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Abstract

Through this MFA thesis I embark on an exploratory voyage, not to find solid ground, but rather an exploration at sea, where the tides and currents of masculinity, transmasculinity, place finding, and self-identification ebb and flow. This expedition is less a search for answers and more an odyssey of asking questions that inevitably beget even more questions. Through a series of multimedia works, including sculptures, installations, and drawings, I begin to tease out the dissonant relationship between the trans narrative and conventional understandings of time and space.

Time moves differently here.

Not Quite, But Not Quite Not

by

Markus Denil

B.F.A. Concordia University, 2019

Thesis

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

Syracuse University
May 2024

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Graduate school was no easy task, and it would not have been possible, or as profitable for me without the guidance and support from so many people.

These are a few of them:

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“By the way,” Doc Edwards said. “How’s the book coming along?”

“Oh, it’s coming along.”

“Fine. What’s it about?”

“Just what I’m writing down: one word after another.”

“Good.”

– Richard Brautigan, *In Watermelon Sugar* (1968 129)

The thought of writing an MFA thesis is confounding. Adding my thoughts and ideas into the world in an attempt to move the conversation about life and art forward is both exhilarating and stultifying. Here, with the generous help of those around me who have supported my growth along my journey, I present to you just what I am writing down, one word after another.

To be trans is to exist apart.

To be trans is to be human.

I was born with gender trouble. I landed on this planet in 1990—the same year that Judith Butler’s groundbreaking work, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, was published. This confluence of timing is like a thread that has bound my existence to the continuing discourse on gender identity. These identity concerns—growing from an early, inexpressible, sense of dysphoria through my developing understanding and eventually to the onset of my social and then medical transition, and the journey on from there—have always played a significant role in my life and work, at times more consciously than others. This thread,

traceable all the way back to my very beginnings, is what ties me to my current research—guiding me as I navigate through the uncharted and tumultuous waters of a human life and artistic career.

Transgender identities and experiences disrupt conventional understandings of time and space. The lives and bodies of queer and trans people exist outside of normative timelines and spatial boundaries, challenging societal expectations related to gender and identity. This incongruous relationship creates an inextricable link between the trans narrative and a discussion of time. I have often felt the temporal dissociation and spatial displacement of my own trans body in my lifetime. Time itself is out of joint—*my* time is out of joint—and, in a manner similar to the way my body realigns—it is utterly disordered.

My Master of Fine Art study constitutes a new and deeper phase of this evolution. Guided by my personal experience and informed by the insights of queer theorists and artists, I delve deeper into these complex themes. By harnessing my irreverence through a playful yet pointed subversion, I have begun to tease out the varied and discordant aspects of the transmasculine experience, and to examine them in ways I could not have anticipated before.

Through this MFA thesis I embark on an exploratory voyage, not to find solid ground, but rather an exploration at sea, where the tides and currents of masculinity, transmasculinity, place finding, and self-identification ebb and flow. This expedition is less a search for answers and more an odyssey of asking questions that inevitably beget even more questions. I am weaving an ever-evolving tapestry of understanding that is as intricate as the gender identity I seek to fathom.

Time.

There's no time here, not anymore

– Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life* (2014 13)

I've always been plagued with an intense fear of time, born of a veneration for the relentless and unforgiving power of its constant march. Even as a very young child, I never felt like there was going to be enough of it to make any meaningful headway or lasting change. These feelings were intensified by the thought that I was stuck where I was, somewhere that I knew was so deeply wrong for me. My alterity seemed to define me in every facet of my young life. No matter which direction I cast my gaze in the people with whom I found myself surrounded by seemed fundamentally different from me in innumerable ways. The limits of my knowledge and experience made it impossible for me to fully grasp or articulate my discomfort, but it was there.

There was never any pushback from my parents when I picked out clothing meant for 'boys', swam topless at the beach, or when I asked to have my hair buzzed off. To onlookers my prepubescent body was visually indistinguishable from that of any other little boy, but somehow it still didn't *feel* quite right. It was something about where I was, my body just didn't seem to fit the space I was in, and I knew that sooner rather than later I would begin to change in uncontrollable ways making visible my incongruence with the 'boyhood' I longed to inhabit.

A short time after my parents' divorce, my father returned as an MFA candidate to the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (NSCAD)—the place where both he and my mother had met

almost two decades prior, and where both had received BFA degrees. My biweekly weekend trips to Halifax to visit him were most often filled with art: trips to the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, the Anna Leonowens gallery on campus, and to the studios of other masters students who were studying alongside my dad. Through the hazy memory of long-passed events, there are fleeting moments that still stand out to me as I think back to that time. It was then that I learned that art could, and did, take many different forms, and I saw that people could, and did, undertake deeply engrossing studies of issues that would never even occur to most of the other people I encountered day to day. While many of the things I saw held references and clues that went well above my head, the experience was formative and primed me for my own formal artistic education.

One particular event that I've heard retold to me many times by my father is when I saw a banana sitting on a shelf in one of the studios. It had already been sitting there for some time with the artist observing and taking note of its appearance. While the conversation I had with this man has long escaped my memory, according to my father I asked a variety of questions about how and why this investigation was taking place. What I *do* remember quite well was arriving back at my mother's home at the end of that weekend and urgently requesting that she take me to the grocery store so that I too could acquire a banana and inspect it as it succumbed to the effects of time as it sat on my bedroom windowsill.

Time echoes. We repeat ourselves; we repeat each other. At times our dissonant and erratic movements align perfectly, creating harmonious synchrony. We become a living canon, moving in rounds.

