

toxic
masculinity
will
kill
us
all

Blousy Irreverence

Matt welcomed Jared to the studio one recent afternoon, and the following exchange of words occurred over e-mail.

Jared Ledesma ... Most of the time your work is quiet and austere. It isn't forthcoming like, say, a representational painting. Keeping this in mind, you expressed to me that you enjoy when your artwork rejects the viewer. Can you talk about this? I'm finding a connection in the work's rejection of the viewer and its discrete reclamation of effeminacy, faggotry, and swish.

Matt Morris ... Near the end of Marguerite Duras' film *Nathalie Granger*, 1972, Lucia Bosè's character—apparently Nathalie's mother, named in the credits as "Isabelle"—puts on her cloak and walks out into the yard behind the house. There's this incredible depth of field where the viewer sees her weave further and further away, beyond trees and brush and thickets. This is the figure I saw in my mind when I read "rejection," said back to me. Rejection qualifies a withdrawal, charges detachment, specifies refusal. I believe I brought up previously the uncertain ways I identify with caryatids and dryads, from art history/architecture and mythology respectively. The former are usually women carved across the fronts of support pillars in temples and other ancient buildings; the latter, tree nymphs, but, I think, related to naiads—water nymphs—appear in various stories turning into trees to avoid being raped by the gods. Into this field of play, I may also invoke the sorceress and the hysteric as they are described by Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément in *The Newly Born Woman*: the two are not identical but at least theoretically compatible. The sorceress they say is antiestablishment and the hysteric is a disorder and performs disorder.

As you saw in the studio, my work is replete with these over-identifications with a capacity of womanhood that I find instructive and reparative. The visual artists Sherrie Levine, Florine Stettheimer; the X-Men comic book character Psylocke; the female protagonists in the 2002 film adaptation of Michael Cunningham's *The Hours*; women who worked as perfumers at a time that the field was almost exclusively controlled by men such as Germaine Cellier and the mysterious Madame Zed who is purported to have created *My Sin* for Jeanne Lanvin—their presence in my research and artwork mark out a crucial moment of turning away from the ways that heterosexist patriarchy encodes pleasure. Femininity is necessarily troubling; its definition/s depends on the ways that gender is conceived and implemented. I see it as political work to locate, describe, and relish in qualities that have historically operated under the sign of the feminine, but to resolve to digress away from the fraught expectations that a masculinist society assigns to these aesthetic turns.

I relate to these figures in a way that follows on Larry Mitchell's 1977 book *The Faggots & Their Friends Between Revolutions*, which has recently enjoyed renewed attention:

The faggots cultivate the most obscure and outrageous parts of the past. They cultivate those past events which the men did not want to happen and which, once they did happen, they wanted to forget. These are the parts the faggots love the best. And they love them so much that they tell the old stories over and over and then they act them out and then, as the ultimate tribute, they allow their lives to re-create those obscure parts of the past. The pain of fallen women and the triumph of defeated women are constantly and lovingly made flesh again. The destruction of witty faggots and the militancy of beaten faggots are constantly and lovingly made flesh again. And so these parts of the past are never lost. They are imprinted in the bodies of the faggots where the men cannot go.

The men want everyone to remember and commemorate only their moments of victory and plentitude. The men hope that only they have such moments. So history becomes a chronicle of wars and brutality and state splendor. Art attempts to transform men's brutishness into men's benevolence. The faggots know better. They know that one man's victory means the defeat of others and that some men's plentitude means that others go hungry. The faggots refuse to celebrate the men's lies. [P. 13, 2019 Tourmaline edition]

So what's especially useful in this for me is the ways the faggot behaves as an interlocutor within the functions of women and men. Mitchell himself is inscribed into this place. Perhaps so is Cunningham writing a fantasy about Virginia Woolf. Cixous and Clément likewise attach Flaubert to his character Madame Bovary. To my mind, my work is withdrawn and simultaneously excessive, flamboyant and reserved. I often say simply that in my practice, I work against repression. To do that forensic, excavating work, there is, as Freud says, "the reproduction of certain scenes." I think perhaps this is the rejection. Rather than work in spite of regulative symbolic orders, I recollect them and then reject them. The Duras woman receding into the thickets.

