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There are ghosts in the machine

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Citation

Green, J. (2022). There are ghosts in the machine. *Graduate Theses and Dissertations* Retrieved from <https://scholarworks.uark.edu/etd/4445>

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There are ghosts in the machine

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

by

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University of Tulsa
Bachelor of Fine Arts, 2011

May 2022
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This thesis is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council.

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Abstract

There are ghosts in the machine is a body of paintings that dare to dissolve the boundaries between my physical body, intimate desires, and paintings. Utilizing the aesthetics of leather lifestyles, the paintings express the transformational potential of desire and transgression. Oriented within my experience as a queer, transgender male, I call upon influences that range from the body horror classics by director David Cronenberg or the transgressive attitude of Nine Inch Nails, to theoretical works on the power of eroticism by Audre Lorde and Georges Bataille. Modified by hardware such as chains, zippers, and grommets, the paintings express the transformational potential of material embodiment. The materiality and physicality of paint are emphasized within the work to provoke a proprioceptive experience within the viewer. As objects of radical difference, they conflate desire, the body, performance, and identity.

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Introduction

Something on the inside erupts to the surface. Displaced interiority. In the 1986 film, *The Fly*, a scientist experiences a horrifying transformation after testing his teleportation device. Naked, he enters the tele-pod, the machine fires and he emerges from the second tele-pod across the room. A fly that went unnoticed accompanies him in the teleportation and a computational error fuses the fly with the human body of the scientist. This results in the grotesque transformation of a man into a giant humanoid fly, who slowly and painfully sheds his human shell as he becomes something new. This narrative of body horror and violent fusion generates endless possibilities, infinite monsters of hybridity. Much like the destroyed boundary between human and fly, I am interested in a transgressive dissolving of boundaries between my physical body, my desires, and my paintings. I speculate what might emerge if I enter the tele-pod clad in my leather jacket and holding a can of paint. I think about what kind of art that creature would make—the loneliness of being an original subject causing them to create art in their own self-image.

I am queer. Beyond queer, I would label myself as transgender, sex-positive, and *kinky*. Like other parts of my being, my affinity for kink is something I can look back on and identify as being present at a very young age. I remember at the age of twelve creating a desktop wallpaper on the family computer that featured Trent Reznor from Nine Inch Nails and a pair of handcuffs. The music video for “Closer” had been released almost a decade earlier, but the dark pulsing sexuality of the music endured and found an audience with my younger self. Since those confusing adolescent struggles with longing and otherness, I have been able to find community at various points in my life with others who engage in dissident sexuality: those who are queer, those who are kinky, and those who are both.

The aesthetics of *leather* are employed in my work and synthesized with the material concerns of painting. The Leather Archives and Museum of Chicago defines leather as “a style, an identity, a community, and a subculture that celebrates kink, fetish, BDSM, and sex.”¹ I utilize the word *leather* as an umbrella term both to reference this wide range of histories and activities, and because the term *leather* centers the materiality of the practice. Both leather and painting as practices are driven by aesthetics, fetishize material, and can facilitate the exploration of alternative states of being for their participants. The transformational potential of each practice is centered in my work. Aesthetic decisions in leather are tied directly to erotic desire. Through experimentation and play in the studio, I create a bridge within my paintings that connects aesthetic investment to erotic desire. With the curiosity of a scientist, the passion of a pervert, and the history of a painter I have taken on the task to queer painting.

I characterize my relationship to paint as transgressive— that feeling of just not being able to help yourself, like writing in the wet cement of a sidewalk. I am sensitive to how the paint comes into contact with my body. There is something delicious about how it finds its way outside the studio and soils all my clothes and lives under my fingernails. I transgress within my own medium in the search for a new kind of form or sensuality, visual and erotic alike. My desires and their particularities are the seed for the painting. I pull from my desires, believing that our erotic experience is the site of our most authentic selves. Audre Lorde calls the erotic a “true kind of knowledge”². The erotic is characterized by its intensity, its location deep within us, and its nonrationality. According to Lorde, the erotic precedes understanding and is based in

¹ Leather Archives & Museum, “What is Leather?”, accessed February 4th, 2022, <https://leatherarchives.org/about/what-is-leather>.

² Audre Lorde, “The Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power” in *Sister Outsider* (Berkley: Crossing Press, 1984), 89.

feeling. As such, recognizing the erotic and its strength can lead to heightened, deeper modes of feeling and understanding across other aspects of our lives.³ The moves I make in the studio are based in feeling. I lean into what feels good, until it provides unacceptable diminishing returns, or disgusts me.

