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## made of water, covered in mud

Nicole Norman

*University of Arkansas, Fayetteville*

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made of water, covered in mud

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts in Art

by

Nicole Norman  
Northern Kentucky University  
Bachelor of Fine Arts, 2017

May 2021  
University of Arkansas

This thesis is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council.

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Rana Young, M.F.A.  
Thesis Director

---

Zora J Murff, M.F.A.  
Committee Member

---

Loring Taoka, M.F.A.  
Committee Member

---

Rebecca Morgan, M.F.A.  
Committee Member

## **Abstract**

My fixation on water as metaphor is a product of my cosmic design; Scorpio sun, Pisces moon, Pisces rising. I am made of water, begging to be held. Anything liquid has this same desire. I use my art practice to examine the fluidity of physical and digital spaces; how they transform almost constantly. This is only possible through the use of containers that give form to abstract ideas and make them easier to drink (read: digest). Containers can vary in size and shape, but their purpose remains the same. A drinking glass, a swimming pool, a creek bed. These are containers for water. But a body, a gallery, and an art institution are containers of a different kind.

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## **Introduction: *made of water***

My fixation on water as metaphor is a product of my cosmic design; Scorpio sun, Pisces moon, Pisces rising. I am made of water, begging to be held. Anything liquid has this same desire. I use my art practice to examine the fluidity of physical and digital spaces; how they transform almost constantly. This is only possible through the use of containers that give form to abstract ideas and make them easier to drink (read: digest). Containers can vary in size and shape, but their purpose remains the same. A drinking glass, a swimming pool, a creek bed. These are containers for water. But a body, a gallery, and an art institution are containers of a different kind.

What I really mean when I say “container” in this context is *system*. A container’s purpose is to contain, to hold, or even control its contents. Systems do the same. They dictate the parameters that shape the world and determine how people can move within it. Fundamental systems of power and oppression rely on their invisibility to continue functioning. Capitalism, white supremacy, patriarchy, and heteronormativity are engrained into every aspect of our culture in the United States and their omnipresence can make them nearly undetectable. These systems are introduced to us as children and reinforced on a regular basis by our friends, neighbors, teachers, and government. This is the mark of a successful system: how efficiently individuals mirror its core functions. When we consciously or unconsciously participate in racism, misogyny, ableism, or queerphobia, we act on behalf of systems that seek to maintain a homogenized culture. Doing so can cause immense harm, but if we honestly acknowledge our contribution to this violence and commit to its undoing, we can find new, authentic ways of being.

*made of water, covered in mud* is an inquiry into personal authenticity. It is embedded with joy and grief; feelings I experience when confronting systems and queerness in my own life. As a white, queer, and trans non-binary person who grew up in a rural, working class community I have undoubtedly contributed to my own pain and that of others. Not necessarily

pain in the physical sense -- though this is also true -- but emotional pain from trying to fit in containers that were not made for me. This feeling points to a simultaneous acceptance and refusal of systems; a duality present in the relationship between the physical exhibition of my work and a digital space called “the cr33k.” I have named these spaces with reference to water in order to address the fluidity of queerness and transformation. The creek, more specifically, is the name given to a psychological space where I can access queerness more readily. Its origins are deeply connected to my childhood home, located in a part of Kentucky that I might describe as part-rural, part-suburbia. This statement is also a reflection of the creek, which alludes any clear definition. The creek is *not* a creek. If I point to its location on a map you will discover that it is not a narrow stream capable of holding water, but a cluster of trees in a shallow ditch behind my parents’ house. This part of the land I grew up on had no purpose aside from marking the end of our property. As a result, it was, and still is, largely ignored.

The creek is a metaphor for my queerness; present, but out of the way. Growing up I experienced an ever-present feeling of difference, which I now understand as subconscious knowledge of my queer identity. Despite this knowing, I continuously tried to blend into the world by participating in heteronormativity and accepting the predetermined binaries of gender. This is not an uncommon behavior for queer people who don’t have access to communities that reflect or respect who they are. We learn how to maintain safety and survival by navigating the systems given to us, often at the expense of our identities.

