

I Can See Queerly Now:

Visualizing Queer Theory
By Creating a Personal Gay History



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Master of Fine Arts
LGBTQ Studies Certificate

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By John Gutoskey

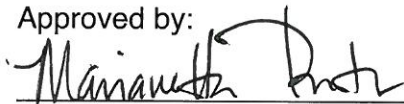
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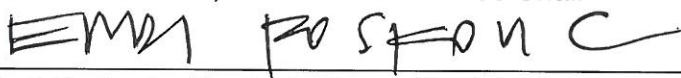
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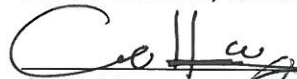
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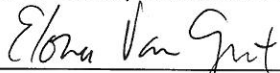
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Abstract

This paper recounts my attempts to visualize the concepts and ideas of queer theory in my studio practice through collecting, collage, assemblage, printmaking, installation, and performance. I focus on the concept of “queering” and how to translate this visually and linguistically to the creation of objects, people, and place using my own personal gay history as a reference point. I look at what it means to “queer” objects through curation and display using my private collections as examples. I present my attempts to apply the concepts of queer theory to my studio practice using print media, gay valentines, the self portrait, and old scholastic photos of myself as another way of creating a gay personal visual history. I look at language through queer slang and the effect of being taunted for being perceived as queer and as a way of going back and marking myself and my childhood as queer. I employ images of St. Sebastian to visualize the concepts of shame and abjection. I look at queer space through Arnold Van Gennep and Victor Turner’s work on liminality, and explore queer personae through the lens of shamanism. I then discuss the creation of the installation, *Shaman Johnny’s Pop-Up Shop & Gallery*, and show how it visualizes the main concepts of queer theory. I describe the queer or alternative persona, Shaman Johnny, and the creation of a sacred space that allows for the experience of queerness through liminality. I close with a final assessment of the installation, *Shaman Johnny’s Pop-Up Shop & Gallery*.

keywords:

liminality ¹	queer theory ⁶
photobooth ²	queer valentine ⁷
queer collections ³	queering ⁸
queer personae ⁴	Shaman Johnny ⁹
Queer Pop ⁵	shamanism ¹⁰

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Introduction

As a gay male visual artist with a life-long obsession for collecting, I am drawn to the idea from queer theory that a collection could reveal queer affect and desire through the choice, display, and contextualization of objects. Indeed, seeing my personal history through the lens of queer theory provides me with frames to view my identity as a gay artist/collector--as a curator of queer. I have lived much of my life surrounded by visual treasures of found and collected objects and art, and these collections form a visual self-portrait. Lately, I have learned that I have been queered by my collections as I queer them. Since much of the materials and inspiration for my art are drawn from my collections, then it too must be queered. During my three years in the UM MFA Art & Design program, I have infused my studio practice with queer theory's ideas, inventing ways I might start to apply or combine what I was reading in my LGBTQ Studies Certificate program with my work in the multilayered media of collage, assemblage, printmaking, and installation. By learning to mark or queer my largely autobiographical work, I begin to participate in a larger dialogue with issues that are both intensely personal and bridge the worlds of art, culture, and queer studies.

