

// Becoming a Precipice: The Liminality of Queer Cruising

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Abstract

In “Becoming a Precipice,” I am analyzing queer cruising areas as psychological landscapes from a queer, non- binary perspective, counter to heteronormative conventions. These landscapes are important to me, as being a full participant in this culture is my main form of sexual interaction. My inquiry is prompted by the need to interpret how this specific form of desire molds itself into visceral responses and manifestations of performative masculinity. Entering the cruising landscape itself increases awareness and intensifies the senses, in a space where signals become critical in determining transactions with other individuals beyond spoken language. These somatic reactions are uniquely felt through the queer, mostly gay male, bodies that enter them knowingly. Individuals become simultaneously hunter and prey as they pursue a release for their desires. There is an inherent danger within cruising that adds to the sexual thrill of these acts, but are mostly overridden by vulnerability of fleeting sexual desire. By photographing cruising landscapes and their inhabitants, I examine the theories of utopia addressed by José Esteban Muñoz as well as examining the transformative theory of heterotopias by Michel Foucault.

For everyone searching, wandering, fumbling around in the dark.

Introduction

Becoming a Precipice is an artistic inquisition that questions my desire in cruising areas. I set out to make sense of the landscapes where my sexual experiences arise by dissecting the roots of my attractions and the history of cruising. My work explores notions of masculinity, queerness and the landscape, through a lens I share with other queer photographers and writers. I think of a precipice as the edges of others, a place of intensity and bodily knowledge, of quick intimacy and unspoken signals. This is where I become; the self is transformed, disembodied, and merged with the landscape. By using large format photography and prose, I am documenting my time in these psychological landscapes: spaces that can alter perceptions, shift behaviors, and exaggerate senses.

The images are romantic depictions of cruising areas, showing lush green foliage, and a still body of water reflecting cumulus clouds like a mirror on a snowy day. I use a visual language of heavenly beauty to depict queer iconography, such that of a used condom suspended in a bush becomes a halo when lit by the sun. Conversely, I also document the reality of these spaces within the urbanized landscape: rusted metal riddled with wounds holds an empty bottle of lube, and cut trees fall below an

untethered railroad track. These two opposing modes of making highlights the multiplicity of the landscapes I am researching and the paradoxes they hold.

In addition to the landscape itself, I make portraits of the cruising community therein. Anonymity is represented by masks and backs turned toward the camera, emphasizing the importance of privacy within these spaces and the ethics of who is entering them. Finally, by inserting my own body into the landscape, I show a journey of healing, as well as exhibiting my participation within the community through more direct self-portraiture.

The prose in *Becoming a Precipice* allows for a more intimate consumption of my personal memories. The poems exist mostly in short form, using both traditional poetic structure as well as breaking lines completely, mimicking my fragmented memory and the dissociative symptoms of my PTSD.

This thesis also delves into my time exploring bathhouses as indoor cruising spaces, and the research conducted there before the COVID-19 pandemic. I examine the different modes of making necessitated by these interiors, and how they differ from the psychological landscape of outside cruising spaces.

Biography: a personal attachment to the ritual of cruising

"Becoming is never easy. Being tempered and stretched is painful."



I am young - living, growing, and learning about myself, by myself, and about my queerness. This learning, or intense searching, took place in Lake Charles, Louisiana. A handful of miles north of the Gulf of Mexico, the city is surrounded by

¹ Fleischmann, T. *Time is the Thing a Body Moves Through*. Coffee House Press, 2019.

chemical plants that produce plastic, oil, and men to continually fit into a system. The byproduct is toxic masculinity, produced so profoundly in the American South, and within its bounds rises alcoholism and Catholicism. These are the men I would learn to be attracted to; the men I would yearn to conquer, to become, to fuck.

I despised the ideals of the southern man growing up. Yet, within the confines of their aspirational monolithic experience, I was paradoxically predetermined to be them. I would dizzily spin in the outfield of a baseball game as a young child, picking apart a daisy ripped from the earth. While I created stars in my eyes, a baseball would tear towards me, ready to impact my flesh. Bruised, with the whole team screaming that I could have easily caught the meaningless sphere, I questioned what the hell I was doing there. A flesh ripped outcast in the outfield, I spun around dreaming of becoming a dancer or a gymnast. When I asked my caretakers to be put in those sports I was met with, “Dancing is for faggots!” Even at the age of five, it was instilled in me to catch the ball, hurl the ball, hit the ball, enjoy the ball, and scream. They wanted me to scream so loudly so they would know I am a boy, and eventually a man: a southern man, of the earth, of God and Christ himself. This was God’s country.

