Apparitions and Absences

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MFA Thesis Supporting Document

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The main cornerstone of research within my practice as an artist is the personal narrative. I tend to reflect on those moments from my past that shaped my identity. I also look at the stories of others with similar experiences as mine to try and better understand my own experiences. I find that this exchange is an effective means of communication with those who have a shared past. I feel that as we learn more about each other’s stories, we uncover more about ourselves. This exchange of stories influences my material choices and process experimentation. And how I feel that my personal narratives come alive. My deeply personal experiences become visible expressions that make room for the viewer to see themselves in the work and reflect on their own experiences.

During this work I started by looking at loss and mourning within my experience as a queer person and things I have lost because my identity is at odds with the community I grew up in. I am also looking at these experiences in conjunction with how the trauma of past experiences can manifest in a way comparable to ghostly hauntings. Modern Psychology teaches that we mourn not only those we care deeply about, but also “the loss of some abstraction which has the place as one, such as a Fatherland, liberty, an idea.”¹ By the time I was in high school, I had already started to realize I was not straight; I also knew that this was at odds with the Mormon religion and surrounding culture of South-eastern Idaho. I lived in a town of less than five hundred people and our ward (congregation) had over eight hundred members (many from the farms outside of the incorporated city limits). During this era, the rising AIDS epidemic was viewed as God’s will against homosexuality.

I had to keep parts of myself secret – for my own safety and survival. My stepfather was a very abusive man and these aspects of my identity would not be tolerated in our home. To make matters worse, I had to hide this even from my father and stepmother whom I rarely saw. It was
imperative to my survival to learn to lie. To make it easier, I called it “acting”, but the hard reality was that I was lying to everyone around me, including myself sometimes. It was as if I had assumed a double life - the real me who stayed locked inside only to come out in rare moments of solitude, and the “good” child, beloved by the community.

The cost of this double life was a sense of loss of the life I could have lived if I did not have to hide who I was. Many hopes and dreams eventually slowly died, leaving behind the haunted memories of who I could have been and who I wanted to be rather than who my parents wanted me to be. Due to the stresses of acting, I participated in many destructive behaviors in my youth. My life reflected the stereotype of teenage self-infliction of small town living with sex, drugs, and rock n roll. Looking back, it's an absolute miracle that I am still alive and HIV Free. Many people from my past cannot say the same. And I am haunted by the memories of loved ones lost too early in life.

There have been countless examples of scholars writing about the phenomenon of ghostly apparitions and other haunting experiences as metaphor within the queer experience. One such example can be found in the writings of Jose Muñoz who explains that queerness haunts straight society as an aberration. We exist as an uncomfortable reminder that there are other ways of being that differ from their imagined state of holy perfection² This is one way of looking at ghosts within my work, that queerness is a specter that haunts the straight world by being in opposition to it yet being in the middle of it. Though more directly, the trauma caused by these two opposing constructs (straight and queer) forced to coexist creates lingering emotional responses that act like ghosts deep inside us. One of the biggest examples is reflected in my processing of my queerness against the expectations of my birth culture.

The expectation was to be a straight, monogamous, Mormon, Republican, father, and husband, to go on a mission at nineteen years of age, then successfully to come home, get
married, have kids, and move the cycle forward. These expectations are hard to leave behind, especially when everyone I used to know is still following through with them. This is a large part of the ghosts of my past even though I quit believing and practicing about thirty years ago, due in part to my separation from that community programming. After the death of my parents, my ties to the culture severed completely. I have little connection to my siblings and former classmates who still practice. Yet, these ghosts bring a bit of shame that pops up occasionally, and unfortunately, probably will still be true 30 years from now.

At the same time, there was much of my youth that only existed internally. I had no one to talk to about crushes or many of my hopes and dreams. I had no outlet for my fears or moments of sadness related to my newly growing identity being at odds with the community I was growing up inside. Many aspects of my identity had to be kept internal out of fear of being discovered. This invisible me is another ghost that I believe is the absence of reality versus performance, and the ravage of that dissonance remains alive in my soul.

This exploration of the duality of my life has led me to learn about storytelling. Storytelling is a key tool that I have been employing in my work as sharing stories is part of the human experience. When I find stories from others that are like mine it helps me feel connected to them, aiding me to feel less isolated. This isolation is tied to my own struggles growing up of not fitting in because of my differences. As a result, one of the biggest motivators in my own work as an artist is to help others see themselves in my work and connect with it. I know not everyone will, but for those who do I hope that the connections help them feel less alone.

