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### Exactly What You Run From, You End Up Chasing

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## **Abstract**

This thesis paper titled “*Exactly What You Run From, You End Up Chasing*” summarizes and describes the photographic body of work I accomplished through the last three years of my life and academic journey I am now concluding at Syracuse University. It visually expresses my life as a brown queer young man, intersecting with my relationship with my own father, and my chosen family that consists of my husband, friends and lovers.

Exactly What You Run From, You End Up Chasing

by

David De Lira

A.A. SUNY Schenectady, 2017

B.A. SUNY University At Albany, 2019

Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts in Art Photography.

Syracuse University  
December 2023

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## **Introduction**

My latest and most personal, intimate, and vulnerable body of work to date is my thesis project, *Exactly What You Run From, You End Up Chasing*. The project itself visually expresses my life as a brown queer young man, intersecting with my relationship with my own father, and my chosen family that consists of my husband, friends and lovers.

The title of this body of work acknowledges my past, as an immigrant, and my present, as an American permanent resident in relationship to the men I continually tend to gravitate to, intimately and not. However, I am trying to explore our synergy as intimate queers. Who am I to them? And who are they to me? The answer is not clear, but both form a crucial part of each other's lives and construct different relationships with a similar core: love, intimacy, and desire.

This body of work is formally photographed in a medium format film camera and in full color. The conscious decision to photograph in this way comes from my own desire to showcase reality, the colors of our bare skin, and our physical environment. I think this creates a more honest image compared to my past work in black and white. This was a challenge initially, but the more I became invested in a color medium, the more my work started to flow. It became more natural and organic as I worked with it, and what I had envisioned began to appear in the images I have made.

The psychology of this body of work is ever-present. I start with my relationship with my father, who I never was able to satisfy due to my failure to act like a straight masculine boy, which was traumatic for me. I have carried the need for acceptance from older paternal figures throughout my life—some later become my lovers, friends, and ultimately a husband. All of this shaped the way I chose to live my life and brought me to where I am now. Freud would argue that in the act of transference we displace what we need inwardly onto an outward signifier. My

need for parental, particularly fatherly approval, manifests as an external transference on to the bodies of my older male lovers, wherein their embrace has, perhaps, psychologically manifested as a form of fatherly acceptance.



*Figure 1 Dad & I, 2022 by David De Lira*

Formally, the images I am displaying on the left wall are the landscape of my hometown, depicting a cross that represents the perished past of my life. The other one, a portrait of me and my father, an Iberic white Mexican man that I tend to follow his physiology to the men I get close to and photograph. The lands taken close to my current home, in a literal way, my history—the physical loci of my upbringing--has been crucified upon the cross of a dead past—it is a history that can no longer be my present, even though it's literal presence in my curatorship signals the way that this impossible-to-return-to past continues to impinge on my present.

As for my subjects, I am focusing on the most important ones: My father, my husband, Jeffrey. My best friends, and my most important lovers who have agreed to be part of my photographic subjects.



Working on this body of work has taught me to be the most vulnerable I have ever been, and at the same time, the most real and blatantly honest about my queer past and present. I articulate several layers that my work entails and hopefully translate these effortlessly to the audience who will witness the exhibition, along with faculty and peers.

Talking about this hasn't been easy, but the last few years that I have been in graduate school have taught me to open myself to all these themes that I have been holding off on for many years now. Presenting my subjects to a public gaze is also to expose the aspects of myself that I often prefer to keep hidden, making this project one of timid, though determined, voyeuristic expression. This project could not be more personal than it currently is, which is quite a liberating experience that I haven't had until now.



*Figure 2 Shame (Self-Portrait) 2022 by David De Lira*

I also want to connect with the audience as much as I can. The use of landscape, portraits, still-lives and diptychs open several points of entry that can make the work speak to the audience in one way or another, unfolding in an intimate experience. I want my audience to spend time looking at this work, analyzing it, understanding it, and feeling identified with it in ways unique to themselves. This work does not possess multiple layers simply for the sake of artistic technique, but because it depicts *real* experience, and I intend for it to resonate with whoever gets in contact with it.

The term *Queer Photography* can contain many aspects, nuances, styles, levels of transgression, care of the term and the many different meanings that being queer contains. Queer photography, in contrast, usually falls into a commercial cliché of portraits of young, “good-looking” and muscular men, posing merely for the act of being desired by the audience. My work is transgressive in that it dispenses with the need to produce queer photography for the sake of a hungry audience’s gaze. My works and my subjects are the opposite of those deemed conventionally attractive via queer society’s lens, capturing instead a desire to render those who are overlooked (i.e., deemed unattractive through stereotypical gay desires) as objects of genuine desire. My works clash with mainstream societies expectations and desires of beauty by rendering the unlovable, overlooked, and undesired as objects of intimacy and sexual softness.