I would ask my grandparents again if I could switch to ballet or gymnastics hoping that consistency would be key. But the reply was rife, “Only faggots do gymnastics.” Oh god, how badly I wanted to be a faggot.

I am 14 years old; the hormones are raging and the faggotry is rampant. This is Lake Charles, so there is no sex education in our public school system, especially no focus on queer sex. So, I explored the way most queer teenagers in the late 2000's did: I turned to the internet to find out what the hell was going on and what I was supposed to do. As a result of this I discovered a few apps and online platforms: Grindr, SCRUFF, Jack'd, Adam4Adam, and [name redacted]². 2009 was an important transitional phase, not only being 14, but March of that year being when Grindr was released. SCRUFF followed the year thereafter. The idea of "dating"³ apps in the gay community was new, and most of them still included a desktop site in addition to the phone application. Not only was I learning how to navigate my queerness, but I was fumbling with newly found internet ethics and the reality of having 100 men nearby and ready to hook up at all times.

With Grindr specifically came this realization of my nude body as an object of desire, embedded in imagery and used as currency through the digitized space. Nudes were a new idea to me then but seemed to be the most important prerequisite to

² I have decided to not include the actual name or imagery from [name redacted] because it is not in the mainstream knowledge and I would like to keep it that way. With this act of refusal, I am trying to maintain a closed practice that protects the individuals who are already in the cruising community. While the site itself exists as public information, I do not want to be the individual to oust the website itself. A hateful individual could potentially encounter this work and cause harm to a community that is already underground and ostracized. I do not withhold the names of apps like Grindr and Scruff because these applications are already a part of mainstream knowledge, even in heteronormative media and conversations.

³ While platforms like Grindr and Scruff within the gay community have to market themselves as dating apps, there is a strong focus on using them solely for hookups. These apps act as a modern day MSM (Male Seeking Male) ads that existed previously on Craigslist. So while addressing them as dating apps is correct, it is important to note that they are mostly used for quick casual sex.

meeting with the men I would hook up with. The photograph, I learned, created an evidentiary product of my body that was to be consumed by others. Those highly pixelated flip phone images became important rectangular representations of my vessel. This consumption was not only for identification but for pleasure as well. I became fond of this digital experience and exchange, which allowed me to fulfill a fantasy before encountering “real” landscapes and men. I got off on the idea that individuals were consuming an image of me, a satisfaction that was brought to them through something that was merely a pixelization of my body.

While Grindr was useful for navigating the digital space, [name redacted] acted as an online platform for finding physical landscapes to cruise. The platform took shape as an indexical blog containing specific information about known cruising sites. The index contained location, best time of day to cruise, if nudity was allowed, the age range of participants, etc. Alongside this index was the blog that allowed users to leave comments on their experiences and arrange meetings with other individuals or groups. [name redacted] allowed for a physical exploration of familiar landscapes in ways that I had not encountered before.

Given the small size of Lake Charles, I recognized most of the environments where the cruising was taking place: a local park a few blocks over, the soccer field behind my grandparents’ home, the Market Basket restroom. The discovery that the

same place my grandmother bought her bread and pork chops on Thursdays was also somewhere I could give someone a blowjob was exhilarating. I became infatuated with the searching and wandering of cruising, the public and private lives that these landscapes held.

Through using both Grindr and [name redacted] as my primary mode of interacting and communicating with men, I began putting my discoveries to use as tools for experimentation of my desires. These sexual encounters helped satisfy my yearning for a connection in the Deep South, an environment that continually and brazenly questioned my right to do so. This was my furtive introduction to cruising culture, which would shape my way of interacting with, thinking about, and meeting men. The importance of this discovery remains relevant to how I still practice pleasure as being an active participant in cruising.

Notably, most of the men I was meeting at the time were some combination of anonymous, married, closeted, straight, just experimenting, “not a faggot.” Of course not. They were southern men, the epitome of masculine, and faggotry did not have a place in that structure. The individuals made this well known in advance of the actual meeting. This practice that anonymity was to be upheld at all costs deeply influenced my ideas of intimacy and desire. I denied this ideology in social contexts, but it molded

the way I thought about sex.