Trying to understand the role queer history has within my work I decided to ask if queer history is so important to the art world as a whole and if so how or why. I think this question is also important in understanding its place within both my work and my research. First and foremost, as a queer artist, it is important that I understand the place my work, and the work of
other queer artists has in the canon of art history. As underrepresented minorities, our work has historically been overlooked, diminished, or even rejected simply for not fitting into the prescribed box that art institutions claim art must fit within³ Few artists can overcome this hurdle and claim success and of those who do, many get 'straight washed' by history⁴. And while some institutions are starting to show support during pride month or for national coming out day, the rest of the year there is little traction⁵. Because of this, I find it's even more important to study the artists within this movement no matter the medium they work in or the content they push forward. Our queerness links us despite our differences.

Additionally, since queer art is still oscillating between erasure and tokenism, the most important thing I can do is add my voice to the story - and my work does just that. The need to share queer narratives no matter how distinct and different they may be is how we will have more strength as an art movement. It is from this strength of uniqueness that I draw upon as I create my art. My work is, in part, a form of protest against the toxic social norms I grew up in. I work with found and manipulated objects tied to my past experiences as a way to highlight the differences between who I was and who I became. I use materials that are tied to my heritage, which is rooted in homophobia and hate, because they are a reminder of what I have overcome. These are the narratives that I feel are important to add to the collective strength of this movement of queer art.

**Stolen Glances:**

One of my earliest memories when coming to terms with my sexuality is cruising, which is a common experience among gay men and other queer male presenting individuals in America during the 20th century. Much has been written on the subject looking at the practice⁶ and the Locations⁷ and even personal expression within⁸. From my experience it is about admiring the male form all the while trying to avoid notice except within specific settings. This practice of
objectification of the male form seems like an inversion of the male gaze. Much in the way Manuel Betancourt puts it “the peculiar paradox for gay men is the way we both struggle against definitions of maleness which oppress us and incorporate those definitions which we carry with us as permanently renewable sources of excitement”.

Stolen Glances started off as a series of figure drawings based on my memories of cruising, initially created from images I gathered of men in various stages of undress, in differing poses reminiscent of my experiences in gym locker rooms, bathrooms, and other cruising locations. The act of collecting these forms activated parts of my mind where these ghosts like to manifest in my psyche. This process became very sensual and somehow cathartic, as I had space to contemplate these ghosts and these experiences. At times these forms even become less about the people and become more like landscapes of distant places. To quote Manuel Betancourt from his book *The Male Gazed*,

> There is nothing sexier than a pair of white briefs... Briefs have that perfect high-to-bulge ratio. Boxers hide and thongs flaunt, but briefs titillate by the very shape they contour and convey. Furry thighs and fuzzy navels create a landscape worth exploring, rolling hills that entice those eager to go sightseeing down below. As utilitarian as they may be, briefs have a way of coyly suggesting that which garments like jockstraps handsomely outline*. 

It was from this line of thinking that I started considering these images. I took these images, cropped them to highlight different aspects and then transferred them to plexiglass panels.

I began working with the brightly colored panels because they were vibrant substrates to print the images on. The bright colored plastic forms speak to the commodification of the human form that is also inherent in cruising culture. They also connect with the plasticine fetish gear that has been part of my cruising uniform as it has been for others. Another important aspect of the colorful plastic substrates is it connects to other commercially produced items found in other parts of this exhibition like the dildoes and butplugs in the still-lifes.
I started with a process using acetone to transfer the printed images onto paper. This choice started as a way to alter and diminish the initial figures much the same way time and memory does, it is also tied into the content of cruising culture due to the rubbing process being reminiscent of the sex act of frottage as explained by Brian Blanchfield\textsuperscript{10} and this connection to sex felt more relevant and tied to the content and to my own experiences than any process I explored before. It is also inspired by the artist John Paul Morabito whose frottage weavings connect the process of rubbing to narratives about sex\textsuperscript{11}.