*Figure 3 Scott & I, 2022 by David De Lira*

Audiences usually neglect my kind of art—people do not want to be exposed to the kind of subjects or bodies that I photograph. This could be the result of a sense of rejected familiarity, or simply the fact that this type of work has been missing from the archive. It should be normal. The subjects I photograph can be anyone’s neighbor, boss, father or even grandfather. Audiences do not want to be shown what they do not want to see. In a real sense, older and fat bodies are deemed “safe” only when they are “covered” or clothed. My work uncovers the societal

imposition against conventionally overlooked bodies by rendering them to a public gaze and raising them up as figures worthy of admiration—even love and desire.



*Figure 4 Evan & Paul, 2021 by David De Lira*

Queer artists who are getting shows, residencies, and awards are producing important work. In my assessment, any work of queer photography that renders the invisibility of queer bodies visible does a service to queer photography. For example, with individuals such as Catherine Opie, there has been a tradition of queer photography that uses traditional portraiture techniques to both normalize queerness but also destabilize the center of traditional portraiture.

Mainstream society has long been known to champion conventionally attractive bodies--muscular and toned bodies in the case of men, skinny women with large breasts for women. Capitulating to these forms of stereotypic beauty in queer photography reinforces a heteronormative stereotype of beauty within the queer register.

From the earliest days of my artistic career, my work has been questioned, doubted, turned around, and censored. The work I present in this thesis is unapologetic, honest, transgressive and most importantly, real. The intersection with commonly known subject matters such as landscape and floral imagery, which I usually incorporate in my work, contrasts

dramatically with my intimate partners who are also my subjects. These act as points of entry, a direct romanticization of what I want to transmit to the audience.



*Figure 5 Cielo, 2022 by David De Lira*



*Figure 6 Cielo Rojo, 2022 by David De Lira*

## **CHAPTER ONE: Early Work and Life**

Photography has been present throughout my entire life. Since I was a little kid, my family had an old 16-millimeter Minolta Weather Matic camera that I used to play with, even if it did not have film. Self-Portraits were, for the most part, the most accessible ways for me to explore with the photographic medium.

Then, the affordable computers and internet era arrived, allowing me to make images with a webcam and a Windows 95 desktop computer. Then, the revolution of compact digital cameras reached me, opening more possibilities to casually explore the medium as recreation, without knowing I wanted to be a photographer in the future.

When I first started photographing, I photographed the land I stepped on and made self-portraits. Years later, after rediscovering and fully accepting my inherent queerness, I began

photographing the men I had intimate encounters with as a way of visualizing me, them, and us in an external form in order to materialize and make publicly visible what happens behind closed doors in the life of an individual like me. This decision felt not like exhibitionism, but documentary.

Early self-portraits represented innate needs for expressing my own identity as a brown queer individual. Not the mainstream way of creating the mainstream construct of *selfies*, but rather, using whatever apparatus was in my hands to make a self-timer portrait of myself, a practice that I currently still use in my current work--either with solemn self-portraits or portraits of me and my partners.

Intersecting with my interest in the medium, my queer life had always been present in everything I made until I later realized that I could fuse these two and externalize all the themes that I had been interested and, at the same time, had been hiding from the public. I realized that producing work with these closed-door themes was incredibly liberating, and even healing, after going through so much pain trying to hide who I really was. Marking myself as “here” through the time-stopping medium of photography revealed to my own self an indelible mark—it was literally through the process of photographing myself and my subjects that I was able to finally *see* myself and my lovers as objects worthy of visibility.

Some of these themes represent the inherent desire to satisfy my parent’s expectations as academic and working individuals, things that I never succeeded to achieve, especially for the eyes of an old-school businessman family guy. Photography opened doors I never thought would open. It allowed me to show the world, without words, who I really am, who I desire, and who I love.



*Figure 7 Richard & I, 2022 by David De Lira*

## **CHAPTER TWO: Queerness, Dislocation, Land, Intergenerational & Interracial Love**

My thesis work, *Exactly What You Run From, You End Up Chasing*, explores my polyamorous queer intimacy along with the intergenerational and interracial relationships with my American chosen family—my husband, friends, and lovers. I explore these themes along with my observations of the land my subjects and I share simultaneously.