"& so I learned— that a man in climax is the closest thing to surrender."⁴

⁴ Vuong, Ocean. *Night Sky With Exit Wounds* Port Townsend, Copper Canyon Press, 2016.

Recollection: A Brief History of Cruising

It is impossible to pinpoint exactly where the word “cruising” began so far as the contemporary understanding of how I am using and researching it today. The informal definition in the Oxford English dictionary is to: “wander about a place in search of a casual sexual partner.” I am interested in this wandering and searching that occurs within cruising landscapes and that has been happening continuously throughout history. Cruising can be more easily tied to larger civilized societies in urbanized settings and its activities have been related so far back as the ancient Egyptians. Cruising spots can erupt in these condensed city centers, allowing for more privacy in the crowding. Alex Espinoza addresses these histories in his book, *Cruising: an intimate history of a radical passtime*. “Certain hieroglyphics in Egypt, now seen through a contemporary queer lens, clearly depict homoerotic themes that had been brushed over by their straight white ‘discoverers.’ The evidence is there, if you know what to look for.”⁵

Researching cruising is much like the activity itself, wandering and searching until someone comes around to give you a casual exchange, in this instance being knowledge as well as desire. Attempting this research in an academic setting has left

⁵ Espinoza, Alex. *Cruising: An Intimate History of a Radical Passtime*. The Unnamed Press, 2019.

me feeling both helpless and refreshed -- Refreshed that this underground community has not been thrown to the academic wolves for dissection, helpless in understanding cruising and its roots, despite my longstanding participation. Espinoza's book gave me a sense of relief that there now exists a careful examination of cruising through a queer academic perspective, rather than being judged by outsiders. He provides readers with his personal connection to the activity since his teenage years, and includes a wealth of information on historical iterations of cruising. Espinoza goes on to write,

“The act of looking, so intrinsically connected to cruising, was entrenched in ancient Rome's high society, where distinctly modern cruising practices were established: “men searched for sailors in the vicinity of districts close to the Tiber. Public baths are also referred to as a place to find sexual partners. Juvenile states that such men scratched their heads with a finger to identify themselves.” Fast-forward to eighteenth century London, where we find the first iteration of the gay bar in “molly houses,” clandestine locations scattered across the city where men would meet to stage drag shows, mingle, and have

sex. Distinctly social places, molly houses were places of refuge where men could be with whoever they wanted, but also simply be themselves.”.⁶

Queer men have always been cruising and will continue to do so. The searching and wandering will continue to exist, a place to have these anonymous, fleeting, yet meaningful encounters.

My practice commits these landscapes into history, adding to a living queer archive of cruising. My images are documentation that these spaces exist and are traversed by queer folks searching for themselves. As photographs materialize my body, the same is true for these landscapes. While the archive may not know the specificity of location, it does hold the essence of the places with it inside of the photographs.

⁶ Espinoza, Alex. *Cruising: An Intimate History of a Radical Passtime*. The Unnamed Press, 2019.

The Cruising Landscape

"Self-preservation is a powerful impetus to the consolidation of a subculture."

There is a network of individuals that still meet solely in physical cruising spaces, and these are the people that I have been documenting through photography and poetry. I enter these spaces, examining them as psychological landscapes, which I define as an environment that has the potential to alter the psyche. Cruising can make one more aware of their body and surroundings, and encourage a more exaggerated persona. The landscape allows someone to enter and become. This becoming allows a multitude of responses: revered, confident, desirable, curious, exploratory.

My own experiences constitute a kind of bodily research, a phenomenologically based approach. I dissect moments of intimacy, desire, and danger through personal encounters rather than relying on academic texts that address cruising and related theories. By using my body as a tool for research, my perspective is no longer theoretical, but speaks to a lived-through experience. This language not only finds itself in the imagery, but through impactful prose enacted as research of previous memories.

Cruising landscapes exist in all areas of the United States, but for my photographs and research I have been focusing solely on locations in Louisiana and New England. I have a somatic connection to these two places, having been raised in Louisiana and dragged to New England as a child by our family abuser. By cruising this land, it is an active way of moving my body through a living archive of queer spaces that exist as grounds for public activity.