After spending the majority of my life burying queerness, I am using my art practice as a way to uncover it. I do this by visiting that queer psychological space, the creek, and documenting my experiences with written and visual storytelling. The stories are published on “the cr33k” (cr33k.cargo.site), a digital archive that makes the development of my queerness legible. Each webpage preserves a significant moment, relationship, or revelation and translates it into a visual composition. I regularly create new pages or edit old ones to mirror my current experience of queerness, which is inextricably linked to transformation.

Although the work is made to exist online, elements of “the cr33k” manifest in the exhibition *made of water, covered in mud*. Bringing this digital world into a physical space is one way that I interpret how queerness shapeshifts. Like water or mud, queerness changes state. I explore different states of being as a way of engaging with a simultaneous using and refusing of systems, especially those related to academia and art institutions. I approach these spaces through a queer lens to ask questions about who these systems are intended to serve, who has access to their benefits, and how they affect our lived experience.



**on mud**

The thing about mud is that it cannot stay mud.

## possible containers

I remember learning that bodies are 70 percent water in grade school. By this measure, it makes sense that human existence should be allowed to flow in any direction. But our bodies are the most recognizable container we have; they signal to others where we belong in systems of race, gender, and physical ability. My body is the only container I have immediate access to, which gives me some control over it. But still, I cannot control how it is perceived. When people see me, they don't see water. They see me through the same systems that we all learn and use to define ourselves. In most cases my body will be read by others as a white, able-bodied woman. For a long time, I viewed myself this way, too. I *am* white and able-bodied, which gives me a certain level of privilege that should not be ignored.<sup>1</sup> However, to be seen and described as a woman is something that I struggle with because the gender binary is a system that dictates the flow of my existence. *Go this way, not that way. Male or female. Man or woman.* I negotiate my relationship to masculinity and femininity on an almost daily basis; an evaluation that allows me to explore and challenge what they mean to me. Regardless of how I choose to express this flux, I am bound to a body that most will perceive as woman. Because I am trans and non-binary, this understanding of bodies and gender is something I actively fall outside of, question, and refuse.

It would be irresponsible to claim that a person who is not queer is incapable of understanding the complexities of gender or the struggles of transgender individuals. They are certainly capable. However, our lived experiences dictate the empathy and care we extend to others. Someone who is cisgender or heterosexual may do their best to use correct pronouns for the trans people in their life (if there are any), but this is the very least that they can do, and in a lot of cases, the most. What people fail to understand about being trans<sup>2</sup> is how it is so much

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<sup>1</sup> National Association of School Psychologists. *Understanding Race and Privilege*, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Trans is used as shorthand for transgender. See *GLAAD Media Reference Guide – Transgender*. GLAAD.Org.

more than pronouns or transition or a body. The best way that I know how to describe it for myself is, of course, water. I'm reminded of the water cycle – evaporation, condensation, and precipitation. Always water, no matter the state. How can we so easily accept the transformation of this element and not the fluidity of others? The answer is in the body.

The body gets in the way...A person is not the simplicity of their genitals, nor is their gender, character, or their desirability. A person is a whole wonderful thing. So capable--of anything--it's not assigned. It's not dictated or intentional. Behind that skin is more than a man or a woman.<sup>3</sup>

The limiting nature of the gender binary has turned my body (my most personal container) into a problem; it gets in the way of others being able to truly see me. This is not because I was assigned female at birth (AFAB), but because this identifier is loaded with meaning and expectations. This is true of any identity label, especially those related to gender. To have our bodies identified as one of only two possible genders at birth immediately places us in complex systems which dictate our lived experiences. If we experience discomfort with this assigned identity, we are likely to feel that we have failed and become frustrated. This is amplified when the communities we are part of offer no alternative to binary thinking, which affects more than gender. Trans, non-binary, and gender non-conforming individuals understand this frustration on a deeply personal level. We are constantly fighting to be seen as the “whole wonderful thing” that we know ourselves to be. We work to unlearn the gendered expectations placed on our bodies and, through our own undoing, have the potential to educate and liberate anyone who sees us. But our visibility is just as likely to make us unsafe. So, where do we go? How do we get our bodies out of the way?

