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### **“let Me Show You Around”: The Domestic As A Site For Personal And Political Transformation**

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## Abstract of Master's Thesis, Submitted May 2021

This thesis seeks to contextualize and describe my art making practice through my personal experience and professional research. I begin by referencing a childhood memory to craft a metaphor for my current work. Through storytelling, I weave together the ideas of home, comfort, and alienation to describe the influence that domestic objects have on the construction of identities. Using disidentification as a queer method, the works described herein act as visual (and visible) evidence to imagine queered futures and complicate the traditional divisions between public discourse and personal narrative. In conclusion, the importance of this queering as a sustained and repetitive personal political act is discussed.

“LET ME SHOW YOU AROUND”: THE DOMESTIC AS A SITE FOR  
PERSONAL AND POLITICAL TRANSFORMATION

By

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Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree  
of Master of Fine Arts in *Studio Arts*.

Syracuse University  
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## Ripples and Reflections

The personal narrative presented here is used to locate my art practice within a place and time. Both my identity as an artist and the aesthetics that the work presents are entangled within the frameworks of a constructed rural queer identity. Through the distinct, and often mutually exclusive, dominant discourses of what it means to be “rural” and/or “queer”, I use this personal story not to perpetuate the negative and harmful stereotypes associated with these identities. Instead, I seek to acknowledge their presence in the past and the present and to interrogate the inconsistencies of these tropes and use their intersections to make room for future possibilities and new ways of understanding and existing within these positionalities. The inclusion of anecdotes within my research are used to honor the rich traditions of Appalachian storytelling and the histories of proposing and preserving an intergenerational queer lineage, both of which I would like to celebrate and continue.

In my early childhood in rural Central Pennsylvania, I spent a lot of my time outside. I grew up in the Susquehanna River Valley part of Pennsylvania, an area surrounded by the Appalachian Mountains and forests and home to working-class coal mining and Pennsylvania Dutch farming communities. One activity I remember doing often was going down to the crik in the wooded hollow behind my grandparent’s house with my brother and cousin - swimming, splashing, building bridges, and catching crayfish for hours. During these activities of play, I was slowly constructing a sense of self and of the world through the reflections in the surface of the water. In the places where the water

pooled, it became a glassy mirror in which I could see myself from the water's perspective. I admired my reflection and the way things looked around me; I was full of curiosity.

I remember one specific memory of playing in the creek quite well. I was hypnotized by the way the water reflected a near photo-like image of myself until my brother and cousin threw the biggest rock they could find directly into the creek at the place where I was standing. With a big splash of water, the image of myself was shattered. When the water settled, another reflection emerged. It was similar, but the presence of the large rock in the center of the stream altered the flow of the water around it, presenting a different reflection in this new place and time. The new image still reflected the same silhouette, but where the details of my face were, there was a jagged, dark non-reflective rock, which hindered the water from showing anything back to me.

Though I came of age as a young boy in a rural working-class community in Pennsylvania, my childhood play was not limited to things outside in nature. Inside, secondhand objects and materials, leftover toys and figurines from the 1980s and 1990s, and Pennsylvania Dutch craft traditions mixed together to inform my experience. I enacted made-up stories and scenes sitting on a traditional Amish knot rag rug, made from leftover fabric scraps and worn-out clothes. In these stories, I used a diverse cast of characters, which often included Baywatch Barbie, G.I. Joe, the latest McDonalds Happy Meal toys (both "boy" and "girl" ones), Ninja Turtles, matchbox cars, and Lego houses.

These playtime performances were made alongside of the traditions of craft being shared and passed along throughout the women of my family. The domestic space was where I watched and learned how my mother, grandmothers, and great-grandmothers quilted, painted ceramics, sewed, cooked, baked, and scrapbooked. In these activities, there was pride and passion, with a strong emphasis on personal narrative and storytelling. Relating these “feminine” crafts to the imaginative childhood play I was engaged with created what I knew to be home - a sense of comfort and a pride in place.

The commingling of these characters, toys, traditions, and environments moved beyond clear distinction, with very little worry as to which bodies or actions belonged in which places. These scenes were of my own making. I used objects, from nature *and* the home, to imagine something fantastical and fictive, unaffected and unbothered by traditional roles of gender and sexuality. These norms were certainly present in the world, but these performances cultivated what I now call a queer imagination - the place where symbols, images, and signs from popular culture collided with objects of family history, regional craft tradition, and my own sensibility. This queerly constructed way of interacting with the world of images and objects both *informed* my sense of identity and *was informed by* this identity.