I position myself and my gaze as an outsider who later became an adoptive native, and how this land impacted my life and the way I make work. The dramatically changing seasons,

the greenery and fertile land contrasting with the bleak and dark cold days. Opposites that coexist harmoniously, as well as me and my subjects, created a balanced relationship.



*Figure 8 Peter & I, 2021 by David De Lira*



*Figure 9 Behind Our House, 2022 by  
David De Lira*

In this written thesis and exhibition, I am communicating these themes that have been part of my life and artistic vision through my main medium, photography.

During the making of this project, I learned how to be fully vulnerable inside and out of the frame of my camera, and at the same time, showing and exploring the vulnerability of the men I photograph.

The intention of this work is not only to show our clear body differences interacting with each other, but also to communicate that non-traditional love and desire is more common than what people may think. Most of the general Western public views my relationships as taboo, fiction, or merely transactional. I try to make these relationships as real as possible— they are taken in film format, using natural light, minimal touch ups, and most importantly, they are taken during an honest shared moment of intimacy between me and my subjects. I am attempting to translate the honesty of our encounters.

I use the camera as an instrument of self-discovery and have learned how to integrate it in my private life organically in order to achieve the images I make. While the photographs each hold a specific emotional meaning, they are also a documentation of this private life that we share and that I eagerly try to show to my audience as an act of self-acceptance. Many of my photographs are taken inside my home and inside the homes of my subjects. Like Mapplethorpe's *Brian Ridley and Lyle Heeter*, 1979, I attempt to bring that which is "hidden" or "taboo" into the open—into communal spaces, such as living rooms, or on the stairs, or in dining rooms. Sexual copulation, especially queer copulation, is supposed to remain private and relegated, always, to the bedroom. Photographing in recognizable home spaces is intended to capture the commonality, and perhaps even mundanity, of queer sexuality within the home space.



*Figure 10 Brian Ridley and Lyle Heeter, 1979  
By Robert Mapplethorpe*



*Figure 11 Jeffrey & I, 2022 by David De Lira*

*Exactly What You Run From, You End Up Chasing* is the evolutionary result of two previous bodies of work that explore similar themes in a more superficial way. This body of work is the most intimate and honest work I have created thus far in my photographic career.



This is the one that I have been most excited to create and show, but at the same time, the one that I have been more fearful about, due its stripped-down nature, both figuratively and formally.

While creating these photographs, I push myself to disassociate from the opinions and shame that the nature of my work can evoke from either family or other relatives who do not know me in that way. It has also been an act of freedom from the same shame that kept me and many other queers silenced since ancient times.

This body of work has many other layers underneath the visible ones: trauma, migration, race, sociopolitical context, body positivity and ageism, to name a few.

### **CHAPTER THREE: Influences and Inspiration**

I divide these sources into artistic and intellectual parts. Formally I explore other classical and contemporary artists whose mediums are painting, photography, and film. I discuss how these have inspired me compositionally and their impact on how I envision my photographic work, also paying attention to lighting, poses, foreground and background, color and gestures.

Contemporary photographers such as Mark McKnight, Matthew Morocco, and Clifford Prince King have influenced my work dramatically, opening the door to themes that my own work explores. These include gay intimacy, sexuality, desire, and race. I have been drawn to them and their themes photographically and theoretically, making me feel part of their tribe of queer photographers engaging similar subjects.



*Figure 12 Worship, 2021 by Mark McKnight*



*Figure 13 Jug of Change, 2019 by Clifford Prince King*

Queer photographers such as Jimmy De Sana, Felix González Torres, and of course Robert Mapplethorpe have strongly influenced my work, especially in finding the guts to be able to make the work I make, as well as influencing me visually and contextually. Their unfiltered and honest way to depict to the general audience the struggles, joys and in-between feelings of being gay men in times of the AIDS epidemic influenced my work, specifically that I made this body of work during the COVID-19 pandemic, that made me understand the risks of intimate and physical contact with other people taking the risk of getting infected. Contemporary artists such D'Angelo Lovel Williams and Clifford Prince King who deal with gay love and intimacy as people of color who are HIV positive have strongly influenced my work, especially with the risks of interactions with vulnerable queer subjects.

This work was all made during this time, taking in account that most of my subjects are older and prone to the disease, it was a challenge for the to engage intimately with them. We always made sure we were tested and safe for each other to participate and become intimate. The fear was always there, especially for them, however, both parties risked it in order to obtain what we both needed, touch, feelings and physical passion.