My body has always been a site for investigation. Before I came to understand my queer identity and how it manifests in my art practice, I used self-portraiture as a tool to express my internal world. The earliest representations I made of myself were often dark and lonely, like

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<sup>3</sup> Zelony-Mindell, E., Cotton, C., & McNelis, A. *Newflesh* (Gnomic Book, 2019), 8.

something was wrong or missing. It wasn't until 2019 that I started making photographs to intentionally look at femininity and, more specifically, express the frustration I experienced from trying to meet its expectations. At the time, I was creating nude self-portraits and most conversations in my critiques were about sexuality, performance, and pornography. I actively referred to myself as a woman and put my feminine body on display as an attempt to weaponize it; to simultaneously give into and resist expectations. In retrospect, I can see that I was expressing a discomfort I have always had with "being a woman." Nearly a year later I would find the words to describe this feeling: transgender and non-binary.

The truth is that before meeting other trans and non-binary individuals, I didn't have the language to understand how I was feeling. Without them, I'm not sure I ever would have found it. I consider myself lucky to have met a handful of trans friends during my time in graduate school – but this has also meant watching our academic environment fail them in ways that are both similar and dissimilar to my own experiences. (An important note on trans experiences: not every trans person is the same. We do not all have the same experiences or feelings. If you forget this, remember water.) Even this liberal arts school, which prides itself on diversity and inclusion (as many of them do), has failed to prioritize conversations about student well-being or take actionable steps toward improving our experiences. This is true for queer and trans students, but for all students of marginalized identities, especially students of color.

To put all of these larger issues into perspective, I need to address a specific instance where the University of Arkansas School of Art, failed to support me. When I was making nude self-portraits, I was sharing a studio with another photography student and had been for almost two years. Our studio had a glass front and was located in the basement of a public building with minimal foot traffic. For this reason, (and because neither my studio mate or I actively made photographs in this space) we were not concerned about its lack of privacy. It was rare to see people walk past the studio. In most cases, anyone who did was one of my colleagues. So, when I was hanging printed representations of my body for critiques, I felt safe doing so. It helped that

my work and research was being enthusiastically supported by a number of faculty inside and outside of the photography area. However, this support fell flat after I had a troubling interaction with the building's new custodian. I sent an email about my concerns to my supervisor:

Here are the details from my encounters with the new custodian at 1East: The first incident is one that I wasn't present for, but the custodian entered a studio visit that my studio mate was having in early November (faculty member said the visit was on 11/1). He walked into the studio during their conversation and introduced himself, then gestured to my side of the studio and said that he "was enjoying looking at the work" when he walks by our studio. That's all I know, since I wasn't present at the time. The second incident happened last Thursday afternoon (11/5) when I was getting the studio set up for final critique. Because my studio mate told me what happened before, I've been locking the studio door when I'm in there alone, just in case. So, the door was locked, and he walked by with his custodian cart and waved at me. I gave a quick wave back and then returned to what I was doing. He came back shortly after and tried to open the studio door. Of course, it was locked, and he couldn't get in. Then he started talking to me through the glass, asking if I was Nicole and commenting on how great he thinks my photographs are. I was short, but said thanks, then he left. The next morning, when I arrived for my final critique, the custodian was walking across the street and waved at me. I waved back. Then when I got out of my car, he yelled at me, asking how I was doing, etc. Nothing alarming or inappropriate, but odd given the fact that he was across the street and that he has obviously taken a liking to my work. I also know that [redacted] has had some issues with him. I don't know much about that, but it has resulted in a sign on their studio door that says not to come in.<sup>4</sup>

When I revisit my written account of what happened, I am surprised at how objectively I describe it, despite being made uncomfortable by someone I did not know. The custodian placed an expectation onto photographs of my body, then felt compelled to talk with others about it and me. I felt violated; a feeling that escalated when he attempted to enter my studio and my peers' studios. The notable difference between our spaces is that he could see into my studio; and inside of that space was my body.

Vocalizing my concern was encouraged by School of Art Executive Director, Gerry Snyder, after I commented on the incident during my final review. I agreed that it should be addressed and felt hopeful when I sent the email. However, two months later, my concerns had gone unacknowledged. Instead, the conversation quickly shifted to one about making my work

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<sup>4</sup> Email to my supervisor, sent at 4:31PM on 10 Dec. 2019 with subject line "Concerns at 1East."

and studio less visible. It was clear that students being at risk was no longer (or perhaps never) a concern for the building and School of Art administrators. From this moment on, the School of Art continuously revealed itself to me as an institution run by individuals clinging to pre-existing power structures. For them, the concern was not for me, my work, or my safety; they were being pressured by a member of the community and wanted to appease him by somehow censoring my photographs. The proposed solution, supported by a line in graduate student contracts that promises “private studio spaces”, was to frost the glass on my space. Ultimately, the discussion about my studio dissolved when COVID-19 shut down campus in Spring 2020. My peers and I no longer had access to studios. The glass was never frosted. I opted to move into a different studio in the same building for my last year.