I've changed a lot since those days—physically, for sure. I've had my body sliced into and altered. I've artificially boosted my testosterone level to that of a “typical adult male”¹. I've had my birth certificate, passport, and other legally identifying documents reissued in both Canada and the United States so they now list me as *male*. Yet, even after all this work, I still find myself haunted by the unrelenting passage of time and the looming sense that the spaces and places I occupy were simply not designed for someone like me.

...the transgender body functions in relation to time and space as a rich site for fantasies of futurity and anachronism...

– Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place* (2005 15)

Locked and loaded.

There's a monster in the room—sinister, lurking, underfoot—in the very foundations upon which our modern world is built. It hides in the shadows, seeps out through the walls, and permeates the very air we breathe.

It's easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of ...

– Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism* (2009 1)

As you take the stage and navigate the labyrinthine pathways of culture, power, and tradition, you walk atop unsteady ground where an insidious, potent paradigm lies omnipresent, influencing our society, often in unexamined and unacknowledged ways. We built it: this is a

¹ Gardner, Ivy H, and Joshua D Safer. “Progress on the road to better medical care for transgender patients.” *Current opinion in endocrinology, diabetes, and obesity* vol. 20,6 (2013): 553-8. doi:10.1097/01.med.0000436188.95351.4d

system of our design and prolongation, and now we must find a way to reckon with this monster of our own making.

We hold each other captive. We demand answers, definitions, and descriptions, all in easily digestible forms. Change and evolution are swiftly stomped out. People are forced back into the tiny cells that we've designed for them—and if they don't fit, it must be due to some lack on their part.

Who are you?

What are you?

What *type* of artist are you?

So, are you a *man*?

It's *your own fault* you're in there—you answered the questions, *you* designed your room, *you* locked the door. By making each one complicit in their own subjugation we wash our hands of the guilt and can continue on living in ignorant bliss. No need to complicate our lives by learning anything too new or too complex. We simply hop back into the stream and let the current carry us on our way.

I've been through over a decade of post-secondary arts education by now. Over that time, I have seen a slow adoption of the land acknowledgment being read at the beginning of each new class. I watched as mediocre enthusiasm turned to begrudging obligation and eventually to a settled and expected routine of educators rattling off a quick paragraph at the beginning of their first lecture. What started as an act of resistance, as a conscious witnessing of the historical events

and of the violent atrocities that brought us here to this place, on this land, has been systematized and automated into a boiler-plate statement.

I have also witnessed saw the rise in the ubiquity of pronoun sharing as part of class/group introductions, so much so that it is now considered strange or non-inclusive to begin a class without quickly circling around the room to have each person publicly announce their respective label. I have always had mixed feelings about these pronoun sharing activities. While pronouns, at their core, are simply words that we use to talk about people, they carry a tremendous amount of social weight and meaning. Not only are people suddenly required to define themselves concisely for the group, and to accept the baggage that implicitly comes with whatever pronouns are chosen, but they are quickly locked into that choice. The act, in many ways, seems antithetical to the project of queer theory.

In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler lays out the notion that our identities aren't inherent or fixed but are rather constructed and performed through our actions, behaviors, and societal norms. Our expressions and performances of identity are not simply a reflection of an essential self, but actively contribute to shaping and creating that identity. Publicly announcing one's pronouns when joining a new class or group activity is one of those contributing actions, but rather than a statement of internal fact, which is how it so often seems to be taken, it should be understood as one moment in an ongoing process of *becoming*. Butler's perspective implies that there is no fixed endpoint to achieving a specific gender identity. Instead, gender identity formation is an ongoing process that is never fully completed. Individuals are constantly engaged in performing

and reperforming their gender in response to social contexts and interactions. This process is dynamic, always open to change, and never settles into a final or complete form.

...the transgender body performs self as gesture not as will, as possibility not as probability, as relation...

– Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place* (2005 97)

My practice

Using my personal experiences of marginalization, temporal displacement, and spatial dissociation as an entry point, I explore, examine, and ask questions about the world through which I move. I contend with the haunting forces of time and space, and struggle to understand and contextualize them. All the work I make is connected by the thread of transness that runs through my life, but I want to take this opportunity to explore a few significant works that exemplify my exploration of the themes that follow me: *Untitled (216 vials)*, *Untitled (2704 needles)*, and ‘*Terrible Time*’–*And Hope*’, all from 2022, as well as some works from my most recent project *Monster*, that was started in 2023 and is still ongoing.

Untitled (216 vials)

Untitled (216 vials) is a sculptural work that ties me, my body, and my existence to a physical timeline. A soft white grid of unglazed porcelain vials is displayed on a soft white panel, contained within a soft white wooden frame, hung in a soft white room. Each vial sits on its very

own stainless-steel shelf. It appears, at first glance, so innocuous that you hardly notice what it is you are looking at. It speaks so softly you likely won't hear it unless you stop to listen. Modeled on my own lifespan, this piece counts backward to February 7, 2019: the day when I first began taking testosterone injections, and then forward to the projected life expectancy for the average Canadian male². With multiple doses in each vial, 216 is the projected number of vials I will require for my entire lifetime. The repeated forms reflect one another while flattening time, bring the past forward and the future back, all to meet in one quiet moment—in one quiet room. The solemn act of counting from past to present and from present to a finite future translates something so amorphous as a human life into a tangible physical state.