Queer Collecting, Curation, and Collage

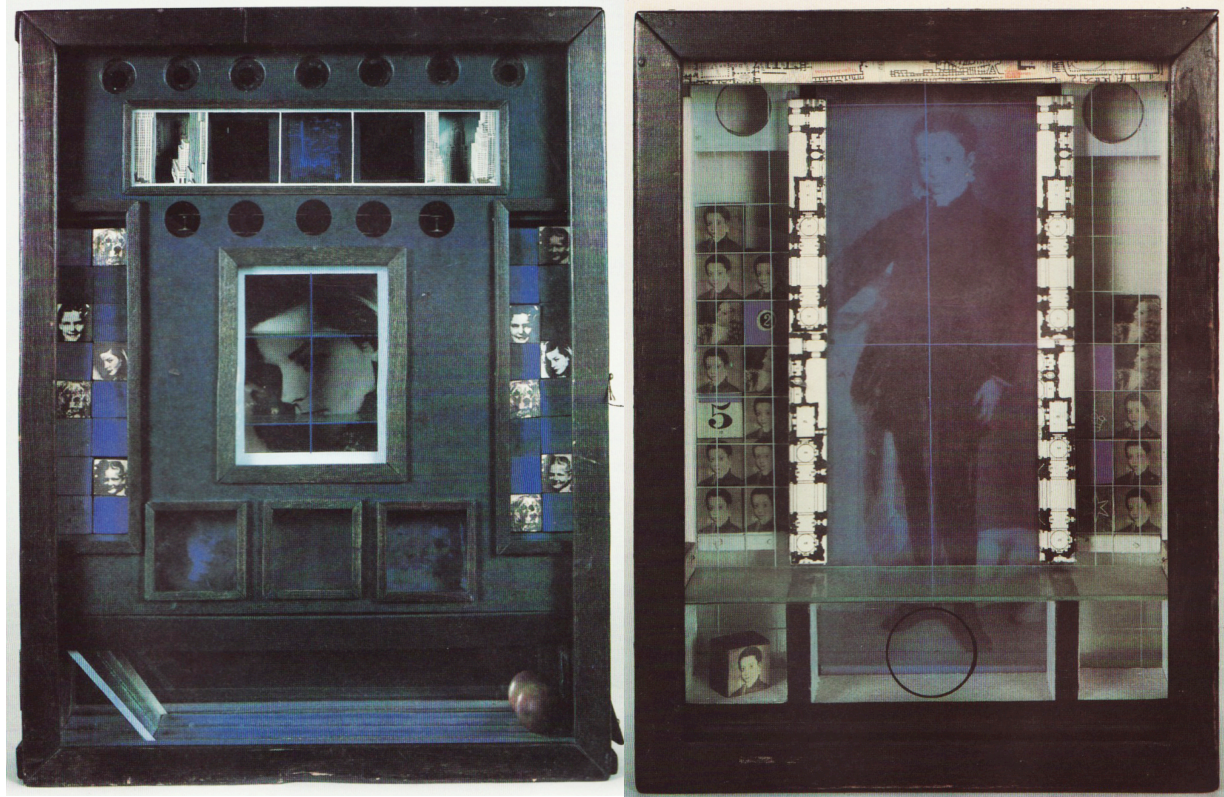
I was a collector before I was aware I was gay. I caught the collecting bug at a very young age and fell in love with the idea of acquiring and forming collections as a toddler. At age 3, I began to save all the birthday cards I received each year. There is still an envelope full of those old cards somewhere in my studio. I still have the brown leather pencil pouch with Canadian maple leaf embossed in faded silver from a rare family road trip taken when I was 7 years old to Niagara Falls--the site of my parent's

1942 honeymoon. Like many children, I had collections of rounded beach glass, stones, and leaves and acorns from the woods. I was always organizing, arranging, and displaying these collections, then adding to them or starting a new one. Any object could trigger a new collection, like a bottle cap, an old penny, a Matchbox car, or a souvenir or postcard from a trip. As I grew into adolescence, my collecting habits began to change, particularly when I began to drive at the age of 16. I now had easy access to second-hand stores, flea markets, and estate sales. It was around this time that I became interested in vintage clothing. In the fall of my sophomore year of high school, my mother offered me a 1950's overcoat that my father had worn. It was a beautifully made in brown and olive green wool herringbone and it was cut long. I could see why my mother had held on to it. It was a handsome coat. Somehow, she knew I would appreciate it. She was right, and I began to wear this overcoat to high school every day--in the 1970's, when it was not cool. At all. Yet, out of my father's vintage hand-me-down overcoat grew an avid interest in vintage clothing, which I actively began to collect and wear. (I had always had an interest in clothes and what I wore, even as a young boy. My mother sewed and made her own clothes, as well as making them for my 3 sisters, and eventually, me.) I was interested in art and design from an early age, and because of my growing collection of vintage menswear, I began to read and educate myself about the history of 20th century fashion. I was always interested in how things were made, because making had been a major component of my childhood, so I became interested in how clothes were made. The collecting of vintage clothing fueled my growing interest in the history and manufacture of other items from the past that had been discarded, and then reappeared in the second hand shops I was frequenting. It

lead directly to my going to school to study theater, where I learned how to sew, cut and drape clothing. (I had already begun acting and performing in theater productions by the age of 6.) I then went on to become a costume designer, a costume crafts specialist, a milliner, and a clothing designer.

In my early 20's and while still an undergraduate, my collecting began to include objects and furniture from the 1930's through the 1960's, and a growing collection of found objects that I used in the sculpture I was creating in school at the time. As I collected more items, I began to read more broadly and to research the history of the objects and paper ephemera I was finding. The things I collected taught me about history and culture, as well as manufacturing and craftsmanship. It was about this time that I was introduced to the boxed assemblages of the American artist, Joseph Cornell (1903-1972). Cornell was a scavenger and a collector who made art from his vast collection of vintage paper ephemera and found objects he gathered during his wanderings through New York City's book shops, record stores, and second hand shops.