Experiencing more of the outside world in middle and high school, my relationships to the objects that I felt at home with and comforted by became fraught with inconsistencies. As a boy who has always loved the decorative, the feminine, the playful, and the imaginative, I learned what it meant to embody and act on those desires within a public space, according to the norms of gender and sexuality in rural

Pennsylvania. I internalized those discourses because the world I was living in told me it was impossible to embody those identities simultaneously. I could be “country”, but not queer. I could be a “boy”, but could not be feminine.<sup>1</sup>

Through alienation and displacement to the things I had always enjoyed, I learned to shift what I did and how I presented myself to the world. As the freedom and possibilities of childhood fell away, it felt as though a potential future was vanishing. I was forced to rework the notions of “home”, the traditions of the domestic (often seen as comforting, but now quite the opposite), the masculine and feminine, and of family and how it was all affected by geography. Through this alienation, however, I found moments of joy and happiness. Exclusion forced me to find an alternative. By receding back into my imagination, I found an incredible sense of potential again. It was the queer imagination I had cultivated through my childhood that presented future possibilities. Without role models or obvious representations to look to and with a desire to understand my feelings and experience, I again turned toward objects and the material culture around me.

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<sup>1</sup> These binary narratives where the rural, often depicted as conservative, close-minded, and anti-LGBTQ+, is placed in opposition to the queer serves to construct and continue what Jack Halberstam defines in *In A Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* as “the metronormative story of migration from ‘country’ to ‘town.’” Still today, political discourses affirm these narratives, erasing and silencing queer folk who are not able or do not want to leave rural areas, or those who should not have to leave the place they call home to find safety, community, and opportunity.

## Disrupting the Flow

In my recent work, I am interested in how public and private identities are influenced and constructed by/with material culture in the home.<sup>2</sup> In the domestic space, politics, place, and memory reflect and are reflected by the things we collect and display. In these self-fashioned collections, the private and the public become impossible to separate. My personal experiences in the home are the sources for this work that reorients a given material culture (and its related forms and aesthetics) to imagine queer potentials. Using the cast-aside fragments of images and objects from the past, I look toward imagining a future for others and myself.

I use found Americana kitsch objects and images that are banal and everyday and politicize them through curation to reveal the systems that make them ubiquitous/unmarked. I use curation as a queer method to scavenge through cultural remnants, craft new connections and relationships, and politicize normative images and objects.<sup>3</sup> The aesthetic practices that I use to enact this queering are altering found ceramic objects (fig. 1), collaging and juxtaposing disparate images and objects

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<sup>2</sup> Feelings, bodies, and external presentations, are identified and named in relation to or in opposition of the things that surround them. Personal identity manifests itself in speech, clothing, and action, and these aspects can either be self-identified and/or publicly projected. They are co-constitutive and shaped by everything we see and experience in the world. Identity, which makes up the many parts of our subjectivities, is also informed and influenced by larger cultural constructs, such as sex, gender, and geographic place. This is not to say that, as subjects, we have no power. Although these category markers we choose to identify with or against are in some ways always culturally constructed, personal agency is also always present.

<sup>3</sup> Although I acknowledge “queer” as an identity marker and see its political potential as such, in relation to my visual art practice, I’d like to prioritize its use as a methodology. In the introduction to their book *Imagining Queer Methods*, Amin Ghaziani and Matt Brim use queer theory’s insistence of rejecting unchanging and impermeable categories, dualisms, and interest group politics to propose queer methods as a way to “to outline the conditions of queer worldmaking and to clarify, but not overdetermine, the conditions that ‘make life livable.’” By using “queer” in relation to the methods I use, my intention is that the work’s subject matter resists a simple or clear homosexual subversion. My personal experience and perspective of the world as a “gay man” is the lens from which the work emerges, but in the work’s methods and handling of materials, oversimplified identifications and category distinctions break down and fall apart, leaving space for a more queered experience of the (queer) work.

together (fig. 2), and taking everyday symbols and icons and translating or shifting their original forms into other materials (fig. 3).



Fig. 1. Detail of *\$1.00 Plus Tax (Place Plate - Watsonstown, PA)*, altered commemorative ceramic plate, 10" x 10", 2020.



Fig. 2. *Piggy, Piggy, Piggy* (detail of *All the Queen's Men*), commercial ceramic decals on glazed slip cast porcelain, 2019.



Fig. 3. Detail of *Moving Forward (Heading Backwards)*, latch hook rug, 23” x 23”, 2020.