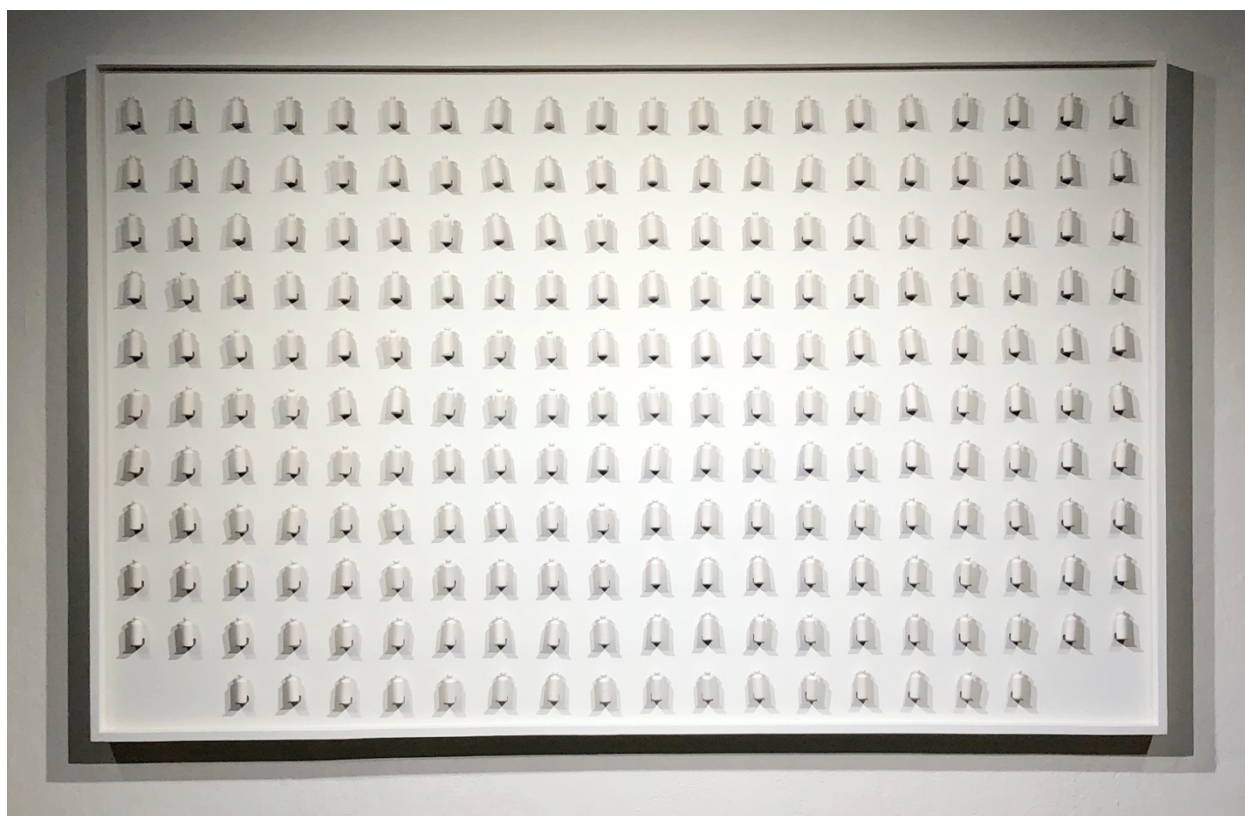


Fig 1. *Untitled (216 vials)*, 2022

² Statistics Canada. Table 13-10-0409-01 Life expectancy at birth and at age 65, by province and territory, three-year average. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25318/1310040901-eng>



Fig 2. *Untitled (216 vials)* (detail), 2022

Untitled (2704 needles)

Untitled (2704 needles) sits on the floor, displayed as a companion piece to *Untitled (216 vials)*.

Framed in the same soft white wood, the shallow box holds a grid of 2704 hypodermic needles that have been meticulously and delicately placed. The needles point upward, and the shiny metal of their shafts reflects the light as you move around the piece. The sharp points glisten, and the moiré pattern created from so many perpendicular lines in close proximity makes the entire piece difficult to perceive visually.



Fig 3. *Untitled (2704 needles)*, 2022

Each of these two works both reflects, and converses with, the other. The soft and quiet moments of pause aim to encourage a moment of self-reflection, introspection, and contemplation. Two different units are used to measure the same distance of time, and each one folds into itself to take on a different physical form. Restricted by the sides of the boxes holding it, the lifetime measured is finite, but also incomplete. It is not quite the adult portion of a lifetime, nor is it simply the trans portion. By physically objectifying the segment of life that represents my transmasculine hormonal transition, I can inspect a small part of the complex and nebulous form of my existence from a concrete vantage point.