This incident is one example of how the academic space does not prioritize students – and it is not an isolated incident. I would have to write a separate thesis to address all of the instances of misogyny, racism, and queerphobia I have witnessed in my three years at the University of Arkansas. Instead, I draw attention to this story as a way to frame the ways I understand my body, the relationships between bodies, and my approach to the gallery space.

## the cr33k

The ways that I choose to display my artwork are an extension of my research, which emphasizes transformation. The bulk of my art practice has been curated into a digital space that I call “the cr33k” (cr33k.cargo.site). I refer to the cr33k as a digital space in lieu of calling it a website because visitors (viewers) actively move through a series of web pages that use the language of written and visual storytelling. Each page preserves a significant moment, relationship, or revelation and translates it into a composition. But because lived experience is constantly expanding, and because digital space is an impermanent medium, these compositions always have the potential to change and build on themselves. Everything in the cr33k is temporary; reflecting the everchanging nature of my queerness, especially as it relates to gender, sexuality, and the community I cultivate with other queer individuals. When placed into the context of systems, the cr33k can be used to address archives, aesthetics, and accessibility.

At its most basic level, the cr33k is a digital space created with pieces of my personal archive. This includes photographs and writing created by me within the last three years. The development of my work during my time at the University of Arkansas shows how I have come to see myself and my queerness. I arrange the cr33k to map this progression and facilitate connections between my work at different stages. I am knowingly changing the meaning of works by grouping them with a specific goal in mind. This is a common occurrence in the practice of archiving written about by Shawn Michelle Smith in *Photography on the Color Line*:

...the archive constructs the knowledge it would seem only to register or make evident. Thus, archives are ideological; they are conceived with political intent, to make specific claims on cultural meaning. Archivists choose certain images while excluding others, and by comparing contemporary archives, one can decipher the range of imaging options available at a particular moment, and thus begin to interpret the significance of the choices the archivist has made.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Smith, Shawn Michelle. *Photography on the Color Line* (Duke University Press, 2004), 8.

Smith specifically addresses an archive that W.E.B. Dubois put together for the American Negro Exhibit at the 1900 Paris Exposition. In the writing, Smith frames this archive as one that “challenges a long legacy of racist taxonomy.”<sup>6</sup> Photography has historically been used to perpetuate harm and violence enacted on marginalized groups. For this reason, it is important for contemporary photographers, image makers, and archivists alike to address the role of representation in their work.

In considering who is represented in my work, the cr33k becomes a trans archive. Visual and written language point specifically to conversations I am having with myself about gender. I use images of my body on its own or in spaces with other bodies. Any relationship that exists between individual subjects or bodies is trans; in part because it’s the narrative I am creating, but because the people I photograph are trans, too. Presenting this digital space as a trans archive challenges similar ideologies as the Dubois archive; but instead of using it to challenge a racist history, the cr33k makes a small community of queer and trans individuals visible. Constructing these archives is “evidence that trans lives are livable because they’ve been lived.”<sup>7</sup> Representation of transgender, non-binary, and gender non-conforming individuals is lacking in popular culture, art history, and in most communities. We live our lives at varying levels of visibility to navigate systems that are violent towards us. It is critical to not only construct the archive, but to make it accessible outside of this institution or my personal network.

I use the internet as a means to create and distribute my work; these are two ways that the cr33k begins conversations about access. The internet is a place where we engage with content on a personal level. For example, when we use social media to connect with others, we engage with those platforms on our own. This is how I first came to experience the world wide web; logging onto fan forums, chat rooms, and Myspace in the early to late 2000s. I gained

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<sup>6</sup> Smith, Shawn Michelle. *Photography on the Color Line* (Duke University Press, 2004), 2.