Cornell was a peculiar, one might say queer, man. He was a loner and socially awkward, yet he craved connectedness with others. A self-taught artist, he did not make his first work of art until he was in his late twenties. He was a nervous and sickly child who loved books, movies, magic, theater, Coney Island amusements and penny arcades. His father died when he was thirteen, leaving the family mired in debt, and his mother was forced to sell the family home. The family was then required to live a much more modest lifestyle. Cornell spent most of his adult life caring for his elderly, possessive mother and a younger brother, Robert, who had a severe case of



1 left: Joseph Cornell, *Untitled (Penny Arcade for Lauren Bacall)* 20.5" x 16" x 3.5" (1945-46)
right: Joseph Cornell, *Untitled (Medici Prince)* 15.5" x 11.5" x 5" (1952)

cerebral palsy that made him almost completely disabled from birth. In response, Cornell idealized his unhappy childhood, and he retained an exalted vision of it throughout his life. He never outgrew his fascination with the amusements of childhood, and he had a rich fantasy life as an adult which eventually came out in his boxed assemblages.

Cornell led a very modest and chaste life. In his search for a cure to daily indigestion and migraines, he joined a Christian Science church when he was 23 and began to study the teachings of Mary Baker Eddy. Baker Eddy believed you could heal yourself through the mind--a kind of faith healing. He remained with the church the rest of his life. He did not drink, and, although he had a series of unrequited crushes on teenage girls, he had only a few relationships with women. As an adult, he was



Joseph Cornell, *Untitled (Soap Bubble Set)* 15.75" x14.25" x 5.5" (1936)

obsessed with dead, Romantic-era ballerinas, opera divas, and contemporary movie stars such as Lauren Bacall. His first physical relationship with a woman did not occur until he was in his sixties, and he died a virgin. Because of his prudishness and the fact that he never married, lived with his mother, and loved opera and ballet, many of the artists he met assumed he was gay. Added to this, was his ambiguity about sex and his own androgynous sexuality, his strong identification with female stars of the stage and screen, and his being part of a gay art-world clique that included his closest friend, the flamboyantly gay figure, Parker Tyler.

From his diaries, it is clear that...“In spite of his celibate ways and the cloaked spirit of his art, he yearned for intimacy with woman (Solomon, pg.98).” He seems to have worshipped women, but was unable to connect romantically with them. Cornell

may not have been gay, but he can certainly be figured as queer. He was clearly perceived in his day as not being normative--he was often described as strange, odd, peculiar, and weird. As Deborah Solomon put it in *Utopia Parkway: The Life and Work of Joseph Cornell*, "He was more affectionate towards objects than people, preferred little girls and actresses to available women, suffered from migraines, and talked to pigeons (pg. 98)." In many ways, because of his rich fantasy life and his nostalgic love of the past, Cornell was living out of ordinary time and place in his mind and in his art. Collecting, for Cornell, seems to have been a way to recreate his unhappy childhood and rewrite it as magical and untroubled through his assemblage art. He was often dismissed, along with his wistfully romantic assemblage work, because he was perceived as... "an odd-duck figure lost in the distant and irrelevant past. His shadow boxes with their intimate scale and nostalgic spirit, seemed to go against what Ezra Pound called the "make it new" spirit of twentieth century art, an impression reinforced by Cornell's timid and apprehensive behavior among his art world acquaintances (Solomon, pg. xii)." Although Cornell may have seemed to belong to an earlier world (he certainly yearned for one), he was, in fact, ahead of his time. "In light of the contemporary trend for interpreting art according to issues of gender, Cornell seems likely to be deified as a quintessentially postmodern artist--a pioneer of sexual ambiguity, androgyny, and gender reversal. (Solomon, pg. 98)" It was obviously not his intention to blur gender boundaries, but his ambiguity about sex and his own sexuality seems to have influenced the work he created. Although there were precedents to collage and use of found materials in the early Cubist works of Pablo Picasso, George Braque, and Fernand Leger, and the surreal assemblages of Max Ernst, Cornell was the

first artist to devote his entire career to collage and assemblage art. Largely because of his pioneering treatments (or “queering”) of found materials, his work continues to be influential in the 21st century.

I was smitten with Cornell’s work, and I read anything about him I could find. I immediately started my own collection of vintage paper ephemera and found objects--especially old wood boxes and vintage children’s games--with an eye towards creating my own assemblages. This collection grew very large and varied over the years, and eventually I began to create my own assemblages from it. In retrospect, it is very clear to me that my collecting habits were not only the seeds of my earliest creative practice, but that the scavenging and collecting continues to nourish my studio practice to this day. I became, in part, both an artist and a designer because of my interest in collecting and my exposure at 18 to the work of Joseph Cornell. 30 years after coming across my first Cornell box, I had the opportunity to see a retrospective exhibit of Cornell’s assemblages along with his collections of paper ephemera and a variety of objects from his studio. Imagine my surprise when I recognized several of the items on display from Cornell’s collections from his basement home studio as the very same items I had found and were also in my own basement home studio!