These ways of appropriating and manipulating found images and objects break down the normative ways of connecting the symbolic image to the material object. By separating the image from the object, there can be a closer consideration of the power and influence they have. The traditional making techniques, such as latch hooking and quilting, and the country kitsch found objects that I use in my work, reference moments of nostalgic memory, both culturally and personally. Culturally, these images and objects are romanticized and idealized conservative versions of the normative white heteropatriarchal working or middle-class family in the countryside, which also similarly harkens back to my personal upbringing. But, through curation, alteration, and transformation, I break the codes of tradition and complicate these objects to not be understood simply as passive monuments or political gestures for the past. They instead stand within the present to slow down the assumed narratives between the “rural” as an imagined, innocent, timeless, and unchanging past and the “queer”, an



imagined future. By unhinging tradition from these objects and images in the work, I prompt contemplation and interrogation of social norms. Reflection urges the viewer to move beyond the literal and linear associations with them, as if their surfaces open up to imagine what could be beyond them.

In the piece ***My Mind is A Lonely Place (Father's Help)*** (fig. 4), a grouping of four found and altered ceramic collectible Norman Rockwell plates depict a queering of normative inheritance and understanding. The plates illustrate an ideal American scene of a young boy writing at a large desk with a father figure looking over his shoulder guiding and directing him, while the mother figure and cat are knitting and lounging in a chair beside. They all share a lamp as the central light source in the middle of the composition. These plates were marketed as “the only limited edition of *Father's Help* by Norman Rockwell, third in Rockwell's Light Campaign Series.”<sup>4</sup> In this series, which also includes *This is the Room that Light Made*, *Grandpa's Treasure Chest*, *Evening's Ease*, *Close Harmony*, and *Birthday Wish*, the objects of light are the focus of these images, quite literally enlightening these subjects into their assumed roles and their various interactions with each other in the scene.

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<sup>4</sup> Text found on back of the ceramic plates.



Fig. 4. *My Mind Is A Lonely Place (Father's Help)*, altered Norman Rockwell collectible plates, 9" x 40", 2019.

I have altered the original image and its romanticized ideals by incrementally erasing the individuals and objects from the surface of the plates by etching. In the first plate, the father figure is erased. Both visually and textually, we are normatively taught to interpret that the father figure holds (and withholds) the control and power of the scene. Although marketed thematically through objects of light, the father figure, in this case, is the one assisting the boy in learning, en"light"ening him toward the future. Although still present in silhouette, the erasure of the father figure depicts the beginning of the entire composition and related power structure collapsing. Without this figure to position everything else against, roles and characters begin to break down and a new space emerges.

In the fourth plate, the boy is left with only the gold luster rim that is identical across the entire edition of the plates. In the white negative space, a place for imagining the rest of the scene is suggested with only what is left. I have altered the found objects so that the void, rather than being negative, is presented as a blank space for imaginative potential. The plates have been queered, transformed through a series of alterations, to imagine a new beginning; they are still familiar, but have been shifted.

Utilizing the seriality of these collectible ceramics, this piece illustrates the transitional effects of erasure. The erasure references the original image from the past altered to create a space for the present, while also leaving room for a potential for different experiences with this image into the future. This re-presentation and queering of the image materializes what José Esteban Muñoz has defined as the process of disidentification, as “the third mode of dealing with dominant ideology, one that neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly opposes it.”<sup>5</sup> By removing the background and subjects from the Rockwell plates, the elements of the composition are removed from their intended scene and become icons and signifiers. These icons, when isolated either through the use of positive or negative space, question the archetypes, stereotypes, and assumptions the viewer may have about the figures in the image, their environment, or the original scene.

As an altered found object, the plates maintain their original form, which continues to utilize the language of their original distribution, aesthetics, and intended audience. However, the queering of the image and found object complicates the notions of an authenticity of the past and an originality of the future in relation to its value or collectability. First, through alteration, these objects are no longer a part of the limited

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<sup>5</sup> Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, p. 453-459.

edition of “one hundred fifty firing days” as was previously marketed. They have lost their value in the traditional collectible market, but have taken on another form of value through the personal and subjective re-writing of them. Secondly, the blank white space, overlaid onto the original scene is a result of my physical alterations. Rather than the composition beginning with a blank canvas, this one is a result of a whitening out of the previous composition. Even while disrupting notions of originality and authenticity, however, the references in this piece to the “original” painting by Norman Rockwell acknowledges its widespread influence on the shaping of identities, both mine and many other Americans. Through interrupting this image, these plates imagine and materialize a present queer existence that lives within the systems of normativity and exclusion.