**Ghosts of Bareback Porn:**

Many of the largest ghosts I feel from my queer community exposure are due to the AIDS epidemic and the absence of countless lives cut too short. The impacts caused by the stigma surrounding the disease were exacerbated due to misinformation and government inaction during the early days of the pandemic. The media drowned us with haunting images of those who were sick and dying and to some degree they continue to do so. Even though these sit deep inside my soul, the strangest of all was shown more recently to me. Most of the men I admired in the films that I enjoyed in my youth have all passed away from AIDS\textsuperscript{12}. These videos now act as ghostly reminders of not only who they were but who I fantasized I might be. Delving back into these films I created screenshots of compelling images, similarly to Erin Riley’s Porn Grid weavings, except, I printed them out and framed them like snapshots, giving these ghosts a place of honor reminiscent of still lives based around the tradition of Vanitas and Memento Mori. Traditionally these paintings discussed the ideas of the impermanence of life juxtaposed against the idea of a life of excess and the moral debates surrounding these ideas so I can think of no better honor than this\textsuperscript{13}. To push this further I created a large Memento Mori with a collection of found objects which tie to distinct aspects of my experiences from the past.
Satelliting off of this center work, are a handful of smaller still lifes in which I created my own updated symbolic codes based on traditionally used codes by the Dutch Masters in their paintings. For example, phallic shaped sex toys are used in place of skulls or bones for the connection to the human body, or absence thereof. DVDs and Zines replace scripture or books as they are a more contemporary means of disseminating information. Of course, there are many other comparative translations of these codes, but they all work in the same way as the other substitutions.

Draping the fabrics establishes a way of obscuring the objects but also drawing attention to them. This creates a back-and-forth for the viewer intended to open a dialogue between the past lives of the objects and the past lives of the individuals in the images. This dialogue is based on the absence of people and how that absence could be felt and how this can conjure different images in the viewer's mind. I chose very sheer fabric and added pleated ruffling to each piece in reference to the sacred underwear worn by members of the Mormon church called garments by them. This acts as a way to connect the trauma of my past, filtering my memories and experiences, yet the coverings also remind me of shrouds for the dead in the way they drape across and cling to the objects, and in the way they obscure part of what’s underneath.

These found-object still-lives connect to more historic works by Robbert Rauschenberg and Marcel Duchamp. Duchamp famously presented the concept of the readymade, or found objects, which possess a level of aesthetics that are considered art objects on their own. In this way I am considering the shape, color and form of the objects I am working with in these still lives. Additionally, Rauschenberg sometimes worked with found object assemblages which became known for walking around his neighborhood looking for discarded objects on the street along with objects found at second hand stores. He would then take them back to his studio to see how he could connect them together, which resulted in these works (that he called
‘combines’) having a specific meaning, and sometimes it was just about the absurdity of the combinations. His methodology of locating\(^1\) objects is different from my own in this case, as I brought in mostly personal objects to my work, but his concept of looking at found objects as components for art making is one that I am employing in these works\(^1\).

I am, however, looking at more contemporary artists who also draw from these historical figures. Some of these artists are Jonathan Virginia Green and Tom Hill, who use found objects that have a relationship to the body similar to the way I use sex toys in my work. Dave Tavacol and Dana Buzzee, who work with strapping materials such as jockstrap bands and harnesses in a more formal way that I have adopted into my practice. And Micheal Espinoza who mixes found objects with hand crafted works talking about our queer ancestors and our collective history, including reference to the hanky code that evolved during the 1960s\(^2\). Each of these artists are working with found objects specifically from within the realm of queer fetish and manipulating them for their own narratives.

**I think we’re alone now:**

Named after a melancholic song from my youth, about hormonal indiscretions, I Think We’re Alone Now started by reading a story about a man taking his lover skinny dipping in the woods and dealing with his personal fear of being caught doing something considered deviant by some yet normal by others\(^1\). This story reminded me of some similar experiences I had in my youth. These memories generate images that I can task myself to attempt to bring to life in hopes that the physical manifestation will help viewers to connect their own stories and find their own narrative or memory. This work is based directly on my own experiences of fear and heartache along with falling in love with the unobtainable. The base structure is a steel armature resembling the dilapidated fence near the swimming hole my friends used to frequent back in high school. It is also meant to represent the fence that Mathew Shephard was found on in 1998.
when he was beaten and left for dead. This incident happened a year after I graduated High School just in the next state over from where I grew up.

The armature is draped with discarded clothing and condoms suggesting the activities that might have recently transpired in the location. Like a moment frozen in time, it is a memory made physical and manifests the ghost of my past self. But looking back I see both the joyful memories countered by the fear of what could have happened. Like Ghost of Bareback Porn, this work is also based on the idea of Memento Mori and its tie to still life traditions talking about the absence of people left behind as we move forward. This is also reminiscent of the installations of Jim Hodges to a certain point where he makes spiderwebs out of silver chains and drapes them over discarded clothing. His work speaks to the absence left behind from friends who have died of AIDS where the signifiers of discarded clothing represent absent people is used here. While both people indicated in my work are still alive, their relationship with each other is long over and essentially dead. This frozen memory acts like the ghost of their past together for good or for ill.