Many of Cornell’s boxes were about space, travel, a nostalgic longing for the past, the fantasy of childhood, and unattainable women of the stage and screen. This specific content is what makes his work uniquely his own. I am more inspired by the way he used assemblage and found objects to make what I would call visual poems. As an artist of the 21st century, and carrying my own set of longings and fantasies as well as a growing knowledge of Queer Theory, I have chosen to make much of my recent

assemblage and collage work about gender identity, sexuality, and LGBTQ social issues. A recent series used the issue of gay marriage as its theme. The boxes I used



Marriage Diptych 20”h x 8”w x 3.5”d (2011)

for this series, titled *Gay Day*, were old, found wooden drawers which were meant to represent the closet--because drawers, like closets, are places for concealment and invisibility. In the assemblage piece, *Marriage Diptych*, two drawers contain a pair of

vintage 1950's bridal paper dolls, the groom and best man, dressed in their underwear with their paper tuxedos in the background. There are a pair of early 20th century sepia-toned photographs of affectionate male couples, a pair of cigarette trading cards with images of a man exercising with his arms and legs spread wide open, 2 pairs of plastic grooms wedding cake toppers, and the words MARRIED, HAPPY, PERFECT, and FREEDOM, spelled out in Scrabble and anagram tiles. There are four cards about the size of a standard business card--2 in each drawer. They are from a 1970's board game, *The Ungame* created by Rhea Zakich in 1972 as a non-competitive communication game to teach the of sharing personal thoughts honestly as well as how to listen respectfully--a kind of 70's style group therapy/get to know each other/ consciousness raising game for families. There are a stack of cards with various questions meant to elicit conversations about different topics especially around family, marriage, patriotism, and the Bible. The four questions in this diptych read "What advice would you give a young man about to be married?", "Talk about a happy marriage.", "Describe the perfect husband.", and "What does freedom mean to you?". When I found this old game at a thrift store, I noticed the graphics on the lid of the box had a seal of approval by Dr. James Dobson and a white dove and crucifix denoting that it is a Christian Version of the game. Dobson, I remembered, had gone on to found the anti-gay hate group, Focus on the Family, in the 1980's. A right-wing Christian activist, James Dobson has a long history of homophobic rhetoric and his group is known for fighting against equal rights for LGBTQ minorities, including gay marriage, anti-discrimination policies, etc. When I found this, my heart jumped for joy, as the questions on the cards worked so beautifully with the pieces I had been creating about gay

marriage. It also explained the family oriented slant of the questions from the game. A double bonus, when I realized the homophobic James Dobson had given the game his seal of approval, because I would be appropriating these Dobson approved questions for the cause of gay marriage and LGBTQ families--not his original intention. I queered the game cards by putting them with the male bridal couples, the photos of affectionate men, and the plastic pairs of grooms. In this context, the questions take on a new meaning, in a sense they are re-written and re-contextualized to become questions about the definitions of marriage, family, freedom, and happiness and who is entitled to them in the 21st century.



The Ungame (1972)

I have continued to collect into middle age, and I have acquired numerous collections. As a gay visual artist working in collage and assemblage, I draw my materials and inspiration from an extensive collection of vintage and antique paper ephemera, especially post cards, matchbooks, photographs, magazines, advertising,

and greeting cards. I am fascinated with beautiful old things--things with a history and a story. I often sense some kind of latent magic in these objects or some kind of connection with the history contained within the object. I sense both their connection to the past and their relevance to the present. I collect all kinds of objects that catch my eye, often because they are particularly beautiful, strange, evocative, or out of the ordinary--in a word queer. Although many items provide the inspiration and raw materials for my assemblage work, some objects are collected purely for pleasure and displayed as decoration. I spent many years collecting and learning about mid-century modern glass, vintage beefcake magazine photography, barware, Pyrex refrigerator bowls & dishes, anodized aluminum tumblers, 1950's furniture and textiles, milk bottle caps, matchbooks, vintage aluminum Christmas trees and Shiny Brite ornaments, valentines, children's toys and games and so much more too numerous to mention here. Often, art and life collide or collage, as collections are raided and rearranged, added to or cleaned out for my art-making.