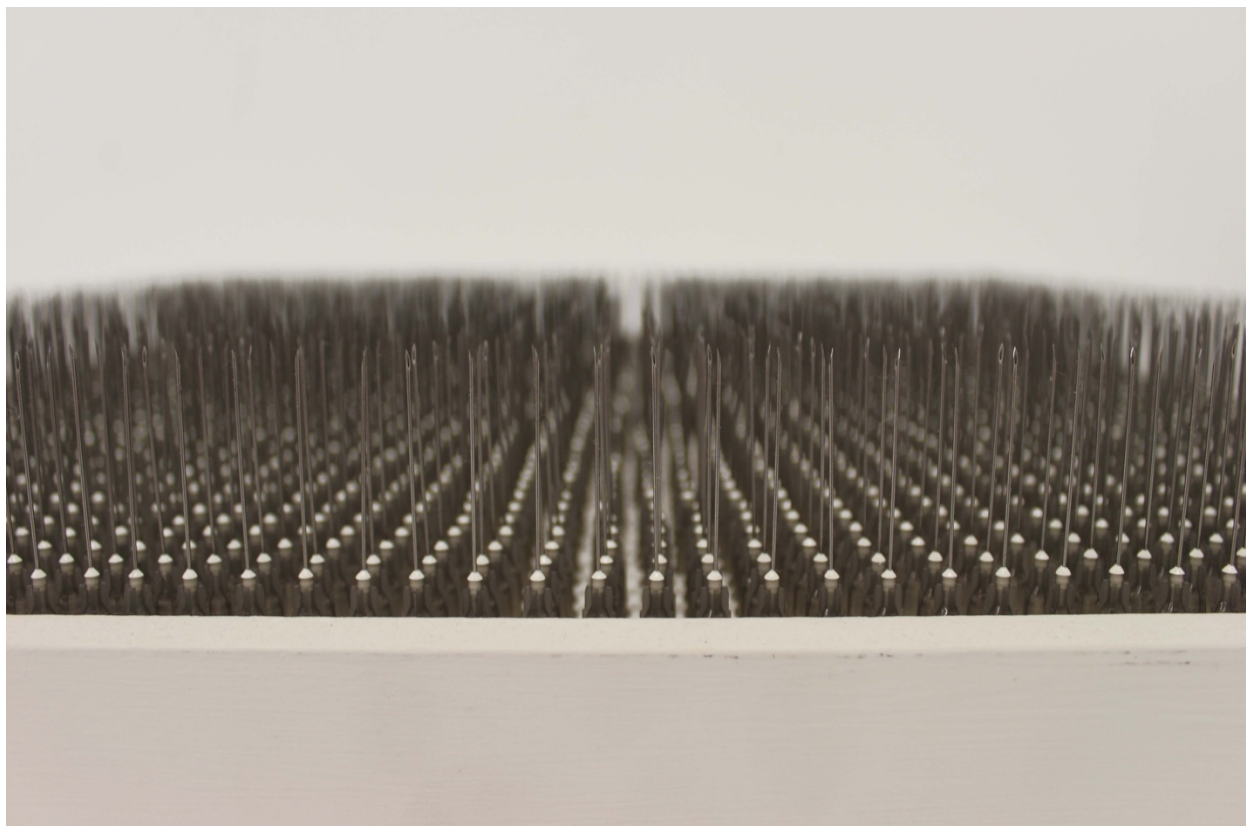


Fig 4. *Untitled (2704 needles)* (detail), 2022

My time is out of joint, but I can anchor small bits of it.

These pieces draw from the visual language employed by the artist collective General Idea (Jorge Zontal, AA Bronson, and Felix Partz) in *One Year of AZT*, 1991 and *One Day of AZT*, 1991, a set of pieces often exhibited together in the same room. In drawing inspiration from General Idea's work, my own artistic exploration—while distinct in subject matter, materiality, timeframe, and scale—serves as an homage to the powerful essence captured in their pieces.