At the same time, I also draw attention to classical painters who have inspired my artistic vision. Since I have a bachelor's degree in Art History, these were the pivotal sources and inspirations to my own work after years of research and observations. Some of them are Caravaggio, Donatello, and Michelangelo.

Intellectually, I explore books and articles that discuss related themes, including historical queerness, familial dynamics, human relationships with their natural surroundings, immigration or land displacement, and cultural exchanges that I convey in my work and support the several layers that position my own self and the self of my subjects and the land we both share.

These include Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands / La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, which vociferously explores the experiences of immigrant queers in the United States, and articulates the struggles we must go through, coupled with what it takes to overcome those struggles and embrace this new land and learn to be part of it and coexist with its residents. Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands's *Queer Ecologies* has helped me to explore the relationship between humans and land, and how heterosexuals and homosexuals share a similar, but at the same time, rather different relationship with nature, and how these intersect to each other, which has become an important theme in my research and visual work.

Films such *Gerontophilia* (Bruce LaBruce, 2013) and *A Single Man* (Tom Ford, 2009) explore the lives of older gay men who have fallen in love with younger men, drawing an intimate link to my own life and the lives of my subjects. These, like mine, explore intergenerational desire, loneliness, invisibility within the gay community, and the longing for touch and physical intimacy.



*Figure 14 Still Image from Gerontophilia  
a Film by Bruce LaBruce*



*Figure 15 Still Image from A Single Man  
a Film by Tom Ford*

The beginning of my academic career was in Art History. I completed my undergraduate degree in 2019, focusing on queerness during the Renaissance era, culminating in my written thesis on the queer aspects of Donatello's work, specifically the *David*. As research found by Adrian Randolph in *Homosocial Desire and Donatello's Bronze David*.

The research I completed during that time vastly inspired me with the queer representation in the arts long ago, some more explicit than others but still present in some way if one knew how to look. It made me think of myself as a queer creative individual, and of my potential to be part of this representation in my own lifetime, through contemporary photography.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: The Present**

The history of photography also contains many instances of queerness through its short lifetime. The archive contains such images from professional photographers and regular people who had access to a camera and decided to capture their intimate lives. All these nuanced images, which have been present throughout history but often hidden have stroked me and made me more interested in the craft and the depths that photography can achieve in humanity. Especially that it captures visual realities, scenes that happened and were frozen in time.

The absence of visible queer artists in Mexico also has inspired me to become one, and represent the country I was born and grew up in. The hyper-masculinity from the north of Mexico, where I am from, has been something that I ran from, an aspect that I never was part of. This region has been very influenced by Texas's cowboy culture, because of their geographical proximity and the already inherent homophobic culture that I grew up with.



*Figure 16 Behind The Place I Left, 2022 by David De Lira*

The fact of being a boy with artistic behaviors and a passion for the visual and aesthetic forms and practices was already quite alarming to our parents. I was that, going against the current that the mainstream population wanted me to

I decided to pursue this career in the United States and be part of the artistic world here that also suffers from a lack of silenced voices and representations in art, even if to a lesser degree than my home country.

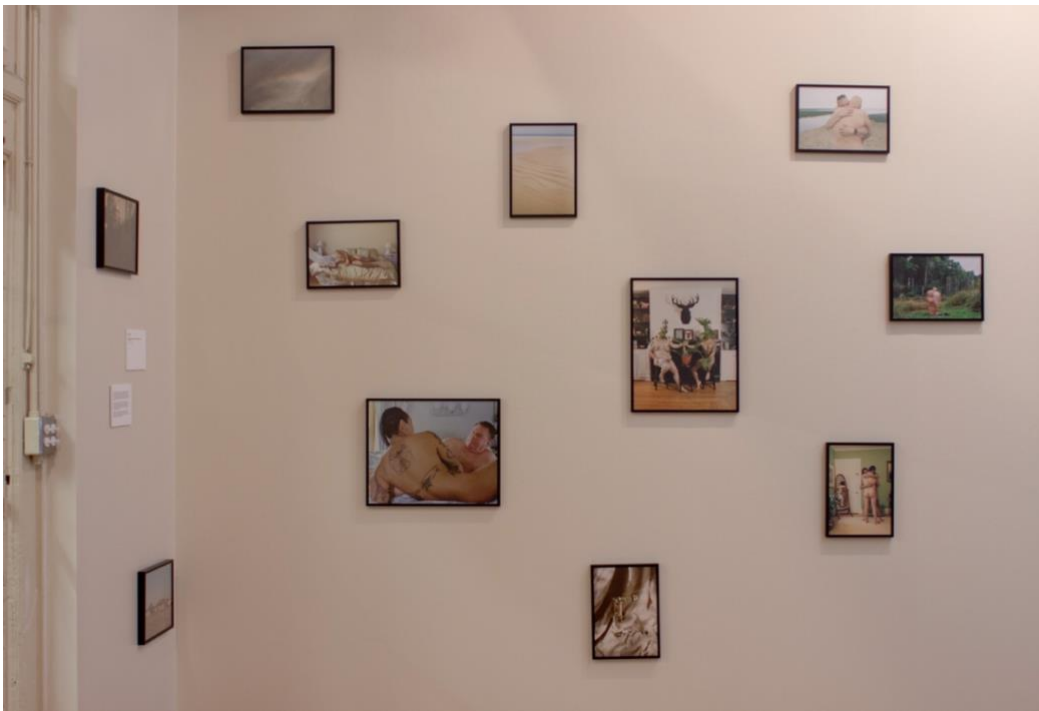
However, what I have encountered in the United States queer photographic community is that people of color usually photograph people of color, and white photographers usually photograph other white subjects. My subjects are often and primarily white, since I was introduced to America primarily from my husband, an educated white gay man from central New York.