JL ... You surmised that most people aren't troubled by the act of gay sex. To you, it's more about the ways in which LGBTQ folk subvert gender norms that's hard for most to swallow. This subversion creates tension. Do you see your work acting in a similar fashion? Creating tension in certain spaces?

MM ... I think I perhaps wasn't clear on this point. I'm convinced that there is a social trauma, which resides outside of articulation: I think non-normative sex practices are actually horrific for many people. And there is a powerful violence leveraged at anything that signals femaleness; the binary is only a force of domination. The horror of sex and the violence of gender's domination are very interrelated, but in ways that lack tidy causality. Andrea Long Chu's recent book *Females* performs some of the irreconcilable contradictions within these practices and discourses, but I'm plagued with doubts around how knowledge is cultivated around the relationships between gender and sex—maybe I could experiment with saying between identity and orientation—maybe I could experiment further and say the difference between what is done to and what is done with. I don't have any solid idea if, for instance, butt sex is appalling to self-identified straight men because it reminds them of fucking women, which they have no clear understanding of, or if they degrade women and femme people because they associate them with submission, weakness, and the receptivity of a hungry asshole. These fears circle around each other endlessly.

My work deals in inconvenient reminders. I approach surface and depth as having collapsed into one another. The cosmetic is the most psychoanalytic. A ribbon carries on its back all of the misogyny and all of the frivolity. I don't demure around stereotypes and I'm impatient with the ways shame is aggravated and cultivated.

JL ... In the past decade or so sculpture has become a huge focus in regards to queer and gender theory—I'm thinking of David Getsy's *Abstract Bodies* and Gordon Hall's essays in particular. Your batons are interesting in that they act as support for the architecture surrounding them (especially the works that are installed floor to ceiling), yet are covered in ruched fabric. There's this type of duality at play there; on the one hand, the masc4masc construction element, but on the other, the frilly, playful fabric. Do you see your baton works as a synthesis of both? Are they gendered? Can they be? I know this is loaded, but seeing how you've answered questions in interviews in the past I think you'll have fun with this one.

MM ... I think there's a latent contradiction in some of the ways that queer formalism has been scripted in the last few years. It seems to ask for a certain legibility of form that privileges not only the more digestible legacies of Minimalism and post-minimalism (I might provisionally enlist Judd's "specific object" as a reference here), but also anticipates access to (and an interest in declaring) self-determined positions in relation to the social. In my practice, I want to gently antagonize the underlying neoliberalism that I think gets carried on a way of proposing queer form that may defy categorization, but also seeks a kind of conceptual transparency of the thing being itself and nothing else, eschewing labels projected from the outside, but also in the process, seemingly divesting from more fugitive ontologies that could be traced through formlessness (see Georges Bataille), abjection, incoherence, illusion, drag, and camp. There's the oft cited legacies of queer abstraction: Ellsworth Kelly and Agnes Martin, the former whose practice became aligned to the ultra-establishment, perhaps one of the most institutionally acquiescent practices that is widely collected and exhibited today, and the latter, mythologized with very little deviation from her dogmatic, didactic claims of what her work is and does. From there, we could talk about the ways Roni Horn and Felix Gonzalez-Torres behave in this queer history—spoiler, there are similarly patterns of institutionalization and mythology at play.

I sympathize with the exigencies that have no doubt produced this logic of form. We're in a difficult cultural moment when the ways identity is enforced seem to demand strategic essentialisms in order to render the margins recognizable. As in earlier moments of activism organized toward the ends of greater liberation, doubt, internal disorder, and ambiguity are discouraged. The pressure of being 'on message' for the advancement of an apparently monolithic LGBTQIA seems, to me, to have not only brought about the expansion of hard-edged abstraction as a signal for a type of queerness in painting (and the corollary cleanliness of sculpture situated into this milieu), but also to have required a kind of inherent "truthfulness" in the performance of queer identity in this present moment. I don't see space right now for the queer to be devious, transgressive, inauthentic, deceptive, and so on. And I suppose I'm trying to force open those possibilities.