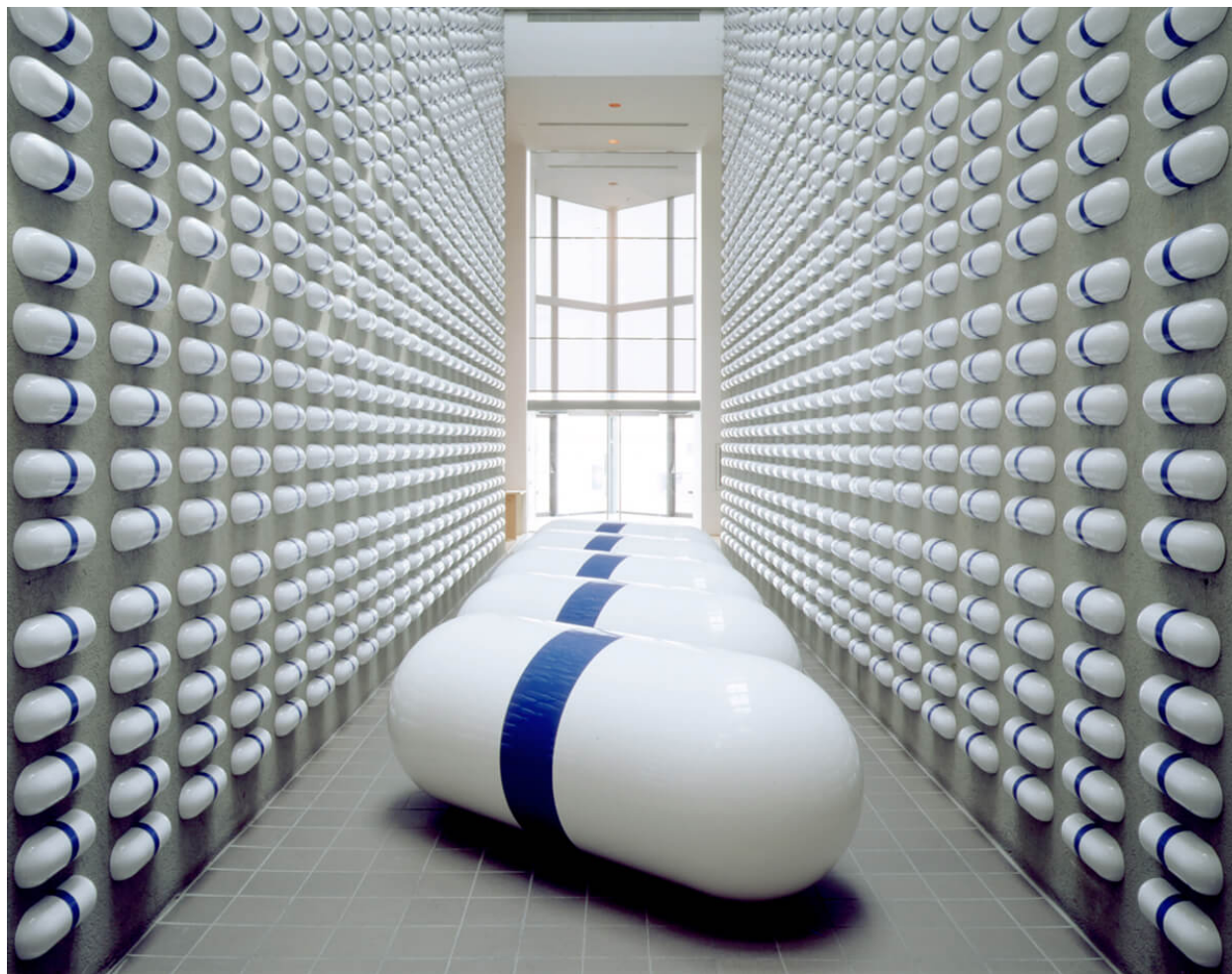


Fig 5. General Idea, *One Year of AZT*, 1991; *One Day of AZT*, 1991

One Year of AZT, 1991 is an installation made of a towering, grid-like structure composed of vacuum-formed pills, representing a year's supply of AZT (azidothymidine), the first medication approved in the treatment of HIV/AIDS. The 1825 units correspond to the exact amount of Felix Partz's annual dosage at the time of making. The structure, with its repetition and scale overwhelms and envelopes the viewer, evoking both a sense of urgency and the burden imposed by the daily consumption of medication, encapsulating the experience of living with AIDS during a time of widespread governmental inaction and bureaucratic delays in providing necessary medical support. *One Day of AZT*, 1991 focuses on the smaller, more intimate scale of

a single day's dose. Featuring five fiberglass pills displayed on the floor, their size—each one just slightly larger than an adult human body—alludes to the coffin destiny holds for the one prescribed such pills.

The impetus to count and calculate the projected number of testosterone vials and needles necessary for my hormonal transition stemmed from the visual impact and conceptual depth I experienced when encountering the General Idea installations. When I first discovered their artworks, I was profoundly struck by the overwhelming weight of their work, embodying the brutally altered temporality triggered by HIV/AIDS and recognized the resonances between that journey and my own. That era was marked by profoundly disrupted timelines and a poignant narrative of loss, struggle, and resilience, and their work depicts the grim reality of the health crisis that drastically reshaped the timelines of those living with HIV/AIDS. My own work is grounded in a different transformative journey, one mirroring the theme of altered temporal experience and evolving being.

If one is unable to access, or has compromised access to, the large ensemble of transition-related technologies, they are placed in a position of lag, their desired future deferred, perhaps perennially.

– Hil Malatino, “Future Fatigue” *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, vol. 6, no. 4 (2019 641)

Testosterone becomes the fundamental framework on which transmasculine life is often measured, where real life only truly begins post-injection. Life before sinks into a liminal space of delay, a period of suspended temporality, anticipating and awaiting the promise of future.

‘Terrible Time’ –And Hope:

‘Terrible Time’ –And Hope: is an exploration of physical space and architecture: an experiment in change. I began to think about the possibility of creating new spaces, or at the very least, creating spaces in a new way. In *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (2006) Sarah Ahmed talks of “the straight world,” through which queer bodies move (160). The discordant orientations of body and environment lead to a disorientation of both being and place.

The ground into which we sink our feet is not neutral: it gives ground to some more than others. Disorientation occurs when we fail to sink into the ground, which means that the “ground” itself is disturbed, which also disturbs what gathers “on” the ground
– Sarah Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (2006 160)



Fig 6. 'Terrible Time'—And Hope: (detail), 2022

I have felt this disturbance many times as I've moved through spaces, and the feeling of alterity follows me. As I move through this world I am constantly and consistently required to adapt to spaces that were not designed for me or people like me. The fact that I, and so many of my trans siblings can not only survive but thrive under these conditions says more about our strength and tenacity than it does about the support (or lack thereof) around us. Things are tough, and change is needed. I don't know exactly *what* needs to change—but something does—nor do I know *how* that change is to come about—but we need new spaces within which to figure that out. It seems almost impossible to imagine how we might go about building these new and necessary spaces. I hope to begin to figure that out through altering, modifying, and distorting the symbols and forms around me.



Fig 7. *'Terrible Time'—And Hope: (gallery view), 2022*

In this installation I constructed the frame for a corner of a wall. This new structure, the symbolic beginning of a new space, sits in the center of the gallery. It was not built from lumber, but from recycled paper—torn, soaked, and pressed into molds, the paper was transformed into a rigid construction material. The newsprint sheets—featuring snippets of text lifted from news articles that had reported incidents of violence against trans people—were wrapped around my old notes, junk mail, and a variety of other of life's forgotten receipts. The words, that once spoke of horrors and injustices, have been reclaimed and repurposed; transformed into the structural framework of the new world I'm beginning to imagine building.

Surrounding the central structure, smaller sculptural forms, also born of the same cast paper material, inhabit the room, echoing the theme of reclamation. On the gallery walls, permanently wrinkled sheets of newsprint bear the same lines of text used on the sculptures: ‘protect fairness,’ ‘permission to hate,’ and ‘terrible time for trans youth.’ The installation invites viewers to walk through this space of recontextualization, and to bear witness to the transformation and reclamation taking place.