<sup>7</sup> Malatino, Hil. *Trans Care* (University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 7.



access to communities I would otherwise never come into contact with, all from a small desk in my parents' basement. Since those early encounters with digital spaces, the internet has become a significant part of our daily lives; and online communications have increased with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Engaging with each other online has made us familiar with the digital; the cr33k exists in this space so that it is approachable and accessible to any visitor. It is my hope that an archive like the cr33k can facilitate connections with queer individuals and generate an understanding of trans identities for those outside of queer communities.

My first experiences online also inform the aesthetic decisions I make when building pages for the cr33k. I am most influenced by Myspace, a social media platform that allowed its users to customize a profile with HTML code. As a pre-teen I would search for HTML to strip my profile of its standard aesthetics; removing my top friends, my music player, and other design elements. Doing this created a blank slate where I could then insert my own information and curate an image of myself for others to see. Legacy Russell describes the internet as a space to play, perform, and experiment, as well as a mechanism for survival.<sup>8</sup> In retrospect, I see my desire to build my image from scratch as engaging in those practices. I regularly experimented with Myspace to build a world for myself, moving to Instagram when it became a more popular platform. In either case, I was careful about what I revealed through the photographs and text that I uploaded on the web.

I position the cr33k as a more sophisticated mode of world building than social media. Starting with a blank page, I use pieces of my archive and the tools provided by a web hosting platform to construct a narrative about myself. But instead of having a profile or a predetermined algorithm, the cr33k is a series of individual compositions and fragments of my journey to queerness. The vast majority of the cr33k is a comment on a shifting gender identity and an accompanying internal dialogue. For example, the pages *one body* (Figure 1) and *he they*

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<sup>8</sup> Russell, Legacy. *Glitch Feminism* (Verso Books, 2020), 22-23.

*she* (Figure 2) show the fluidity of self through photographs, while *both worlds* (Figure 3) uses writing to describe a moment of intimacy between two trans bodies. Other pages continue this commentary; focusing on themes of queerness, transformation, and community. Whether or not a visitor can easily identify these themes or decipher the meaning of an individual page is not of great concern to me. I have found that LGBTQ+ identifying individuals will almost always read the digital space as queer because of its coded visual language. This doesn't mean that visitors who do not (or cannot) understand a reference to some aspect of queerness should not enter the space. It simply means they do not have the tools to navigate it properly.

The web pages that make up the cr33k are arranged into a linear sequence with one possible path. Navigation is quite easy; visitors simply need to identify which image or piece of text is linked (depending on the page). Clicking on that element will take them to the next page. But navigating and understanding the cr33k are two separate things. The linear structure of the web pages does not equate to a linear narrative. Instead, the narrative I construct is reflective of my queer "arrival into the world"<sup>9</sup> – traveling through different moments of time simultaneously to show how they are connected. I understand that the archive translates my queer identity, but visitors interpret the information through their personal lens. Despite navigating the same path, we will arrive in different places. This structure reveals the cr33k as a system. It can only be read "correctly" by individuals with identities that intersect with mine: white, queer, trans, feminine-bodied, or able-bodied. I'm interested in exploring this further; investigating the fixed and fluid identities each of us contain and how they help us relate to one another.

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<sup>9</sup> Ahmed, Sara. *Queer Phenomenology* (Duke University Press, 2006), 38.

## portals

the cr33k introduces a system that lays the foundation for most of my work, but it is just one possible entry point. The internet is a personal experience for visitors while the gallery could be described as a communal space. These two modes of presenting my work remain separate, but heavily influenced by one another. *made of water, covered in mud* is an exhibition that transforms the digital into physical. Within the gallery setting, I address my concerns about archives, aesthetics, and access through a different lens.

*made of water, covered in mud* is an installation consisting of eight large-scale black and white photographs, transparent pixels, and one-way mirror film. The materials have been applied to the glass of the gallery to create an overall composition that limits visibility (Figure 5). The gallery door is locked, but remains uncovered to act as a portal into a dark, empty space. Inside, a single-channel video of three figures in an outdoor space is projected onto the back wall. A placard next to the door contains an active QR code that, if scanned with a mobile device, will take visitors to the cr33k.