³ Lorde, “The Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power,” 90.

The Leather Man and the Rubber Boy

In my work, paint embodies its material subject rather than depicting or rendering it. I push the illusory properties of paint to perverse ends by treating the canvas so that it resembles leather or vinyl. The process involves painting the surface with multiple layers of paint that vary in relative lightness, darkness, and sheen. Other times, the canvas substrate is replaced by paint itself. Paint is poured on a glass surface, left to dry, and then peeled up in sheets. The rubbery, skin-like quality of the dried paint resembles latex. Rubber, leather, vinyl—all these materials have a dissident sexual association and history. They are eroticized and championed within their respective cults. For their practitioners they are a “second skin”—not one they are born with, but one that they can take on as their own, a skin that facilitates heightened experience. It is a vehicle for transformation. I extend this surrogate skin to the surface of the painting making it a metaphorical playground for skin. Furthermore, the location of sexual activity is not constrained to the genitals. The skin in its entirety is a sexual organ. The enormity of its desire matches its scale as the largest organ of the human body.

The work contains paradoxical aesthetic conditions: shiny and matte, inside and outside, opaque and transparent, smooth and sharp, durable and vulnerable, above and below. Paint is used in both an illusory way and in an expressive, matter-of-fact way that announces itself as paint. Canvas, supports, and rectilinear forms are other surviving markers that reference the DNA structure of painting. Color is limited to red and black. As a provocative color combination sourced from leather aesthetics, it adds intensity and a sense of possible danger. The incorporation of elements such as chains, clamps, grommets, and zippers are the “hardware-ification” of the painting. Influenced by bondage gear such as hoods, restraints, and vacuum beds they add to the leather embodiment of the painting. Their presence alludes to apparel and by extension, the body. Mark-making transforms in turn; it does not decorate the surface but dares

to breach it. Zippers and grommets punctuate the surface of the painting in place of line. These are threshold moments, points between the exterior of the painting and what might lurk on the other side. Seams, holes, and areas where the material fails are sites of increased attention—new orifices to explore. Furthermore, they do not only live on the wall. The paintings are suspended by chains or left crawling on the floor. There is a sculptural quality to the relief of their surfaces and the forms created when they fold into themselves. Yet these are not sculptures, but paintings *transfigured*.

The creation of my paintings often begin by cannibalizing previous work. This cannibalism is symptomatic of the erotic drive. With equal parts urgency and desperation, older works are destroyed and reconfigured to revive the original object of desire. Instead of painting at an easel or working on the wall, I work low to the ground. The work literally brings me to my hands and knees. I am submissive to my own work. *Hands on a Hard Body* explicitly captures the action of my body crawling on hands and knees across its surface: a specter of submission. I am less concerned with the perceptual phenomenology of painting, but with its materiality and physicality as means to provoke sensation. The paintings inspire a proprioceptive experience. A viewer may desire to touch their surfaces but are left wanting. They can imagine the sensation and it is this imagining that has been seeded that gives the paintings the power to extend, implicate, and multiply their implanted desire.

Closing the Distance

The increasing experimentation with materials in the studio runs parallel to a deepening understanding of my desire. By its nature, a painting contains and compresses the time spent in its making. Isabelle Graw extends this phenomenon of compression in a painting to the labor and lifetime of the artist who made it. She argues that painting “presents liveliness in the form of a material object.”⁴ Through their emphatic materiality, signs within paintings point to the presence of their author. Furthermore, she argues that the power from the physical relationship between the artist and the painting increases as the artist’s proximity to the work increases.⁵ I exploit the erotic potential of this power. Intimate gestures bring me closer to the work. Handprints, kiss marks, and other references to my specific body saturate readings of the paintings with my presence, the ghost of my desire.

The “ghost in the machine” was a term coined by Gilbert Ryle in criticism of Descartes’ philosophical doctrine known as substance dualism, the belief that the body and the mind are separate and radically different. The mind is the “ghost” that exists independently of the physical brain. However, Mark Fisher in his book *The Weird and The Eerie* is suspicious of this criticism. “After all, *who* is it who can talk of having no inside, of man being rotting matter?”⁶ There is a strange tension in being a materialist, a person who believes that all subjectivity is reducible to matter, but incapable of experiencing oneself as *just* matter. This is a condition not of contradiction, but duality. He goes on to say: “Once the body is recognized as the substrate-precondition of experience, then one is immediately compelled to accept this phenomenological

⁴ Graw, “*The Value of Liveliness: Painting as an Index of Agency in the New Economy*”, 82.