Fig 8. *Protecting fairness to protect the people*, 2022



Fig 9. *Protecting what's important*, 2022

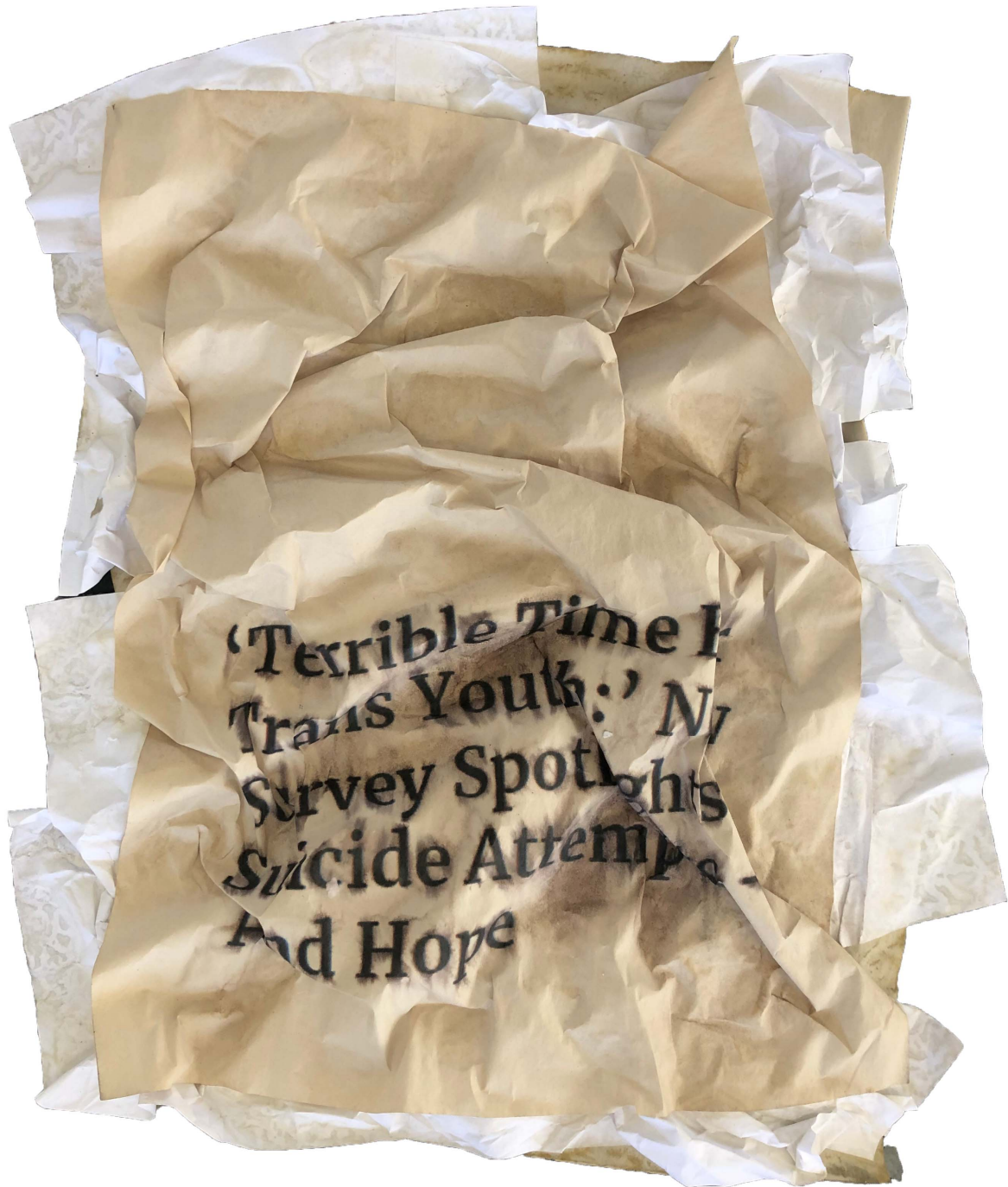


Fig 10. *Terrible Time*, 2022

Only one day after the opening of the exhibition the news was once again flooded with accounts of yet another violent attack on queer and trans people. A gunman opened fire in Club Q, a queer nightclub in Colorado Springs on the night of November 19, 2022. This senseless and violent act of targeted hate left five dead and many more injured. As a community we persist; but even in these “queer” spaces that we’ve built for ourselves, there’s something not quite right with the architecture. The space is still slightly askew. We’ve learned to navigate as outsiders through this oblique world. These straight buildings in this straight world will never properly house the queer body.

Even in this terrible time, I nevertheless still have hope.

It’s time to build a new world.

Monster

My most recent and ongoing body of work is a multimedia exploration of masculinity by way of Monster Energy. This exploration began with a large print titled *Monster Taxonomy*. This work was created to look like a diagram or a map that could be read and deciphered. Images of each of the distinctive cans the myriad flavors of Monster Energy drinks are scattered over the page.

There seem to be groups and clusters of containers, their proximity implying relation—this being Waldo Tobler’s so-called First Law of Geography, and one of the fundamental assumptions used in all spatial analysis. It states that “everything is related to everything else, but near things are more related than distant things” (1970 236). Overlaid on the constellation of cans is a tangle of looping lines that further seem to group cans that are sometimes quite widely separated, implying a different clustering, based on some criteria other than spatial proximity. The many grouping

lines overlap, and blend together as they are not differentiated by any symbol dimensions and can be almost impossible to sort out—especially as their compass expands beyond a few cans. Text featuring terms associated with sexual and gender identity—some more mainstream than others—at first appear to be labels for either the spatial clusters or the groups enclosed by the outlined polygons, but these, too, soon disappoint the map reader: there seems to be no rhyme nor reason to any of it. The ‘map’ refuses to be read.