Seeing my personal history through the ever-shifting lens of Queer Theory provides me with frames to view my identity as a gay artist/collector, as a curator of queer. I have lived my gay adult life surrounded by a visual treasure trove of found and collected objects and art, and this environment that I have created through collecting has given me much pleasure. These collections form a visual self-portrait of me through my things, my possessions. In *Who Was That Man? A Present for Mr. Oscar Wilde*, Neil Bartlett writes that many gay men seem to be attracted to collecting and decorating their home interiors, but with a different, one could say queer, point of view. "Our rooms are not decorated to announce our occupation or our family status; they are not really

“domestic” interiors. They need reflect nothing but the tastes of the owner, the pleasure he takes in life, his ability to choose and arrange his possessions (pg. 178).” My collections can not help but represent or reflect aspects of me--such as my tastes, interests, personal aesthetics, obsessions, passions--and one of those aspects is that I am gay. So if these collections are a way for me to visually communicate, represent or signal who I am, and if they form a picture or portrait of me and my tastes, interests, and pleasures, my aesthetics and my obsessions, wouldn't my gayness, my queerness also be represented in some way in my collections? My own personal experience is that there is something about my being gay that has fed my obsession with collecting and display and my love of art, design, and culture. I think my gayness is also part of the reason why I have a passionate need to design and create a personal environment that reflects my gay point of view--a need to create my own personal gay culture. Because I am a visually hungry person, I want to create and live in a space that provides a wide array of visual stimulation that is beautiful and odd, strange and engaging, curious and evocative, theatrical and exaggerated. If that is queer, and I believe it is, so be it.

My collections are not on public display (except for the guests in my home) and they are overseen solely by me. They are more like my own private museum--not unlike the Cabinet of Wonder or Wunderkammer of Renaissance Europe. My collection has different types of objects with no clear categories or strict boundaries beyond those set by me. In this way, it is much easier for me to queer my collections, because they are under my control and I can give them whatever context I choose in how I go about displaying them. The historian Robert Mills writes about what it might look like to ‘queer’ collections in the public museum environment. He imagines that exhibitions of queer

collections would “not only draw attention to the normalizing dimensions of collecting as cultural activities”, but would “also reveal collecting itself as a potential site of queer affect and desire.” He goes on to imagine that these queer exhibitions “would reveal that the configurations of objects, desires, and identifications that collections set in motion can be multi-layered, multi-dimensional experiences (Mills, pg 48).” When I look around my own home and studio, I have, in fact consciously tried to create a queer “multi-layered, multi-dimensional experience” through the configuration of my objects and my interaction with them which brings into play both my desires and my identity as a gay man and artist. I have paid great attention to and taken great pleasure in how the objects are displayed, whether in like groups or disparate objects linked by some shared trait. I believe that display can be an art form and a way of creating other worlds, other spaces. In my home, mixed in with my collections of objects, there are images of same sex male couples and nude men in the artwork on the walls--some of it my own. I would guess that most people would take a look at my home and think “gay.” (And they would be correct in their assumptions.)

The idea that a collection could reveal queer affect and desire through the choice, display, and contextualization of objects offers great possibilities for future artistic exploration. It is my own personal experience as a lifelong queer collector that desire is a large part of collecting, and the hunt for the desired is part of that fun--maybe because it is so similar to how cruising for men was in my twenties. In both, you start out looking for something you desire--objects or men. Sometimes you know what you are looking for and you attempt to find that specific item--a blonde muscle boy or a red Pyrex mixing bowl. Sometimes you find exactly what you had hoped you would find and

sometimes you feel disappointment because you do not. Other times, your focus may be less specific. You go out cruising or collecting without knowing what you are looking for, and you do it for the pleasure of seeing what you might find. Most of the time, you do both--look for specific items, but also keep an open mind and see what turns up. The thrill of desire and the thrill of the hunt! My collections have had a positive emotional affect on me due to the pleasure I have taken from their acquisition, arrangement, and display, and they have also provided me with a continuous flow of ideas and artistic inspiration. Most importantly, my collections have helped me to develop and refine my own personal gay aesthetic and artistic style.

With this idea of queering the collection in mind, I thought it might be interesting to try to queer items in my own collection and aim for a "multi-layered, multi-dimensional experience" of them through print media. I started with an image of a dozen different vintage pop bottle caps from the 1950's and 1960's from my collection of several hundred. I also began to think about the possibilities in going back and marking or queering objects from my childhood--such as bottle caps, chewing gum wrappers, and alphabet blocks. I am working with discarded and found objects from my collections that often have nothing about them that has the essence of queerness or that would cause someone to identify them as queer--like the pop bottle caps, which are about nostalgia and childhood, not queer. From these found objects, I am trying to create a personal visual history of gay identity in a culture that does not provide such a history. As Sedgwick has suggested, I could go back and read the objects I selected with a queer interpretation or analysis. I was interested in exploring if and how gay identity could be formed and expressed through things. I thought I could take these normative objects,

which were previously unmarked as queer, mark them so they read as queer, and then photograph them and turn them into lithographic prints--both queering the bottle caps and the final print image. One of the dilemmas I had to resolve was finding ways to mark images and objects so that they could be read as queer. One way that seemed to offer a lot of possibility was to work with language. By re-writing what was already there, I could queer the object by queering the language--a tactic I had already begun to use in my "pre-queer theory" work. I was also intrigued by the idea of subverting or doubling the meaning and surprising the viewer by challenging their expectations and assumptions. I want to engage the viewer in thinking about how gender is constructed and how we expect to see gender performed correctly.