**Missing Articles:**

Continuing the conversation of clothing representing missing people is my series Missing Articles. Since these missing people are so long gone, I have nothing left of them. With a few exceptions, I made articles of clothing based on those memories. Sometimes I recreated an actual item they would have worn, sometimes I fabricated something unique based on their personality which I would think they would have worn given the opportunity. There is a lot of interplay of materiality based on expectations of gender, some supporting and some subverting these expectations. This is due in part to reference the uniqueness of these people from my past, but also because part of what drives me to think about them is watching the continuing atrocities committed against those who do not fit into societal norms. Every time a
gender-non-conforming individual is murdered or driven to suicide their absence is felt, and their uniqueness is taken from the world. Each item has been stretched on a mannequin form and starched to hold its shape off the form. Placing them around the space invites the viewer to contemplate the lives that are only present through their clothing. While these lives are based on people from my past, I hope that they also conjure the memories of people from the viewer’s life whether past or still present.

The themes in my work are driven from my past experiences as a queer individual trying to navigate my existence within the society that I live in. This personal narrative reflects those moments from my past that shaped my identity. The work is also looking at the stories of others with similar experiences as mine as a way to try and better understand my own experiences. My material experimentation has added nuance to the work and layers to the narrative. Seeing how these work together or against each other inspires me to push further into the work. It showcases the trauma I am still trying to heal from and perhaps yet may never do so. For many people like me, this trauma manifests like ghosts that haunt us both in our waking lives and in our dreams. The material choices are sometimes tied to memory or sometimes tied to fantasy, yet always tied to my relationship with the story I am trying to convey. Sharing stories is what brings us together and helps us build communities so while I know that these stories are my own, I know that sharing them helps others to relate and process their own experiences.

I believe queer artists have a responsibility to share our stories and our experiences in order to advance the conversation; so here I share my stories, my experiences, my ghosts, in hopes of inspiring others to do the same.
Endnotes:

1. José Muñoz, *Cruising utopia*. Pg 33
2. José Muñoz, *Cruising utopia*. Pg 46
3. Evert van Straaten and Anton Anthoissen, *Queer!?*. Pgs 9-11
4. David Wojnarowicz, *Queer*. Pg 77
5. Matt Smith, “Making things perfectly queer”. Pg 2
6. Alex Espinoza, *Cruising*. Pgs 32-33
7. Ibid
8. José Muñoz, *Cruising utopia*. Pg 1
12. Laura Westingard, *Gothic queer culture*. Pgs 54-55
18. Claud Summers, *Queer encyclopedia*. Pg 270
19. Andy Campbell, *Bound together*. Pg 111
20. Grant Sutton, “Blood Actually” in *It came from the closet* edited by Joe Vallese. Pg 157
John Bybee, *Stolen Glances*, screen print and acrylic paint on plexiglass, 2024 8"x8" (each panel, total of 32 panels).
John Bybee, *Ghosts of Bareback Porn*, 2024, assemblage of found objects, installation size variable.
John Bybee, *Abandoned*, 2024, assemblage of found objects, installation size varies.
John Bybee, *I Think We’re Alone Now*, 2023, mixed media sculpture, installation varies.
Photo of Mormon Garments held in the Tom Trusky Achieve in the Albertsons Library special collections, Boise State University Campus, Boise Idaho. Photo by John Bybee, 2023.
Jonathan Virginia Green *Leather painting (suck my STP)*, 2021 acrylic on canvas, gromets, stand to pee prosthetic, furniture tacks, 16”x20”
Tom Hill, Winner's Cup, 2023, Paint, bristle brush attachment, athletic cup, doggie chew toy, parachute cord on wood panel. 8"x10"x5.5"
David Tavacol, *Supported*. 2023 Cowhide, drain, jockstrap, birch and other media 14”x 4”x3”
Micheal Espinoza, *Daddys Boy*, 2022, Cotton Embroidery, textiles and found objects. 8”x10”
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Muñoz, José E. *Cruising utopia: The Then and there of queer futurity*. NYU Press. 2019