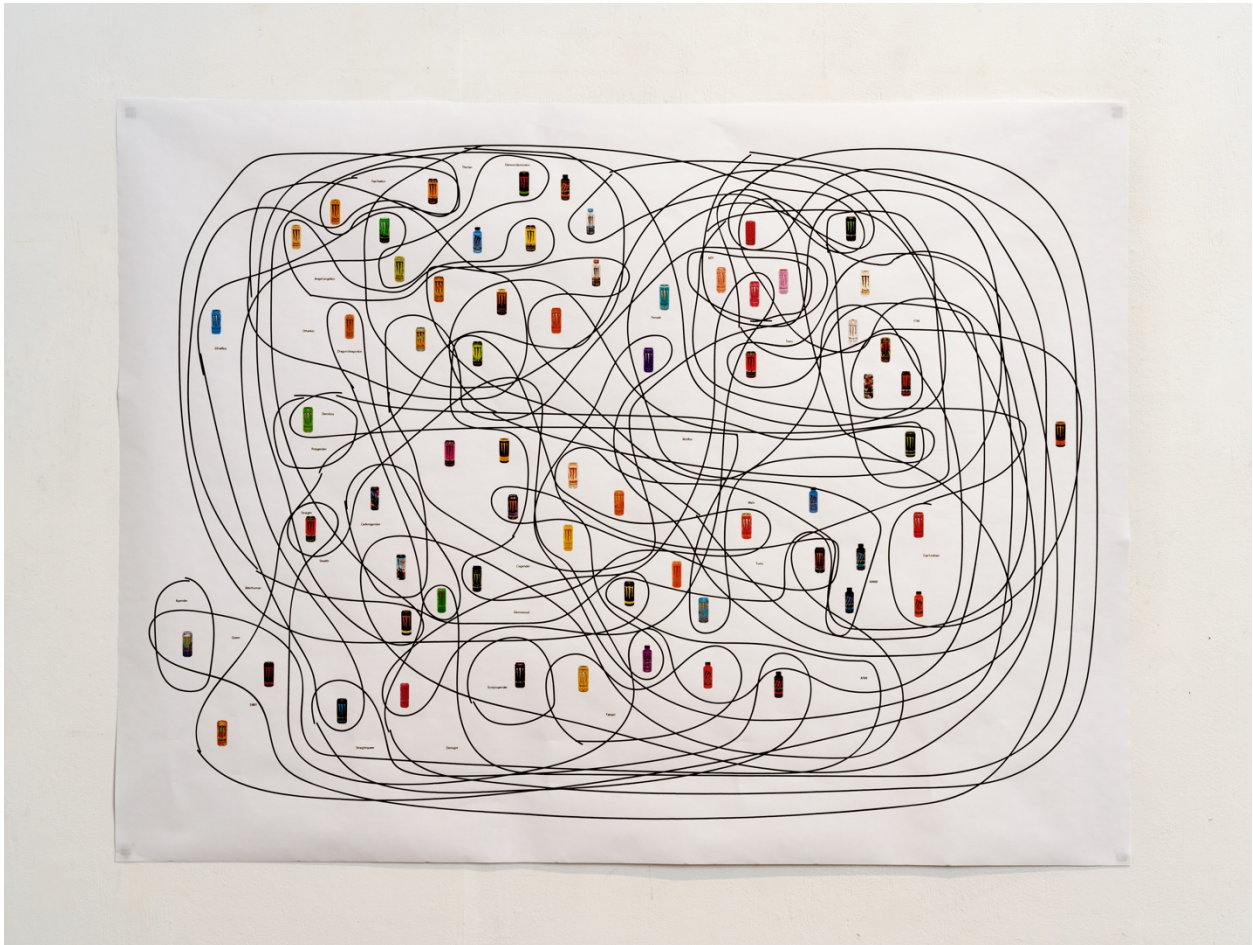


Fig 11. *Monster Taxonomy*, 2023



Fig 12. *Monster Taxonomy* (detail), 2023

I became intrigued by the expansive web of flavor profiles of the different Monster Energy drinks, and the increasingly specific *type* of guy each one is aimed at. *Assault* for the battle-ready boys, *Rehab* for the ones waking up after an intoxicated rager, and *Mean Bean* for the guy who still wants coffee, but just can't stand the weak BS of the third-wave coffee house anymore. I couldn't help but see the similarities between this capitalist driven world of commodified identities and the ever-expansive encyclopedia of gender and sexual identities of the young online gender warriors. Each hyper-specific label comes paired with a flag, often a symbol, and sometimes an etymological breakdown of the term. These ostensibly counter-cultural guerrillas

seem to be only one step away from each being paired with their own Monster flavors, which is where works titled *Stealth FTM transmasculine truscum, identifies as “man”*; *Straight stealth ENBY. Aromantic. Masc-leaning omnisexual*; and *CisHet heteroromantic, super-straight. Masc feral Wolf Therian* came from. [Figs 13, 14, and 15]

In the drawings the cans become characters. Their titles are their sexual, gender, and romantic identifies—a quick and concise description of exactly what and who they are and what type of partner they’re seeking. Simple and easy, they’ve squeezed themselves so deep into their respective corners that there’s no wiggle room left in their projected identities.



Fig 13. *Stealth FTM transmasculine. Truscum, identifies as "man"*, 2023



Fig 14. *Straight stealth ENBY. Aromantic. Masc-leaning omnisexual*, 2023

CisHet heteroromantic
super-straight. Masc
feral Wolf Therian.



Fig 15. CisHet heteroromantic super-straight. Masc feral Wolf Therian, 2023

On one hand, a significant number of queers are fighting for these increasingly fixed and specific labels to describe every facet of their gender and sexual identity, while on the flip side there are those who have adopted a post-gender identity, moving beyond the use of pronouns and labels all together. I'm troubled in both directions. It seems to me that neither is working all that well.

Perhaps it's about remaining in a state of becoming. Unfixed, but actively moving toward something, looking for a way to balance delicately somewhere in the in-between. Or maybe not so delicately, but instead balancing aggressively, assertively, and unapologetically—firmly establishing a presence in the fluctuating tides of growth, embracing the fluidity of transformation, and standing resolute in the midst of a perpetually shifting identity. As the magnetic poles of the extremities pull with such force, it can be hard to stay upright, but that's the challenge.

the subjects of resistance are neither fixed nor fluid, but both and more. And this 'more' involves a sense that resistance is resistance to both fixity and to fluidity
– Steve Pile and Michael Keith, *Geographies of Resistance* (1997 30)

I have begun creating cast works made of a mixture of Monster Energy, gelatin, and glycerin. Moving beyond the branding, bright colors, and catchy copy—all designed to seduce and excite—I narrow my focus to the real monster inside the can. The liquid material is the very essence of modern energy, the lifeblood of our fast-paced, rise and grind, red-pilled alpha male existence. As the mixture sets, it settles from a thick and viscous liquid to a firm jelly. The sickly-sweet scent of energy drink wafts through the air, invading your olfactory system. The flimsy

forms take on an uncanny resemblance to the objects they were cast from. They slump and droop as they are unable to hold up their own weight. Piled together, these Monster jelly objects sit as a flaccid pyramid to masculinity.