I am interested in applying the concepts of queering as it relates to queer theory and gender identity, but I am also interested in the other meanings and definitions of queer such as bent, curious, eccentric, extraordinary, fantastic, far-out, freakish, grotesque, kooky, odd, outlandish, peculiar, ridiculous, strange, singular, twisted, uncanny, uncommon, unexpected, unusual, way-out, and weird. Objects, people, and places can all be queer or they can hold the possibility of queerness. Because queerness is fluid, it is my sense that it ebbs and flows in my life. Some experiences are queerer than others, and some are what I would call straight, normal, or expected. I also relate it to Sedgwick's theory that queer meaning is always seeping out from cultural artifacts of all kinds--from such low pop culture artifacts as bottle caps & gum wrappers to the high cultural artifacts of literature and other fine arts. If you look attentively, you will begin to notice the cracks and fissures in the incoherence of heterosexuality, and then you will most likely be able to tease out the queerness that is inherent. I am

always looking for examples of the queerness leaking out in unexpected places, people, and things which I encounter in the world. Examples of queerness can be found everywhere, like the homoerotic beefcake images on butane cigarette lighters I encountered right next to the cash register at a small town Alabama gas station in the bible belt in the deep south where they seemed completely out of place. I would not have been surprised if they had erotic images of women on them--as that would not be out of the ordinary. (And, yes, I purchased two of them! Their placement next to the cash register felt like a dare to me.)

My experience with the word 'queer' began with it as a synonym for 'fag' or 'faggot.' Most of the people I know also understand the meaning of 'queer' to be a pejorative term that is the same as 'fag' or 'faggot'. I like the idea of reclaiming the word 'queer', but reclaiming all of it, the negative meanings and all the other meanings that do not necessarily specifically refer pejoratively to homosexuality. It makes the word open to a greater range of people, who may not necessarily be LGBT, but who feel at odds with the dominant culture and what society considers to be normal. As David Halperin wrote, "Queer is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers. It is an identity without an essence. 'Queer' then, demarcates not a positivity but a positionality vis-a-vis the normal (Halperin, pg.62)." It is a more inclusive definition, but it also seems to desexualize the word. Halperin's definition proposes that sexuality is only one way in which one might define oneself against what is considered to be normal. Sexuality is not essential to queerness by this definition. So, by this way of thinking, anything that is positioned or oriented against the accepted norms can be

considered queer. Straight people can be queer. This definition seems to open up the field of queerness beyond sexuality and make it more inclusive of difference, disruption, disorientation, and uncanniness in all its forms and manifestations.



Queer Pop 15" x 11" (2013)

In terms of the Queer Pop print, my hope was that the viewer would first register that the print was of a dozen enlarged images of pop bottle caps. Pop bottle caps are fairly normative and straightforward objects--most likely summoning up nostalgic memories of childhood. They would then be drawn in to take a closer look, because, with their colorful graphics and 3-dimensional look, the pop bottle caps are a kind of eye-candy. Although the Queer Pop prints were done as 4 color half-tone photo-lithographs, I wanted the the prints to have the feel of a vintage Pop Art print in the vein of an Andy Warhol silkscreen. The colorful pop bottle caps refer to childhood for me, and, I assume for many other people who were children in the 1950's and 1960's. I imagined that this would bring up fond childhood memories or put the viewer in a nostalgic mood. Upon closer inspection, the viewer would then realize that all of the bottle caps have been queered by re-writing what had previously been there. So where the original pop bottle caps once had the usual and expected flavors, such as Grape Soda, Cream Soda, Black Cherry, or Orange Soda, they now have "queer flavors" using language that refers to queerness such as Gaydar Strawberry Soda, Butch's Black Cherry, Imitation Tranny Soda, Lesbo Sappho Soda, and Half Gay Fruit/Half Queen. This subverts the normative male gaze and frames the bottle caps through my queer gaze. I am hoping to bring out a sense of both the humor and innocence, as well as the sadness inherent in this marking and re-marking, but also an understanding that I am reclaiming my queer past through this marking.