There are two major ways in which I approach depicting a landscape within *Becoming a Precipice*. The first is to romanticize utopian landscapes that I relate to the liminality of cruising. Culturally, liminality refers to a stage between selves, as in a rite of passage. These heavenly, utopic sanctuaries of lush greenery act as portals to the queerness of the future, a space between what has been and what will be. These detailed scenes are filled with sunlight, inviting the viewer into their reality. Clear water offers a space to float, an oasis from the warmth of the image's overall tonality. The trees create shadows on the water like a halo, a divine veil of protection, or another portal to get lost in.

In opposition to this, I photograph detritus and ruin as a form of social liminality, representative of a subculture distanced from the mainstream -- in this case, heteronormativity. These landscapes are dilapidated and industrialized, urban spaces that are landscapes, but a more truthful depiction of how these spaces exist

within urbanized settings. These photographs hold details that are considered more masculine in material, shying away from the utopic, fertile green that's seen in the opposite rendering. Lube and condoms litter a salt rusted dock as pockets of light try to find their place in the sand. The oxidized metal drips like blood, a leaking wound.

A bluntly serrated tree juts out the side of a slanted landscape. An empty beer can with a label that reads "DADDY" facing the viewer lays on rugged stone. These unstable materials lay below a falling railroad track showcasing the ruin of these urban spaces.





The photographs of Kristine Potter have helped me grapple with masculinity as it can be read in the American landscape. In her series *Dark Waters*, Potter began investigating and photographing bodies of water in the Southeastern United States.

The source of this work is a body of water in Georgia, where she grew up, named “Murder Creek.” These large format black and white images, which she calls “waterscapes,” each depicts a body of water that also has a violent namesake, photographed with an eye towards beauty and the romantic. I am interested in that paradox and how that translates through landscape.

I would argue that multiplicity is true of all landscapes, and not specific to cruising although that is where my interests lie. A landscape is an economy of its own, where attributions are then made through the people that pass through it. A name



such as “Murder Creek” or a nameless cruising site that exists in a landscape is only made available through human attribution. It is these paradoxes that draw me to cruising, violent waterscapes in Kristine’s images, and to the land in general.

The Cruising Landscape: A Heterotopia

Cruising landscapes are powerful and appealing because of their ability to transport the individual into a seemingly different time and space completely. Jonathan Weinberg relates Foucault's theories of "heterotopias" to the cruising sites of the Chelsea piers in his book, *Pier Groups: Art and Sex Along the New York Waterfront*, which directly addresses the transformative power of a space. Weinberg's book was a direct pathway to my affiliation of cruising landscapes with Foucault's theories of "heterotopias", which are defined as spaces that "suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect." Cruising areas uphold this theory, inverting the public activity of an open landscape to a destination of private activity within the public scope. These heterotopias exist within our everyday lives, but as they are entered for private acts of intimacy, for fucking, they transform those who enter. This crossover can be ritualistic, the mindset changing while the physical place remains the same. These landscapes also reinstate a feeling of masculinization, which can arguably be seen as paradoxical, but is supportive of notions explored by Foucault. Given that cruising landscapes are male dominated, there can be a pressure to position oneself inside the traditional western masculine role. A deep voice, "straight presenting", aggression, etc. are valued at the top of the hierarchy of attraction within the gay community.

By deliberately depicting the run down urbanized landscapes in my work, I am referencing the most known historical cruising site within the United States: Chelsea Piers in New York City. The piers acted as grounds for nude sunbathing, anonymous sex, drugs, and an exploration of gay sexuality physically distant from the outside world and its ostracization from the 1960's to the 1990's. The piers were a hub for queer folks to exist and live, to fuck, to

dance and experience unrequited pleasure without the pressures and stigmas of society, which were even more prevalent amidst the conservatism of the 1970's. While the piers were a little escape for some people, it was no utopia. They were run down, industrial areas that could act as the only place for a houseless queer person to turn. Despite their danger, however, the piers still acted as a meaningful home for some queer folks, offering community and dedicated space.

Artists photographing the piers from the 1960's and forward typically showcased the environment in which the cruising took place. Leonard Fink photographs intimate moments wrapped in a ruin of industrialized cruising piers and graffiti text written into the landscape. I am fond of the utilization of graffiti and garbage as spoken language in the imagery.