⁵ Graw, “*The Value of Liveliness: Painting as an Index of Agency in the New Economy*”, 86.

⁶ Mark Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie* (London: Repeater Books, 2016), 109.

dualism, precisely because experience and its substrate can be separated.”⁷ This division between experience and matter is a division I question in my work. I operate from the position that there is no hard boundary. As objects of hybridized experience, the paintings and their relationship to myself is always in flux. I confuse animate and inanimate material. At times they are lovers, my own body, or an apparatus to facilitate a sexual encounter. They are messier than duality— they embrace multiplicity.

⁷ Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie*, 109.

Sex Garage

There are ghosts in the machine is not an exhibition inside a gallery or the institutional space of the university. The paintings are exhibited inside a parking garage. The public/private tension of the parking garage is a subterranean world where viewers can watch, play, or cruise. Echoing the underground nature of leather activities, viewers descend into a space where it is unclear where the exhibition begins and ends. The raw, industrial makeup of the space compliments the dungeon aesthetic of the work. The space of the garage is not neutral, and the gaze of the viewer suffices as consent. Not everyone is meant to be comfortable. There are no safe spaces, only places of risk.

Within the space, movement around the work is constructed in relation to the movement of attending an S&M party. At such an event, participants are in a space of simultaneous activities and sensations, where bodies are in constant negotiation with each other.⁸ There are those involved in scenes and there are voyeurs, those who like to watch. Susan Stryker is a theorist working in queer theory and gender studies. She chronicled her experiences as a transwoman in the queer S&M scene in San Francisco in the 1980s. In opposition to heterosexual spaces that resulted in coupling, the trans atmosphere of the parties Stryker attended encouraged multiplicity. She writes that inside the trans dungeon, “one was encouraged to encounter fellow creatures with a sense of wonder and curiosity, with patience rather than judgement. Every person became for others a unique opportunity for the universe to reveal itself from a slightly different perspective.”⁹ Stryker’s comments suggest that the trans S&M space was experimental,

⁸ Robin Bauer, “Cybercocks and Holodicks: Renegotiating the Boundaries of Material Embodiment in Les-bi-trans-queer BDSM Practices,” *Graduate Journal of Social Science*. 14, no. 2 (2018): 66.

⁹ Susan Stryker, “Dungeon Intimacies: The Poetics of Transsexual Sadomasochism,” *Parallax*. 14, no. 1 (2008): 40.

that participants did not readily fit into prescribed roles but were met on their unique, individual terms. In *There are ghosts in the machine*, viewers (or more accurately: voyeurs) encounter objects of radical difference. They are able to walk around the paintings, engaging in multiple points of view. There is no single, correct entry point with which to understand the work. With patience, the paintings reveal themselves without being neutralized.

Boundaries (none)

I try to lose myself, not find myself in the work. All borders in my work are contested. The borders between mediums, the border between my body and the art. I call them paintings, but their creation is a combination of painting, performance, and sculptural elements that oscillate between medium distinctions. They fail to be legible as any one thing. This illegibility is indicative of the queer potential of the work. Legibility leads to manipulation. Jack Halberstam notes in the *Queer Art of Failure* that “Disciplines qualify and disqualify, legitimate and delegitimate, read and punish; most important, they statically reproduce themselves and inhibit dissent.”¹⁰ My work resists containment as a queer strategy. Eroticism itself is a drive towards boundarylessness.

The paintings reflect sexual experience, but they are vehemently non reproductive. They expend, purge, and breach containment, revealing their insides. Sexual pleasure is closely connected to ruination. There is only expenditure. In the “Notion of Expenditure”, Georges Bataille distinguishes human activity into that which is productive and nonproductive, acquisition and expenditure. The need to acquire resources and energy leads us to view everything in terms of its utility.¹¹ This is the realm of the profane. Expenditure is the escape from utility, it is a wasting of resources without expectation of gain. Examples of nonproductive expenditure include but are not limited to art, war, luxury, and sexuality disarticulated from genitals or procreation, all activities that “have no end beyond themselves.”¹² Acts that are for their own sake, that escape utility and waste resources are inherently sacred.

¹⁰ Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 10.

¹¹ Čeika, “Hellraiser, Bataille, and Limit Experiences,” published October 29, 2018, video, 18:30, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3ge0P8z_q1M.

¹² Georges Bataille, “The Notion of Expenditure,” in *Visions of Excess* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 118.