When considering how to construct a large-scale installation for the gallery, I use images from the same archive as the cr33k. There are some images in the final composition that do not exist in the online archive, but still reference it. For example, *creek boys* depicts the same gesture as *common denominator*: two figures passing a marijuana joint (Figure 6). Making these visual references in the exhibition illustrates the reciprocal relationship between the digital and physical manifestations of my practice. This is also reflected in my decision to edit my archive into a smaller group of images. I expand on the queer narrative I constructed in the cr33k by choosing photographs that depict “moments of exchange.” I call them this because they show important visual relationships in *made of water, covered in mud*: hair that turns into an arm, two pairs of feet that touch at the toes, fragments of a body that line up when viewed from a distance. Each image is not meant to be read on its own – they form the composition together. I consider, then, that these photographs are not just an archive, but a community. I use their

collective imagery to frame a conversation about the community I have found with queer and trans individuals during my time at the University of Arkansas.

The non-traditional methods I use to display my work in *made of water, covered in mud* continue conceptualizing community through aesthetics. Because the photographs are printed at a large scale and applied to the glass on the gallery, they must be viewed altogether. Each individual piece in the exhibition is black and white: the photographs, the pixels, and the video. There is no visual hierarchy created by color or contrast because the sequence of images alternates between light and dark tones. These aesthetic decisions are heavily influenced by traditional methods, like framing and book making. Both are concerned with elevating photographs; on their own or within a group of images. Either mode of presentation will shift the context of an image and how we understand it. Creating an overall composition of black and white imagery is also connected to the origins and history of photography. When the medium was invented, its aesthetics were limited to monochromatic visuals due to the limitations of chemical processes. Regardless of the process I use to create images (film or digital), I maintain this same aesthetic. My choice to cover the glass is also a reference to my experiences in this institution and the anecdote from “possible containers.” I combine the history of photography with my personal history to guide my aesthetic choices; then I use contemporary materials to apply them. Thus, changing how we interact with the gallery space in its formal understanding.

For artists and gallery visitors alike, there are expectations we have upon entering an exhibition space. Our primary expectation is access – being able to enter a physical space and view art. Assuming that access will be granted by default is an expectation I challenge in *made of water, covered in mud*. I intentionally and simultaneously give and take away access. Primarily, I do this is through material choices; confronting viewers with a series of large-scale images, which grant visual access to pieces of my archive, but deny visual access to the gallery space. Without context or knowledge of the cr33k, these photographs offer no real entry point into the narrative that drives my work. Mirrored panels are also included in the installation, allowing

viewers to become a part of the composition. Up close, the mirror's translucent material reveals a video playing in the gallery. The only way to watch the video, *little boys blue* (Figure 4), is to stand in front of an uncovered door, which remains locked. The lights in the gallery are off, turning the door into a pseudo-mirror. For full visibility, a person needs to get closer or press themselves onto the glass. These actions indicate one's desire for access. I deny it in order to position the viewer in the correct spot for viewing the exhibition: outside.

As *little boys blue* plays silently in the gallery, you can watch my friends and I sit by a fire, drink beers, and talk while I get my hair cut. The 30-minute loop captures a regular occurrence in our lives. It's not extraordinary, or even something that I would consider "queer." But it embodies what queerness is to me: being comfortable and cared for by a community. To grant unrestricted access to this moment would make it less sacred; I use the gallery to protect and honor it instead.

## **care. something queer**

My practice has been significantly influenced by the care I receive from others. My friends care for me in ways I never knew I needed and they teach me how to return the favor. Together we learn how to “best care for each other, with our differing abilities, idiosyncrasies, and traumas, with our hard-to-love thorns intact.”<sup>10</sup> What could be queerer than this? Loving while liquid. Living without borders or binaries. Completely uncontained. When I’m with people who genuinely care for me, I can forget – for a moment – about systems.

I want this profound level of care to exist outside of marginalized communities. Trans people need spaces to be together, but this is a luxury afforded only to those who survive long enough to find it. Our life paths will undoubtedly bring us into other spaces – where our identities are not sacred, but stigmatized. In Arkansas, HB 1570 was recently passed. It is “the first bill in the U.S. that effectively bans trans youth from transitioning.”<sup>11</sup> And it is not the only one. There are nearly 100 bills like it being introduced throughout the country. All of this, in the midst of an ongoing pandemic and a national call for equity, diversity, and inclusion. This bill does not embody any of these qualities, and it certainly does not qualify as care.