I learned to navigate the gay community through that white privilege I was adopted in. It was easier for me to interact with those who share that identity through my familiarity to my married life. White men have always been my main sexual and intimate interest. I have followed that path after my own father's image, and the lovers I always have had since I have use of memory.

Me, as a person of color have encountered a lack of this racial dynamic in the contemporary world of photography. One of my intentions in terms of my subjects is to counterbalance these norms that have been happening in terms of the relationships between the photographer and the subject. As a brown individual gazing white individual, the roles of power change dramatically. Historically, the white gaze has been the one who pictures minorities due their privileged position. I disrupt this practice and put myself as the POC gaze portraying my alabastine subjects.

Despite our differences in skin color and history, we are still queers who are disadvantaged, and that is what links us, besides desire and love. The socio-politics behind our skin color, age and background are inherently present, but subtly pictured in the images I make.

Photographically, this is the most ambitious body of work I have ever created. Besides having primordially, a written thesis, it has been the culmination of several of the ideas and images I have been creating fictionally and realistically through my MFA program. It is the culmination of such an important part of my personal and creative life, and it has taken a lot of courage, time and effort to make it happen and exhibit it to a general audience.



*Figure 17 Installation Image, Left Side, 2023 by David De Lira*



*Figure 18 Installation Image, Middle View, 2023 by David De Lira*



*Figure 19 Installation Image, Right View, 2023 by David De Lira*



## CONCLUSION

*Exactly What You Run From, You End Up Chasing*, consolidates the artistic work I have made in the most recent years of my life and reflects the deepest and darkest secret love affairs of my life. And, at the same time, theirs. This body of work would have not been possible without the trust that I have been building with each of my subjects and vice versa.

This body of work is a collaborative project that my subjects' willingness has enabled me to successfully finish. They have been willing to contribute to my own work and vision, without leaving behind their own voices and underappreciated life experiences as closeted and opened queer individuals.

This has been an intimate and public project altogether that my subjects and I have managed to create while respecting and accepting each other's boundaries in order to publish the information and visual content of the project. It has been an act of reciprocal trust, and most importantly, love for each other.

Besides the personal liberation from my own apprehension about my intimate life experiences, *Exactly What You Run From, You End Up Chasing* has served as a model of self-love and acceptance for an unknown audience. This healing experience has cost me years of therapy and self-acceptance in order to achieve a successful and artistic appreciation of what my personal life has been as a queer BIPOC man living in America.

As an artist and educator, this project has taught me that I should not be afraid to show myself and my intimate relationships publicly in order to create a harmonious and relatable connection simply between human beings. As such, we strive to find our own kind in order to feel belonging, and I did. I did find the tribe that made me feel part-of no matter what the rest of the mainstream and heteronormative society would think about it.

I found the strength among the weak and managed to build strength and build community between them, my lovers and subjects, and me.

As a prospective immigrant brown queer graduate and educator, I am looking forward to keeping working on the relationship between art and practice, altogether to the intimacy of the artists producing these and their subjects, breaking boundaries between race, gender, orientation and identity.

As an exhibition, statement and context, I have achieved a body of work that has been part of my life for the last seven years. However, this is not a finished work for the future of my artistic career. I have come to the realization that this will be a body of work that will still be evolving at least for the few next years of my life, if so.