With regard to the Baton pieces you've brought up, I think it's important that they are, in fact, not supportive or architectural. They aren't load bearing; in fact, they are fairly submissive and contingent to their given physical contexts. They are adapted ornaments. Their physical strength is more akin to that of corsetry or a bra's underwire. And in their ruffles, the viewer is shown first of all that not everything that comprises the surface of the thing is shown. There is a capacity for 'more' that folds into itself, only gesturing toward knowledge. The batons tease like a burlesque show. I intend them to interact playfully with histories of interior décor and fashion as much as art history and the particular narrows that are being maintained around queer abstraction and queer formalism.

I was asked recently in the Q&A of an artist talk I gave if I minded sharing how I gender identify. I answered, "I don't. Next question." This short chirrup could be unpacked lots of ways, but one thing I'd maintain is that identity is historically not an elective activity. Identity as it's been conceived and implemented historically is not an operation that allows for agency, desire, or personal preference.

JL ... We briefly touched upon tokenism during our chat—how effeminate gay men are expected to create work that's sassy, colorful, glittery, etc., and how this is becoming tired for some critics. Though this may not seem as radical in certain areas where queer sexualities and gender identities are more prevalent and accepted, it's extremely important for LGBTQ youth in other areas of the country to see that effeminacy can be a symbol of pride, or subversion, and even revolutionary. Does this come to mind when you produce your work? I'm thinking of your fragrances in particular and especially the link between some of their scents and that fresh, rubbery smell when you open a new My Little Pony. I remember that smell fondly.

MM ... While we could arguably decide that there are more different kinds of representations of gender and sexuality in the mainstream, I generally feel that I see less variety in these expressions when I consider subcultural space. Again, I think it's worth underscoring that we are in a much more difficult time politically than we may feel day to day. I have Structuralist tendencies that dispose me to looking for the broader cultural read, and the ways that individuals are produced by conditions of power, class struggle, histories of slavery and disempowerment and criminalization of many ways of being.

These longer tensions have been supplanted by rhetoric of commonality and erasures of differences. Modes of assimilation are extolled for bringing nascent or non-normative positions into mainstream discourses. In the field of art, I have experienced pressure to be more explicit about sex practices in my work, and I have also been encouraged to enact modes of abstraction that make for 'family-friendly' characterizations of queer lived experience. I have been advised that were I to self-identify as trans, I would have greater appeal in academia's job market. Some of the most astonishing sexism that I've witnessed was expressed by women: some of the most insulting forms of classism that I've witnessed were by other queer people. I observe the erasure of older women from our art and cultural histories on the regular. Despite the popularization of catch phrases like "Yes fat, yes femme, yes Asian," I still find most gay men to be particularly hostile towards anything that doesn't share in their spiral of shame and aspiration toward normative modes of masculinity. I could keep listing—suffice to say, 'queer' as a project hasn't delivered on the intersectionality and openness that I feel I was promised when I was first introduced to it as a political and theoretical project. With that in mind, I don't endeavor whatsoever to bring positions of otherness into a system organized around centrism. Rather, I want to foster otherness, celebrate eccentricity, and participate in permissions and affirmations around whatever dissolute and invisible ways of desiring that can find air to persist.

I want to appreciate a quality of artifice that seems abandoned in our most recent turn around the 'identity politics' sun. I want uneasy discourses around impure positions. Amidst all of the Stonewall anniversary exhibitions last year, I actually found the Costume Institute at the Met's *Camp: Notes on Fashion* to be one of the most compelling and quietly disruptive projects. As many have noted, 2019 may have been the year that many straight people even heard the word 'camp' used this way. And what 'way' that is was thrown into ongoing disagreement. I want to work within the space of that resistant signification, where a word and its possible meanings never quite match up.

I think I mentioned to you that I see my own art practice situated somewhere between what I wrote about Gaylen Gerber for X-TRA last year (x-traonline.org/article/violent-grey) and what I wrote about perfumes scented to smell like lipstick for *Fragrantica* (fragrantica.com/news/Who-Is-the-Creamiest-the-Waxiest-the-Most-Lipsticky-of-Them-All--12550.html). Even proposing a way of mapping the space between, say, Institutional Critique and Sephora, is bound up in a *blousy irreverence* that I am definitely trying to insist upon.

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