The community itself was nuanced and problematic in its own right of exclusionary



action, where youth and beauty were paramount for sexual encounters and the spaces themselves existed to cater to men. Finding a partner was described as highly competitive,

dangerous, and daunting (Weinberg 16). This, unfortunately, is still true in contemporary queer/gay culture, though I have noticed that this is starting to shift, albeit in slow strides. Grindr profiles are no longer littered with “masc 4 masc” and “no fems” as it was for much of the last decade.

The scene of the piers was brutally stricken by the AIDS epidemic, a whole generation of queers left to die under the Bush I and Reagan administrations. It continues to ravage the LGBTQ+ community to this day, disproportionately affecting queer people of color. Perhaps without this disaster, I would have plenty of queer elders whose work might have been in conversation with mine. It is irresponsible to ignore the fact that though some of the work referenced was made before the HIV/AIDS epidemic, the majority of these artists died of AIDS related illness -- Peter Hujar, Leonard Fink, Michel Foucault, and Félix González-Torres, just to name those written about in this essay.

Portraits in Cruising

The portraits in *Becoming a Precipice* consist of self-portraits and photographs of strangers that I meet when in the landscapes. This exchange with strangers is much like cruising itself, performing acts of intimate care and desire for a fleeting moment, but capturing it with ephemeral material -- this time, a photograph instead of our bodies. Yet sometimes, both.

I use a large format camera as my tool within this body of work. It requires a slow processing but catches the attention of interested cruisers nearby. The camera acts as my second body, a mediator between strangers as a starting point for a different type of intimacy in a place charged by desire. The camera also demands intense looking, an act requiring vulnerability, both from me and the individual participating, which is crucial in a cruising environment. I also want to make sure that the cruising landscape remains a place for pleasure and anonymity, and by using a large format camera I am able to present myself truthfully to other cruisers, a gesture that I am not here to invade, but to examine as I participate. This hopeful gesture allows for a sense of trust, as it deems itself a lot more difficult to capture anonymous sexual encounters in stealth, since the camera itself is large and laborious.



The Self in Trauma: Self Portraits & Healing

“Dissociation is the essence of trauma”

Inserting myself into the landscape is a way of directly dealing with my symptoms of dissociation from PTSD and Bipolar disorder. Dissociation can be described as the splitting off and isolation of memory imprints (Dr. Van Der Kolk). My symptoms also leave me with feelings of numbness and a questioning of my state in a current reality. The photograph allows me to be left with an evidentiary product of my body through material. This way of seeing allows me to both insert myself into and separate myself from the substrate, being duplicitous and split as my memory is.

It is not only important to the images, but imperative for the personal story and healing of the body's trauma, for me to insert myself in the landscape. In taking agency over myself and body within the images, I am aiding in a long journey of rewiring my brain to recovery. Dr. Bessel Van Der Kolk, Author of *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* writes, “At the core of recovery is self-awareness.” Situating my body within these cruising landscapes, and recording it in a photograph, allows me to reclaim control of my body, which is a curative action for me. I am connected with this land that I am queering, therefore further connecting with myself. Van Der Kolk continues, “Body awareness puts us in touch with our inner

world, the landscape of our organism.” It is my goal to connect all of these tendrils of my queer experience within the body of work.

This comes through photographically as I situate myself painfully in the crevice of giant boulders. Shards rip into my ribs as I grunt, reaching out to release the shutter. My figure remains small under the real and compositional weight of the image. This photograph deals directly with my symptoms of PTSD and dissociation, wanting to feel the pressure of a current reality without a searing pain that rips into me.



Acts of Queering

Traditionally, large format photography has consisted of straight white cisgender men depicting the landscape in a way that is territorial. Ansel Adams and Edward Weston are examples within this historical canon, widely considered to be masters of the medium. They typically position themselves at high vantage points, operating as a god-like view of the landscape. As a queer individual, I am attempting to flip this canon on its head, not by claiming the land, but addressing its multiplicities and abilities to shift through enactment and encounters. To queer the land is not to own the land: ownership is not what I'm after, its appreciation.

Queerness is not meant to be measured. However, I aim to subvert materials used by landscape photographers that have been canonized. For *Becoming a Precipice* have made a publication that is a full broadsheet newspaper printed on traditional newsprint. Through this material choice, I am further engaging the transactional, ephemeral, and transitional qualities of the newspaper as they relate to cruising.