### Politics of Performing

***Neither Here Nor There*** is a mixed-media investigation into the ways that domestic traditions and crafted objects inform and influence identity and subjectivities. Utilizing the idea that identities are co-constructed with the images and objects that surround us, this artwork is presented as an assemblage of found and crafted materials. In the gallery, these various cultural and regional signifiers are curated, composed, and re-presented alongside one another to emphasize the ways they accrue meaning beyond their intended contexts. In the piece, craft histories and the processes of patchwork quilt making, rug making, scrapbooking, and kitsch ceramic collectibles are assembled into a conglomerate to depict how these ways of making construct a queer sensibility through the deconstruction of clearly defined images and objects.

Using found images and thrifted objects, such as embroidery samplers, latch hook rug kits, ceramic figurines, and images of childhood game boards, this piece is a celebration and reclamation of things both literally and figuratively pushed aside or “swept under the rug”.<sup>6</sup> Some of the objects and techniques used reference a regionalism, specific to the traditions of Central Pennsylvania and Appalachian culture, while others reference popular and mass culture. Navigating between specific regionalisms and ubiquitous icons, these images, symbols, techniques, and methods depict inconsistencies and slippages that disrupt the dominant binaries of rural/urban, feminine/masculine, and queer/straight in a nuanced and complex embodiment.

The fluidity between images and objects and ways of forming relationships to the secondhand objects in this piece references the histories of coding and visual patterning within marginalized craft and queer communities. Coding is a system of signs and signifiers that communicate between people differently depending on the context and the viewer - being clear enough to the intended audience, while going totally unnoticed to outsiders.<sup>7</sup> The everyday banal quality of the mass-produced, mainstream imagery in

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<sup>6</sup> In the way that the presented gender scripts failed to wholly realize my experience as a child, the use of the thrift store, garage/estate sale, and online auctions as a means to source the materials for this piece is similar. In the thrift store, objects are not arranged by any systems of aesthetics or linearity. One must search and seek out a way that these objects relate to each other as a way to make sense of the multitude of cast-off secondhand objects. This way of navigating, flowing between the image and object and back, is again, an example of the queer imagination I nurtured as a child.

<sup>7</sup> For centuries, queer folks have used visual and verbal ways of coding while presenting in public, such as Polari, camp, and the hanky code. In these ways of presenting, during the times in which they were created, the object and the image or gestures are entangled within each other. Therefore, when one could not act out or speak of the desire for or engagement with “deviant sexual behavior”, an object or secret word could be used to signal without overtly defining or describing it, which could and would result in violence and imprisonment. Coding has also been used in marginalized craft communities for similar, but very different reasons. Secret symbolism and hidden images were used by enslaved Southern Black women in America to communicate directions toward freedom in the North in the making of Freedom Quilts, Chilean women in the making of arpilleras in response to the dictatorship of Pinochet in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, and more related to my own work, Amish and Pennsylvania Dutch men and women in

this work is contrasted by a personal queer sensibility of curation and coding in order to question its kitsch craft status and assumed lack of importance and disposability.

Using a child's play rug as a conceptual framework and visual references to board games, such as Life and Candyland, the work draws the viewer into an overwhelming patchwork of images and objects. From the top, elements that are more ubiquitous shower down, patched into the upward accumulation of a hooked rug background, made up of thousands of tiny pieces of acrylic yarn. Without a stable singular reference or direct linear narrative, it resists being described and defined, making it a tactile experience of fantasy. Using ubiquitous objects, icons, and signifiers as a reference to the normative, I am exploring how power and value is distributed and broken down through re-thinking what is expected of them. They are curated and collaged together to push against the normalizing forces of stable identification, naming, and stereotyping. In this piece, the material culture and its related forms and aesthetics from my childhood in Pennsylvania have evolved and shifted. Through associations with popular culture, I invite the viewer and their own experiences to visually participate in these narratives. The presence of queerness within the work creates a space where the viewer's perspective can be interrupted to suggest that their habits or ways of being could be performed differently.

