, 2021, https://library.artstor.org/asset/LESSING_ART_1039490503.](Image)
Adding to the lineage of a Lamentation allows me to add to the playful contradictions that seems to derail each drawing or painting. Similar to *Crier* (Figure 37) where I use the long composition to draw comparisons to *The Body of The Dead Christ* by Hans Holbein, this piece uses a similar method to play with the subversion of religious iconography. In a way, the entire body of work can be read as a legend or myth with each piece acting as a metaphor, similar to the storytelling of religious altar painting. Only in mine, the story is not clear, the eroticism of the seductive body mixes with the reverence of the pose, creating a clashing and unclear narrative.

Figure 51: Crop of foot, Lying figure
In this work I also play with this idea of pentimenti, or the presence or emergence of earlier images, forms, or strokes that have been changed and painted over, to create this movement of the foot. The ghosted foot becomes a memory (Figure 51), as if the body is anxiously waving his feet in his seemingly peaceful rest.
CONCLUSION

My graduate research has been a re-energized exploration of big concepts that circled my undergraduate work. Shame, desire, and the male body. These themes have never left but instead evolved to speak to a greater understanding of myself through research and studio practice. This body of work will not end at the conclusion of my graduate program, but rather, will continue to evolve and reflect my life and the intersectionality of my identity.

In my past body of work, Subtropical Fever, hidden figures enveloped by stifling landscapes cover their face in an act of deflection, protection, and rejection. In Wrapped in you, tangled in yours, the formation of the piece held the shame. Through scrubbing, ripping, and subtracting information, shame was evident in a light veil of the process, as if I had censored myself throughout the creation of the piece. In A Bonfire in my Backyard, the role of shame has shifted and is now in the faces of the figures, the gesture of their floppy hands and their undulating soft bodies.

As Lisa Yuskavage says, “I had decided to turn all that which I felt ashamed of as a weapon, I sort of weaponized shame.” This allowed me to understand the difference between abandoning my shame versus manipulating shame to my advantage. In my most recent body of work “Flirting with a Shadow,” I shifted the use of shame from pity to accent mark. This decisive reorientation allowed me to, as Yuskavage states, “weaponize shame.” She states that the bodies she paints “simultaneously want to be looked at and not looked at,” as if the figures themselves have the authority to decide viewership.

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18 Tovey, Russell, and Yuskavage, Lisa. Talk Art Podcast. April 30, 2020.
Tackling the subject of shame in my work, I have taken cues from Yuskavage by striking a balance between humility, humor, and authority. In my thesis body of work, I have reconsidered the role of shame in my work, turning the gaze from inward to outward. The role shifts so that the figures, now unapologetic, don’t ask for forgiveness, but rather present themselves with power and authority.

Future

With each piece, a new part of the story reveals itself. I plan to take this chronological evolution further after my graduate program and into my career as an artist. Aware of the weight of my subject matter, I plan to continue to make work that clearly reflect the experiences I have had as a queer person, the feeling of otherness, and the way I have learned to navigate through life. Aware of the contemporary queer artists who are working in painting and drawing, I plan to work alongside them to bring more varying understandings of what a queer experience can look like. I believe it is something to be celebrated and is part of the expanding understanding of what a human experience can look like.
REFERENCES


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