Through conversations I've had people imagine the newspaper in different environments. Ariel Goldberg, a mentor and writer, imagined the publication living on hoods of vehicles while people sit in a cruising area, or in the passenger seat of their cars. The images here eventually turn sun bleached, text unreadable. Camilla Jerome, a

colleague and artist, imagined the publications in the waiting rooms of doctors' offices and emergency rooms. I love the different lives the publications can have, just by existing as a newsprint.

Additionally, by using a cheaper material, the publication is immediately more accessible. By using a material that will degrade over time, I question more traditional photo book formats, meant to be collected and protected. Félix González-Torres' paper stacks are emblematic of takeaway and transitional pieces. By creating artworks that are meant to be taken out of the space by each individual who encounters them, he openly undermines the idea of collection and protection. By allowing the viewer to participate in collecting artwork, potentially for free, this throws a wrench in an art market that relies solely on ownership and exuberant and exclusive amounts of money. Each stack is also site specific, transforming depending on the space it is shown. The work opposes the idea of an 'original,' questioning the boundaries between artwork and audience; public and private. González-Torres writes about these ideas in an interview with Tim Rollins, stating: "I need the viewer, I need the public interaction. Without a public, these works are nothing, nothing. I need the public to complete the work. I ask the public to help me, to take responsibility, to become part of my work, to join in."⁷ This idea is also embodied in cruising, a shifting

⁷ Rollins, T. *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*. Art Press, 1993.

appearance and existence dependent on the landscape the body is passing through, non-existent without a public.

As a queer person making work in queer landscapes, I often find myself shifting in where I stand on how I feel about where things are. By things I mean art, politics, my placement in these evolving and changing structures. Sometimes I trip, stumbling over the desire to quantify queerness, over my own enough-ness, to simply exist within these structures. My hands fumble around in the dark, feeling the textures of desire, need, and bodies to reflect that onto me. Wanting to pinpoint a specific queerness to exist in, I turn to José Esteban Muñoz. He satiates these needs by offering another avenue for these desires. In *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* writes that:

Queerness is not yet here. Queerness is an ideality. Put another way, we are not yet queer. We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality. We have never been queer, yet queerness exists for us an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future. The future is queerness's domain. Queerness is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present. The here and now is a prison house. We must

strive, in the face of the here and now totalizing rendering of reality, to think and feel a *then* and *there*.³

Muñoz' ideas of queer futurity rests on the painful present of a queer reality and queer experience and uses hope as a part of his solidified argument of a queer utopian future. The way he writes about queerness above describes how I feel about photographing a queer reality and representing it. Cruising is gay Americana, a way of living that is just as quotidian as 9 to 5. My photographs offer a structure for desire, inviting the viewer to imagine it, while simultaneously romanticizing and amplifying the banality and mundane rituals of cruising.

In conversation with what Muñoz' is writing, I don't believe this queerness can yet be reached, or touched, or felt, but it can be hopeful. The reality of cruising can be rendered immoral and unsolidified depending on the individual criticizing the acts, thereby questioning the morality and existence of the individual gay folks involved. To live under constant scrutinization, to have one's existence unendingly questioned, can be tumultuous and instill a desire for a more hopeful future. I want to activate this hope in the future acts of queerness and how it can be manifested. This also insinuates that queering the image is an act that has not yet been identified and established, so by making work in a mode that attempts this, I am striving to establish a structure for

future queerness to be materialized in imagery collectively. This is a way of making room for future and current queer artists for me to be in conversation with, both through imagery and person. This is not an act to authorize or claim a monolithic ideal of queerness, because queerness cannot be defined globally but is rather individualized in its existence.

When thinking about utopia and the landscape, I'm inspired by collaborative artists Cabello/Carceller who document the absence and failure of utopia, specifically in vacant swimming pools. Jack Halberstam writes about this work in their book, *The Queer Art of Failure*:

The images of vacant swimming pools in these works signify the gulf between fantasy and reality, the subjects and the spaces onto which they project their dreams and desires. The empty pools, full of longing and melancholy, ask the viewer to meditate on the form and function of the swimming pool; from there we are drawn to contemplate the meaning and promise of desire. ⁴



These images function much like my vacant landscapes, showing a failure of visualizing queer intimacy by depicting just the land, without any sexual activity taking place. This could also be viewed as a notion of failure of utopia and the reinstatement of cruising landscapes as a heterotopia. By stripping the cruising landscapes of visual acts of sexual pleasure, I'm forcing the viewer to approach desire through singularity and vulnerability. This approach mimics the physical transformative nature felt when entering the cruising landscapes and leaves the viewer with a voyeuristic desire to see.