Queering the Valentine

In my years of collecting, I have focused, among other things, on paper ephemera. Because of the collage and mixed-media work I am doing, I am always on

the lookout for affordable and interesting vintage paper items, such as old photographs, postcards, matchbooks, magazines, advertising, and catalogues. I will look for anything that has interesting visuals or language that can be related to issues of queerness or could be read as queer for use in my art work. This includes photographic images of same sex male or female couples or same sex groups, beefcake, anything with the word 'gay' or any other words that also referred to or were code for queerness or homosexuality. (Some of the found paper ephemera I have collected contained such phrases as Lavender Lifestyle, Delightfully Artistic, Gay Bobby Pins, Have A Gay Day, Keep Cool and Be Gay, and Be Happy, Be Gay For Tomorrow Is Another Day). One area where I have regularly found these kinds of queer paper ephemera has been with Valentine's Day cards. Many of them have nostalgic expressions, old slang, or images (like flowers or naked cupids) that can easily be read as queer or put into a queer context in conjunction with other found images.

Most of the myths and stories around the origination of Valentine's Day revolve around ancient Greco/Roman spring festivals, such as Lupercalia, that celebrated cleansing, purification, fertility and ended with marriage lotteries where opposite sex couples were arranged through the picking of names out of a container. During the middle ages in France and Britain, it was believed that some birds began mating on February 14th, and mating season was associated with romance--thus the date of February 14th for Valentine's Day. Some of the other origination myths revolve around stories of St. Valentine. The most common myth is that Valentine, who was a Christian priest, married young heterosexual couples after Emperor Claudius II declared it illegal. Claudius needed all the single men for his army because he felt that they made better

soldiers before they had wives and children. When Valentine was imprisoned for breaking the decree, he fell in love with the jailer's daughter. It is said that he sent her a note that ended with, 'From Your Valentine'. This is considered the very first Valentine's Day card. Because this story is such an over-the-top romanticized heterosexual fantasy, it's almost impossible for the queerness to stay hidden in most of the Valentine's Day cards I have collected. Valentine's Day is traditionally a heteronormative holiday that celebrates opposite sex attraction, love, flirtation and lust, marriage and reproduction. As such, the typical Valentine's Day card has a very heterosexist slant, and because of this, many of them are leaking queerness or ripe for the queerness to be brought forward and marked. They become a parody of heterosexuality, which lends them to becoming parodies of homosexuality--with the addition of a few same-sex markers or signs to push them into queerness. By adding several erotic male beefcake nudes as markers of homosexuality, I can remake the visual meaning and rewrite the text from straight to gay. Most of the Victorian style valentines are trying so hard to be straight that they tend to overdo it with the hearts, cupids, flowers, birds, and glitter. With all that be-ribboned, floral frou-frou, they are already so artificial and unnatural that they easily become kitsch, and this makes it very easy to pull out the queerness. They are so over-the-top, they go gay! In my scavenging, I have always looked for the valentine cards that have what I call a gay aesthetic. For me a gay aesthetic is one that embraces artificiality, contrivance, theatricality, exaggeration, the glitzy, shiny, and sparkly, the staged--kitsch and camp. So, when I am looking for old valentines, I gravitate towards the ones with the most flowers, hearts, lace, cupids, glitter, feathers, frou-frou, etc.--

because of this exaggerated material lushness, the queerness is so inherent in the Victorian valentines that it is just waiting to come out.



Late 19th and early 20th century paper valentines (collection of author)

The British produced the first printed valentines in the late 18th century. Cheaper postal rates in the 19th century made the cards more accessible and more popular, and it was around this time that they began to come into common use. The first paper Valentine's Day cards were produced in the U.S. around 1850. They were inspired by and tried to mimic the ornate English cards that were produced earlier in the 19th century, and were assembled with gold leaf, glitter, real lace, feathers, and fabric trims. (With all the feathers, ribbons, and fairy dust, one could say that they were made with very gay materials and designed with a queer eye.) Many of the early American

Valentine's Day cards were multi-layered baroque constructions in a Victorian vein which featured ornate cut-out paper lace with images of very young, opposite-sex couples, and symbols related to love and romance including cupids, lovebirds in pairs, hearts pierced by arrows, red roses, delicate feminine hands, and fountains or waterfalls. Most of the settings were in ornate, columned gardens and they included frames, arches, and borders that were overflowing with wreathes, swags, garlands, baskets, and bouquets of pastel flowers.