This piece is also material evidence and a representation of rural queer visibility, because the statement from 1990 in *Queers Read This*, "everyday you wake up alive, relatively happy, and functioning as a human being, you are committing a rebellious act"

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making furniture, quilts, and ceramics that spoke to their own community as distinct and separate from other communities.

still rings true today.<sup>8</sup> This is especially important for those that live in or identify with the rural/Appalachian region, where lived experiences are deeply affected by “the nuanced truths of intergenerational poverty, systemic racism, toxic masculinity, absentee landlords, geographic isolation, the opioid epidemic, and what century after century of politicians instead of leaders can do to an isolated region.”<sup>9</sup>

### Daily Acts of Transformation

Individual identities and perceptions shift daily and are influenced by “the queerly constitutive role played by the non-human objects that surround us in private spaces.”<sup>10</sup> With the creation and distribution of ***Bobby as Blue Boy***, a collectible ceramic art object for the home, the figurine becomes a daily reminder to prompt a routine reflection for the viewer. The figurine’s aesthetics directly reference the traditions of Homco and Precious Moments figurines, which fit comfortably within the home. Using these familiar histories, this figurine presents itself as an unspectacular image, refusing the normative ideas of newness in relation to art and commodified functional objects. When this piece is placed within the domestic space over time, its presence is political - demarcating a space for small meaningful shifts in the viewer/user’s perception or sense of relation to it.

*Bobby as Blue Boy*, a miniature slip cast ceramic object of me in the role of the “runaway boy” character found in numerous Norman Rockwell images, is posed as the figure in the painting by Thomas Gainsborough often referred to as *Blue Boy*. Using these popular images as personas to cast myself, both in clay and in character,

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<sup>8</sup> *Queers: Read This*.

<sup>9</sup> Mamone and Meng, 199.

<sup>10</sup> Andrucki and Kaplan, 793.

presents a snapshot of a persona in my journey of exploring identity. It makes physical a frozen moment in time, but does not represent my whole self entirely. The thin layer of clay is a moment made permanent and acts as a stand-in for me as a small commemorative object. In the making of an art object from scans of my body and translating it into ceramic, art and life become entangled, materializing the collapse of the distance between the material culture of the home and the identities it influences and is influenced by. Its inability to embody wholeness also acknowledges the failure of a kitsch commemorative object, even in the present, to successfully represent or return entirely to an imagined nostalgic past. When made material and cast as the runaway boy outfitted in blue, my past, which has been altered through time and space, can never be returned to. This figurine is an object, but is flattened out as though it is a three-dimensional image, a clay photograph. Through this tugging on the present by this constructed artificial past fantasy, the viewer can then interrogate their experience with, or relationship to this object and their own sense of identity.

Habits become norms, normativity becomes knowledge, and knowledge is power. Reflecting on one's own actions and performance of identity is a conscious and intentional action to shift and redirect something already moving in an established direction. Much like those ripples in the creek in my childhood gave me time and space to reconfigure that reflection of myself as the water's surface smoothed back out again, this collectible figurine gives the viewer that in the comfort of their home. This object demands a slowing down, if not rerouting, of the assumed. This process can sometimes be difficult and challenging, which is why *Bobby as Blue Boy* belongs in the home, a



place where the viewer can make meaningful and important changes based on the reflections they see of themselves in relation to this object.

### Returning to the Source

A small moment with an inanimate domestic object, much like a ripple in the stream, may not seem like much, but its presence is sometimes enough. Its presence is a constant reminder that queerness and difference has existed, still exists, and will continue to exist and should be nurtured, celebrated, and in constant evolution toward the forms that best benefit queer lives and bodies everywhere.

In this thesis, I have used a spring-fed creek as a metaphor for the movement of culture and what happens when it diverges, pools, and/or is acted upon to create ripples. These ripples may be small, but they affect the reflection it bears. Past moments are fleeting, but new reflections are reconstructed through the past's fragmentation in another time and space. This reconstruction is similar to the way the mirror functions in the daily ritual of presenting/performing oneself before leaving the domestic to enter a public space. This ritual of repetitive self-fashioning, in many ways, can inform a daily renegotiation as a personal political act of transformation. In this daily act, I find hope and inspiration to look toward a future of continuing this art making practice.

So much has changed for me since that moment down by the creek, including learning, unlearning, moving in geography, and shifting in age and identity, but some things have also stayed the same. As Lydia McDermott says in her essay *The Creek is Crooked: Appalachia as Movable Queer Space*, "I am untangling my roots to re-

entangle them differently.”<sup>11</sup> I haven’t been back to the creek I used to play in as a child in quite some time, but maybe one-day I will be able to sit down beside that same stream of water and witness what is reflected back to me. Until then, I am filled with pride imagining the possibilities of what might be.

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<sup>11</sup> McDermott, 125.

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