Prose as Practice in Placement

Poetry in my photographic work is a way to express feelings that require the nuance of written language. These writings are drawn from memory and the experience of cruising. My body is transformed as I move through the landscape, becoming slices of words, breaths of air, visceral poetry.

The poem offers the reader a more in depth understanding of what the air felt like, how I experienced liquidity and heavy humidity. Words translate a slip, being pissed on, hugged, fucked. I give an invitation through language to experience cruising through my somatic responses. There is a reverence in both the portraiture and the writing when looking at the men within these landscapes, but the language can let the reader know what the crevices were like. The moments in between.

My prose structure takes shape in many forms, drawing mostly from queer contemporary poets such as Ocean Vuong, Danez Smith, and Kayleb Rae Candrilli. The way that they all structure their poems are both lyrical yet split. There is a disruption of grammatical structure and the words themselves, giving a more bodily experience to the poem and how it can be interpreted. Words can appear slanted on the page or break a traditional line structure completely. Loose words hang in corners of the page, waiting to become a pair on a different spread. Whenever writing and approaching

form, I also think about metapoetics and what words I'm using within the structure as representation. For example, in the poem below, words jag from side to side resembling a spine.

I also look to visual poetry, especially work by Kameelah Janan Rasheed. Her texts sprawl about the gallery space, deconstructing narratives and the way that the reader approaches every letter and word. How the viewer chooses to approach the piece, where they start and where they finish, is up to them, leaving room for multiple interpretations. This is an offering of language and an invitation for a close reading of each word.

yes,
i've massaged
the feet
of gods
that desire
me dirt
gathered spine
out of back
and used it
as weapon



Outside, In: Bathhouses

just as i'm about to leave
"I was just thinkin about you, Louisiana"
i shake
You grasp
no laugh
balancingly, you slipped
inside me
and i wondered
how many vessels
i've been,
how many time
i've stood
inside out,
just for you
to spit, asking
why my blood is wet.

Public baths, otherwise known as bathhouses, are cruising spaces that differ from the other landscapes where cruising exists. The bathhouse became popular in ancient Rome and then across Europe. Who fucked who at a bathhouse was directly related to one's perceived sexuality and masculinity. The top, the man doing the fucking, was not seen as a homosexual, but rather an assertive figure in the bathhouse for pleasure and allowed to leave without attached stigma. The bottom, the man being fucked, was ostracized (and, often, these men were sex workers). These antiquated ideas of masculinity are still prevalent today within the gay community. There are

individuals who identify as straight on Grindr because they are strict tops, mostly anonymous men who will leave the scene unscathed from outside repudiation.

D'Angelo Lovell Williams has made photographs in response to these ridiculous notions of masculinity, specifically in a photograph called "Two Bottoms Talking to Each Other". He photographs himself and another individual with their asses touching, their arms arched in an elegant communion between them. This merging of the 'bottom' bodies in a sacred stance connotes power rather than shame or scorn, pointing back at the notions of the fragile masculinity within the gay community.

The bathhouse is just as much of a transformative experience as outdoor cruising landscapes, but the searching is taken away. It is less of a hunt and more of a

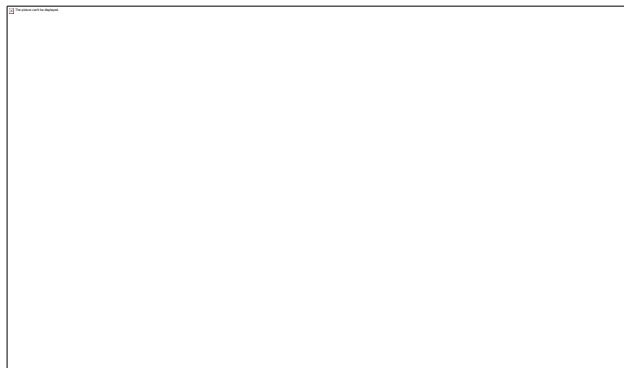


euphoria and immediate gratification. A bathhouse is not public sex and requires less patience in its practice.