We let ourselves expend, let go, or dissolve in the process of expenditure. The more that is lost or risked, the more intense or pleasurable the experience. This “letting go” is realized at its experiential height in a limit experience, an inherently erotic experience that is marked by its intensity, by its dissolving of borders such as between pain and pleasure or anguish and ecstasy.¹³ Transcendence is the ultimate goal in my making, and I am willing to risk failure or destruction to achieve it. There is a need to experience as much as possible—to be continuous with all aspects of my making.

¹³ Georges Bataille, *Erotism: Death and Sensuality* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1986), 17.

TRANSformation

What began as an experiment to synthesize the aesthetics of leather and painting has extended beyond the original parameters. I am the scientist pulled into the freak accident. The constant feedback loop between matter and sensation inspires transformation, interior and exterior. What happens in the studio is not the development of a new kind of painting, but the invention of a new kind of sexuality.

The introduction of this thesis referenced David Cronenberg's film *The Fly*, not only because it is an intriguing metaphor with which to understand my work, but because Cronenberg is a huge influence on me. He has been labeled "the godfather of body horror" and is often credited as the inventor of the subgenre. His career is filled with film after film investigating the bodily, devastating consequences of (usually sexual) transgression that subsequently leads to transformation. As a genre, body horror can illicit an acute response from transgender viewers, me included. The horror is not generated from an external threat, but from within the body. I am very familiar with the feeling of my body changing in ways out of my control and becoming increasingly foreign. Nadine Smith is a trans woman who has also found common ground in body horror. She writes that "body horror can help trans viewers get some necessary distance from our own bodies, allowing us to see ourselves – and the overall condition of being a human being from a more nuanced and multi-layered perspective."¹⁴ Body horror is not necessarily traumatic for trans viewers—it can be cathartic. I dig deep within myself and try to hold onto multiple things to bring to the surface. Not everything is made for the light (I am thinking of those creatures that live in darkness near the bottom of the ocean). This is why there is a

¹⁴ Nadine Smith, "How Body Horror Movies Helped Me Process Gender Dysphoria," published September 3rd, 2021. <https://www.them.us/story/body-horror-gender-dysphoria-essay>.

monstrous quality to the work. I am trying to get to the bottom of something that has no bottom. Instead of finding answers things only become more distorted, more blended.

Characters transgress in Cronenberg's films in the search for a new kind of existence. In the 1994 film, *Crash*, an adaptation of the novel by J.G. Ballard, characters become sexually attracted to car accidents after surviving the experience. The car crash changes the physical bodies of the characters, but it also changes their relationships to love, intimacy, and sex.¹⁵ Cronenberg explores how the destructive event can become the seed for a new kind of existence. These relationships between destruction, transgression, and new being narratively inform my own making. Wounds in *Crash* become new sex organs. Similarly, sites where my materials fail, incisions or punctures are charged with intimate attention. Nothing is exempt from change and at any point something can be destroyed only to be revived as something new. Inspired by Cronenberg's *Crash*, the recent film *Titane* by director Julia Ducournau features a woman having sex with a car that results in her being pregnant and giving birth. In *Titane*, an act of transgression results in conception. My paintings too, are grotesque conceptions that literalize my transgressive desire. The paintings are monstrous hybrids, conflating skin, body, desire, and identity. I do not readily recognize them as desirable or even as art. The leather painting is the humanoid fly.

¹⁵ William Beard, *The Artist as Monster: The Cinema of David Cronenberg*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001.), 379-422.

Conclusion

Through experimentation, embracing the transformational, and reckoning with my own dissident desire, I create objects of hybridized experience. At their own risk, viewers encounter a difference that threatens to destabilize boundaries.

There exists an impossible desire to become one with a material, to transgress the border between animate and inanimate material. It is the same romantic yet desperate want to be one with your partner in the sexual act, to know each other totally. The transcendence is only temporary. I can put on the leather jacket, I can paint my lips, but save from devouring these materials they will never become a part of me. Yet I inhabit them, and they inhabit me.

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Figures



Figure 1: Installation view, *Pisces*. Acrylic on canvas, grommets, chains, needles, paint bucket hook, and a broken mirror. Image by Rana Young



Figure 2: Installation view, *Leather Painting (Heavy Bondage)*. Acrylic on canvas, acrylic modeling paste, grommets, clamps, and chains. Image by Rana Young.



Figure 3: Installation view, *There are ghosts in the machine*, 2022. Image by Rana Young.



Figure 4: Installation view, *There are ghosts in the machine*, 2022. Image by Rana Young.



Figure 5: Installation view, *Leather Painting (Long Live the New Flesh)*. Acrylic on canvas, acrylic modeling paste, acrylic paint skin, grommets, zippers, and nylon rope. Image by Rana Young.