I present all of this with grief and urgency. Systems of power and oppression do not care for us. Will not care for us. We must create our own systems if we want to exist in the world. Building digital spaces like the cr33k is one way that I care for myself and those closest to me by making my queer and trans life visible. This is of great importance for trans youth, who are currently under attack; to see what is possible despite the hate and harm they are constantly met with. But truly, anyone making their life in the margins visible presents us with an opportunity to listen and learn. If we care enough, we will see them and work towards something better.

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<sup>10</sup> Malatino, Hil. *Trans Care* (University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 2.

<sup>11</sup> Bruner, Raisa. “In Arkansas, Trans Youth face the Country's Strictest laws yet.” TIME.

**then it rains**

When the creek dries up in summer, mud turns into dirt. Then it rains.

*Mud again.*

## **Conclusion: covered in mud**

When I started writing this, I was someone else. And soon I will change again. It is my hope that by documenting these transformations, I can contribute to an archive that makes trans experiences legible. I choose different modes of world building to do this: digital and physical spaces that challenge pre-existing systems and expectations. *made of water, covered in mud* and the cr33k are two examples, but I want to discover more. As I continue to make photographs and write about my experiences, I ask myself and others to acknowledge systems of power and oppression; to identify our role in perpetuating their violence; to care about a collective future. This is no small task. It cannot be addressed fully through a website or an exhibition, but this where I start.

Outside of my art practice, I consider that being queer and visible is a way of disrupting institutions. Lately I have been asking questions about this: What can my queer identity contribute to an institution? How do I make space for others to be visible? Does my privilege allow me to change systems for the better? Does it get in the way? These are questions for me, but they are for you, too. Whenever we find ourselves in positions that give us access to power, we have a responsibility to do something with it. I will end, or perhaps begin, by sharing a poem from *The Year of Blue Water* by Yanyi:

Of all the things I have done, I am most proud of our relationship, of picking up the pieces of investing in each other again and again. In every way, I was raised to kill this: the impulse to build and protect a place where you and I can live as ourselves. ...there's always something else going on, something's happened that will change you or change me, and it's not those moments but ourselves that we share with each other. Not out of necessity, but abundance.<sup>12</sup>

We may not be able to tear systems to the ground on our own, but we can start by investing in each other. This, to me, is a practice of care and the beginning of a transformation.

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<sup>12</sup> Yanyi. *The Year of Blue Water* (Yale University Press, 2019), 73.



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## Figures



Figure 1: *one body* ([cr33k.cargo.site/one-body](http://cr33k.cargo.site/one-body)). Image by author.



Figure 2: *he they she* ([cr33k.cargo.site/he-they-she](http://cr33k.cargo.site/he-they-she)). Image by author.