Visual representations of bathhouses, from the seventeenth century and contemporary art alike, depict busy interiors and exteriors, ripe with action and men. While making photographs inside the bathhouse, I decided to strip away all of the decadence of these other representations, and instead pinpoint moments of singular desire and intimacy. I found this to be a more truthful depiction of the bathhouses I

was imaging. This became the parameters within which I photographed inside these spaces.

When making these restricted portraits, I looked to the work of Peter Hujar and the photographs that he made inside of his studio. Even though the images remained in the same space, Hujar used the banality of the surroundings to emphasize the subjects of the portraits that he was creating. By isolating the figure in this black and



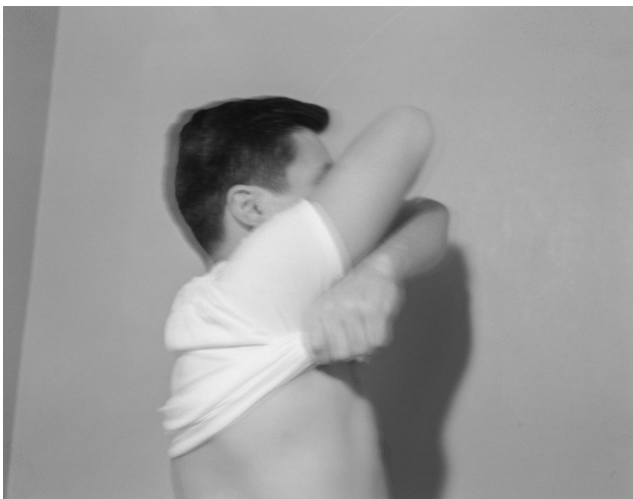
white photographic plane, the viewer can focus on their own intimate connection with the participant in the image.

Here, Hujar photographs a man in pure pleasure, muscles strained, hard dick in hand, veins protruding. The banality of the grey wall and white bed sheet allows the viewer to spend more time with the figure. A spread out hand over his thigh mimics the shapes of the wrinkles in the sheet. A forehead vein forms a straight line down the center of the figure to his dick. These intimate details are emphasized by the neutrality of the backdrop, free of distractions.



I began by photographing individuals inside of the bathhouse. The spaces that I was allotted were small, individualized rooms where I was allowed to photograph in by management. This arrangement imposed physical limitations on my portrait-making,

but I continued to use the large format camera, its slow process allowing for the intense looking that is instrumental in these spaces. I felt challenged by the restrictions that were placed on me and the camera, a forced intimacy within a confined space that translated into the images. I would shove my body into a corner, hiding under the dark cloth in the dim light while I composed barely visible images on a ground glass. These fleeting moments with strangers in this tight space didn't allow for much time to second guess, and I relied more on instinct and trusted the process. These images act as a different, but just as important, archive of a specific type of cruising.



Conclusion

It is my goal with this thesis to apply the research gathered throughout my time in graduate school to question the landscapes where I practice desire and intimacy. I am using language to make sense of somatic responses while cruising transformative landscapes. The work seeks to point out notions of toxic masculinity and exclusionary actions within the gay community. I wonder about where my desires started and how they've translated into the work I am making now. I debate the ethics of entering these spaces and the dissection of them outside of a queer community. My stance is always shifting whenever thinking about these topics, but this thesis acts as a marker for where my current thoughts lie.

The photographs I've made depict both the aspirational quality of the cruising landscape and the reality of these spaces. These multiple modes of making invite the viewer to imagine attraction in a different way. The work exists for a queer audience but remains ambiguous enough for outside interpretations of the images, able to change based on human intervention and attribution.

This work grows as I fall further into the cruising community, continuing to meet and photograph individuals within these landscapes, appending my research. As the COVID-19 pandemic continues and safety mandates shift, so does my practice; As

trust between strangers regenerates and the potential to photograph inside the bathhouse becomes more likely, my inquiries will deepen.

Becoming a Precipice is for other queer people. It's for my unknown friends also fumbling around in the dark, shifting stances, trying to find their way in this world. Searching. Wandering. Finding solace in landscape and carving out their own space to exist, embracing complications.

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