Although, this work feels complete, I know there are still more images I still want to create within the same realm, aesthetics and context that at this point I have not been able to create. My work takes time to produce, since I do not choose my subjects randomly. Along to the lands, flowers and geographical locations that I would like to photograph in order to consider this a finished project.

Weather, feelings, location and willingness to achieve the images this project requires takes more than a few years, but what I have done so far and will be exhibited is a great example of the potential *Exactly What You Run From, You End Up Chasing* has, and at its right time, will have to conclude for me to move on.

My creative process has a lot of steps in order to produce a single image that can successfully translate to the audience and make a remarkable impression to them. This is only the beginning.

## **200 Word Artist Statement**

*Exactly What You Run From, You End Up Chasing* visually expresses my life as a brown queer young man, intersecting with my relationship with my own father, and my chosen family that consists of my husband, friends and lovers. At the same time, my brown indigenous immigrant body contrasts with the whiteness of my subjects, constructing a post-colonial multitude of complex dynamics that I not only depict photographically, but also question throughout my journey in the world without clear answers.

The men I photograph, who are my intimate comrades, confidants, and lovers, display the visible wear of age much more than my own body—their bodies, often overlooked for showing their age and size, attract only a vestige of gay society's endless appetite for youth. My art reclaims their bodies as worthy of validation, pride, and celebration.

Intertwined with the bodies of my subjects, flowers, trees and landscape serve as metaphors for love, passion and desire to purity, innocence or even death. I am interested in showing how we are connected in many different aspects of our lives, consciously photographing the soil and water we do not own, but we share.

## **500 Word Artist Statement**

I relocated to the United States from Mexico eight years ago—a relocation that dramatically ruptured my intimate and familial relationships, thrusting me into a world that I'm still learning to navigate, while I build new intimate and familial relationships.

Queerness represents the nucleus of my work, my own embodiment, and the subject of my photographic gaze: those who occupy the margins of heteronormative society. My subjects share my body, and I theirs. The physicality and camaraderie between my Self and the Self of my subjects produces a casual intimacy and vulnerability, one that I hope grows into a sense of shared familiarity with my audience by relating to the subjects that I photograph, usually being non-glorified bodies, rather, ordinary white bodies with aging signs that most of the audience would relate to.

Formally, I use a medium-format and 35 mm film camera, natural light, and a slow working method to combine a traditional style of photography, contemporary subject matter, and the classic compositional elements dating from the Renaissance to modernist painting. Painters I admire include Caravaggio, Donatello, Manet, and Michelangelo. I consciously use the elements of light, color, gesture, and pose to imbue my photographs with emotional and psychological intensity. My work does not attempt to provide definitive answers. Rather, I invite viewers to engage with others in an intimate, meaningful way, requiring them to reflect on their own identities in the process.

Intertwined with the bodies of my subjects, flowers, trees and landscape serve as metaphors for love, passion and desire to purity, innocence or even death. I am interested in

showing how we are connected in many different aspects of our lives, consciously photographing the soil and water we do not own, but we share.

My latest and most personal, intimate, and vulnerable body of work to date is my thesis project, *Exactly What You Run From, You End Up Chasing*. The project itself visually expresses my life as a brown queer young man, intersecting with my relationship with my own father, and my chosen family that consists of my husband, friends and lovers. At the same time, my brown indigenous immigrant body contrasts with the whiteness of my subjects, constructing a post-colonial multitude of complex dynamics that I not only depict photographically, but also question throughout my journey in the world without clear answers.

The title of this body of work acknowledges my past, as an immigrant, and my present, as an American permanent resident in relationship to the men I continually tend to gravitate to, intimately and not. However, I am trying to explore our synergy as intimate queers. Who am I to them? And who are they to me? The answer is not clear, but both form a crucial part of each other's lives and construct different relationships with a similar core: love, intimacy, and desire.

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## **Vita**

David De Lira (he/him/his) is a queer, BIPOC, lens-based artist born in 1991, raised in northern Mexico, De Lira currently residing in Schenectady, New York. De Lira holds a BA in Art History & Studio Art from SUNY Albany (2019) and is currently pursuing an MFA in Art Photography at Syracuse University.

De Lira has been teaching Analog Photography & Darkroom as part of his teaching assistantship at Syracuse University for two years and spent the Fall 2022 semester in Berlin, Germany, in an awarded art residency. De Lira expects to complete his MFA in the summer of 2023. He has exhibited his photographic work locally, nationally and internationally.