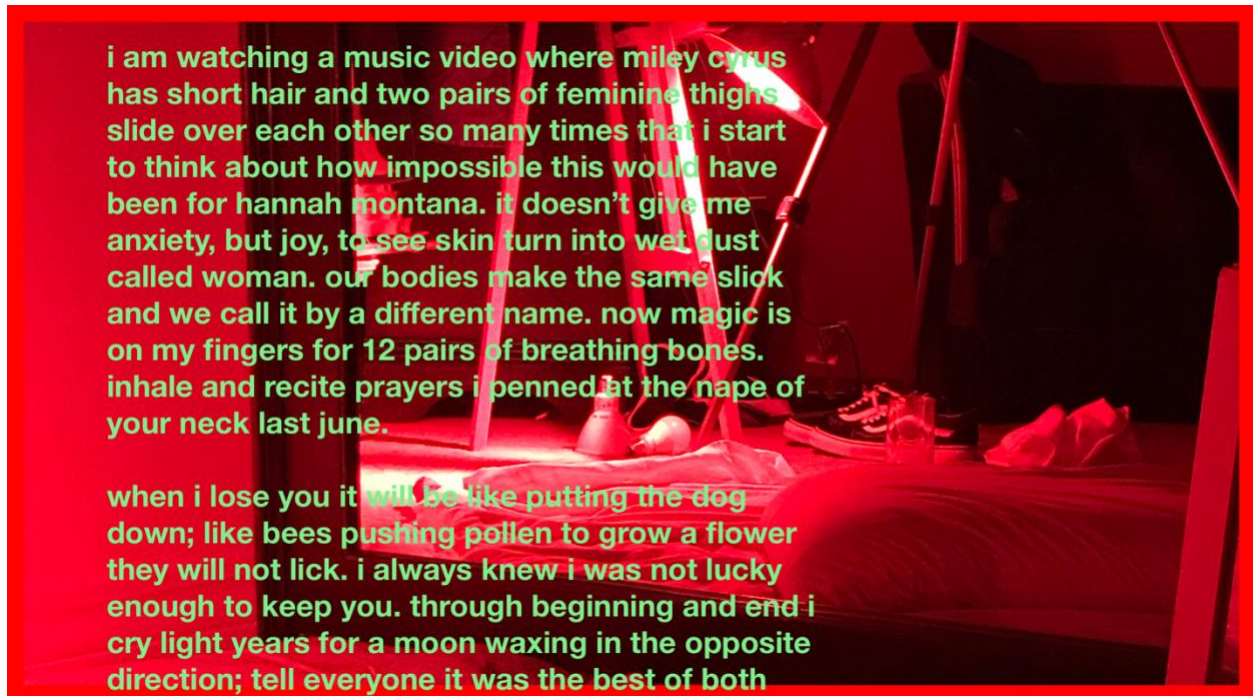


Figure 3: *both worlds* (cr33k.cargo.site/both-worlds). Image by author.



Figure 4: Still image, *little boys blue*. Single-channel video, 30 min. Image by author.





Figure 5: Installation view, *made of water, covered in mud*, 2021. Image by author.

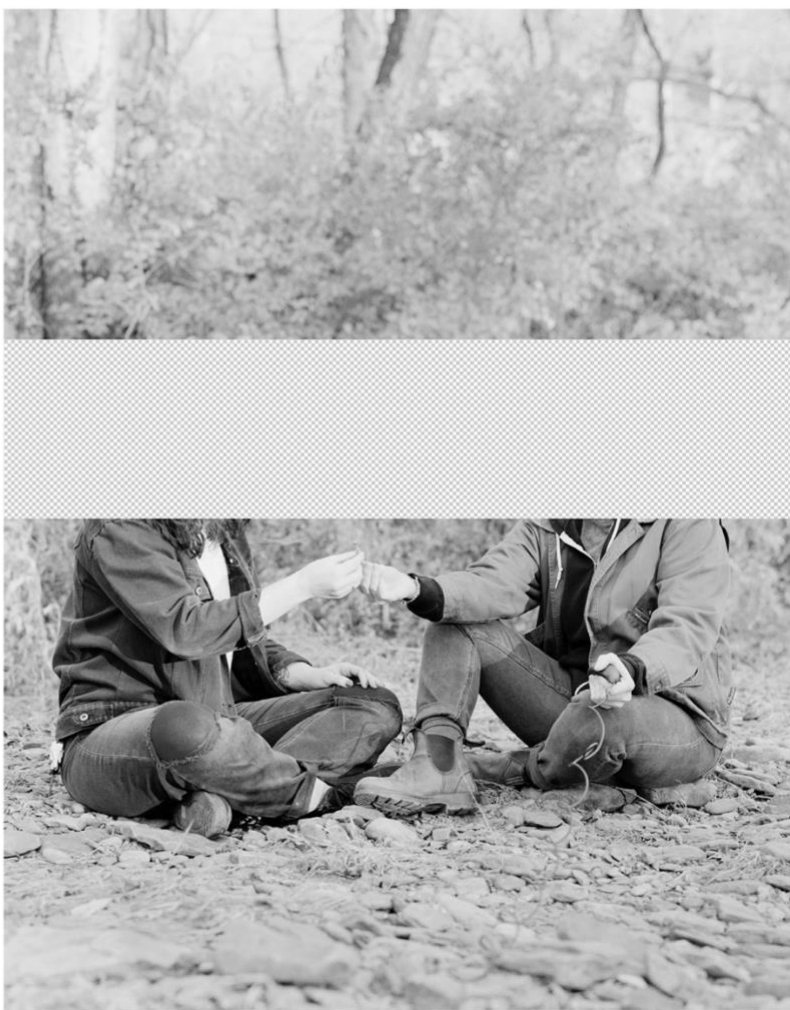


Figure 6: Comparison, *creek boys* panel from *made of water, covered in mud* (left) and *common denominator* from the cr33k (right). Image by author.



Figure 7: Detail, *made of water, covered in mud*. Image by author.





Figure 8: Detail, *made of water, covered in mud*. Image by author.