Fig 16. *Soft Weight*, 2023



Fig 17. *Soft Weight #2*, 2023

Transmen live in and through a state of ambiguity: not quite, but not quite *not* either. There's a presence in the absence. There's a safety in becoming invisible, but that knife cuts both ways. *Can you be real if you're never seen?* Part of the struggle is to remain active, remain amorphous, and remain becoming in a world vying for static and fixed.

We're living through a moment of urgency. There's a monster in the room. It hides in the shadows, seeps out through the walls, and permeates the very air we breathe. It's a system of our own design and prolongation. We've reinforced the foundations upon which our modern world is built, and its potent paradigm lies omnipresent, influencing our society, often unexamined and unacknowledged.



Fig 18. *Soft Weight #2* (detail), 2023



Fig 19. *Weight Bench*, 2023

We built this. And now we must reckon with the monster of our own making.

By acknowledging this monstrosity, by shining a light on the shadows, I begin to chip away at the veneer of normalcy. Each stroke of defiance is an act of resistance against the monstrous expectations imposed on the diverse spectrum of human existence. My work seeks to unveil the monsters that lurk in the rooms we inhabit, exposing the flaws in our cultural architecture and fostering a collective awareness that propels us toward transformation.

Naming things defines them; fences them in; fixes them down; and kills them—like dried out bugs pinned to a display board. The world likes it, because it's easy; once they know what you are they don't have to think about you anymore. They know how to plan for you, they know

what to expect. Being irregular and ever-changing makes for a difficult art career—and a complicated life—but it may be the only path forward.

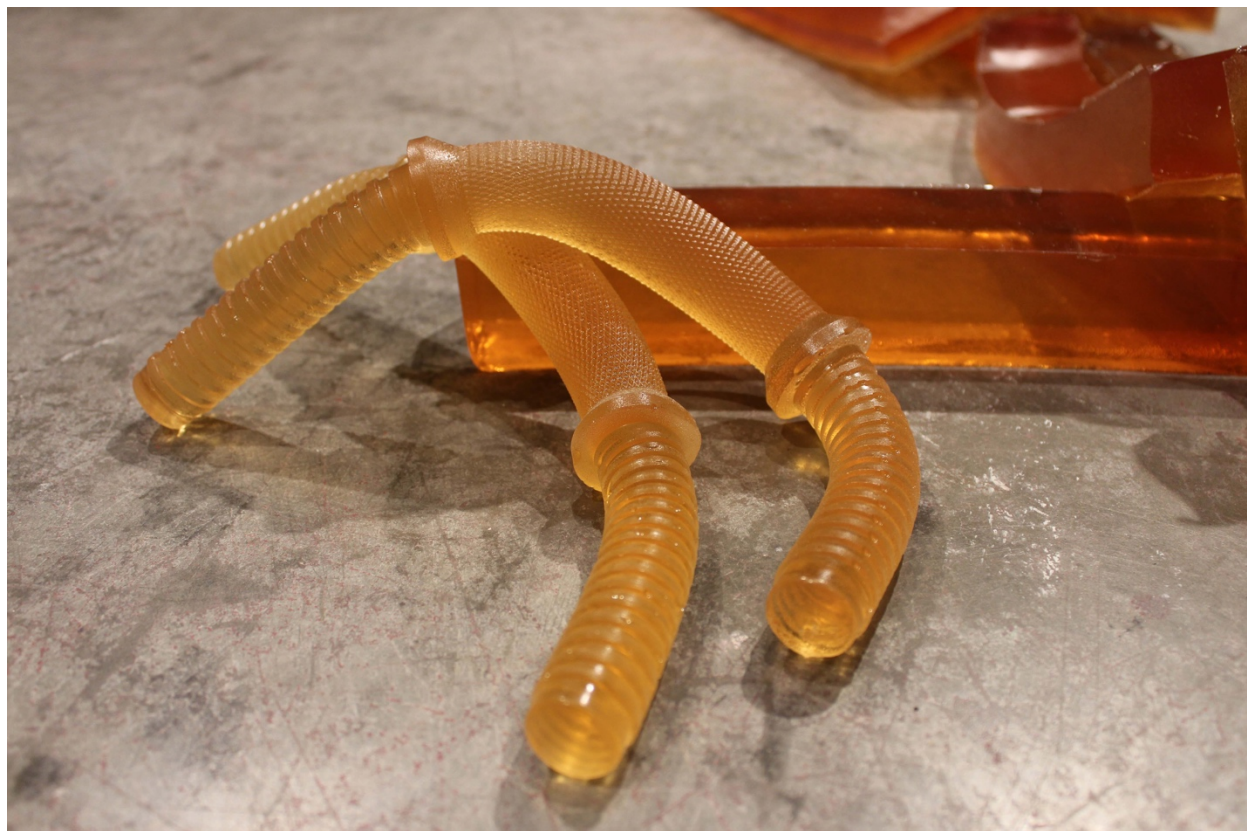


Fig 20. *Weight Bench* (detail), 2023

The rhythmic repetition of anti-queer and anti-trans rhetoric hits the shores of my being like crashing waves in a storm. *My work is my breakwater.*

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