The first Valentine's Day card I made for my partner that re-used vintage valentine cards was in 1996. It was a small booklet that used some old valentines and some romantic phrases. There is nothing particularly queer about how I assembled the first one, beyond the obvious fact that it was inherently queer because it was made by a gay man to give to his same-sex partner. The following year, I made a second small Valentine's Day book. On several of the pages, I queered the cardboard from underwear packaging that featured male models in the underwear. These pages have an obvious homoerotic slant and they are paired with very silly, innocent vintage valentine's--queering both the image from the underwear and the vintage valentine. I continued over the next 3 years in a similar vein by combining the images on the cardboard underwear inserts of male models with vintage valentines and other paper ephemera. Some of the vintage valentines I used included some easily queered images and captions: "I'll 'cop' for my Valentine" featuring a policeman offering to "cop" a feel, a conductor on a train with a large smokestack blowing white steam that reads "Gee, Valentine, you've got me blowin' my stack!" , and one with a boy sun bathing that reads, "I'll 'tan your hide' if you won't be my Valentine." I also started to include some

small images of my face (and some with my partner) that were produced in photo booths and digital sticker booths. (Digital sticker booths were modeled on photo booths and were found outside of many toy stores in the 1990's. Instead of a long strip of photos, the customer received a 3.5" x 5" card printed with 16 small digital stickers from the image taken in a booth.) One valentine was an accordion fold book the size of a vintage photo strip that had many photo strips that I had taken by myself or with my partner. These images began to make the valentine's more autobiographical.



Valentine Portfolio each 9.5" x 7.5" (2005)



4 pages from a Valentine Booklet 8" x 13" (1999)

Over the next few years I continued to experiment with the queering of the valentine form itself. I also began to branch out from the booklet form and began to try different forms. Around 2006, I was given an envelope filled with early 20th century valentines. They came from the estate of a friend's great aunt. They were ornate, multi-layered Victorian fantasies with a profusion of paper lace and floral designs. They were also starting to dry out and fall apart from age, which made it much easier to deconstruct them without regret. I could take them apart and separate the multiple layers and elements of the cards and then use them individually. This way they could be combined with the homoerotic figures I was starting to feature more prominently in the valentine I was creating each year. This taking apart or deconstructing of the actual material Victorian paper valentines and the reconstructing of them through collage into new valentines mirrors the idea of deconstructing the concept of the valentine itself and then reconstructing the valentine as queer. I have appropriated the heteronormative idea of the valentine, and used a negotiated and anti-homophobic reading of the valentine. Visually, using collage combined with a camp aesthetic, I have subverted the male gaze by populating the valentine with homoerotic male nudes, while also recoding and marking the valentine as queer through language. This process of queering creates an alternative valentine landscape and gives it queer meaning both visually and linguistically.

In a way, being gifted these old valentines was a turning point for me in terms of the queerness in the valentines becoming much more overt and much more eroticized. These frilly, floral, and, from my point of view, gay valentines combined with the lushness of the homoerotic male nudes in different states of arousal or passion could



Front covers from 4 Valentine Books 8.5" x 8.5" (2009, 2008, 2010, & 2007)



Valentine Shrine 13" x 17" (2012)

not be read as anything but gay. I also like the idea of the Victorian valentines coming out of a historical period known for its prudishness towards sex and sexuality. It was a time where homosexuality was largely hidden in the closet. It was also the same time

period when the labels of homosexual and heterosexual were created and came into usage. This opposition of images--valentines with flowers, hearts and lace, which read as very feminine and heteronormative and the male nudes which read as stereotypically masculine--play off each other. The abundance of flowers, hearts, roses, and glitz queers the male nudes while at the same time the combination of nude men and hearts, lace and flowers creates a space or landscape for queer romance. In my scavenging jaunts to flea markets, garage and estate sales, I have been fortunate enough to come across several more lots of these antique Victorian valentines. One of the results of this making of valentines from my collections of vintage paper ephemera is that my partner now has a growing collection of his own queer Valentine's day cards. (As of this writing, I have created nineteen of these queered Valentine's Day cards for my partner.) For me, it has become a yearly ritual and an act of devotion to my partner and to the life we have shared together. The valentines have become a record and representation of that shared experience and emotional bond. So I have continued each year to create another queer Valentine's Day card for my partner by mashing up frilly antique valentines with vintage beefcake nudes from old muscle & health magazines, 1980's gay men's magazines, and other relevant paper ephemera. And each year, I go on trying to make queer meaning out of the discards of straight culture.

Queering Myself through the Print

Most of my recent work has been influenced by the writings of queer theorists. I was hoping to take what I was learning about queer theory into my studio so I could process, ponder, and try to understand more deeply the concepts of the theory. I also began to look back at the work I had been making about gay social and political issues

before I had any real knowledge of queer theory. In that work I could see how I had been referencing different concepts of queer theory. In the boxed assemblages I had been making, I could now see how I was referencing the closet and the open secret by making work in old drawers with glass fronts or old boxes with doors that closed. Much of this work also addressed issues of containment, concealment, secrets, and visibility. I noticed how I was appropriating discarded items from straight culture and rewriting, recoding, and re-contextualizing them so they could be read as gay or queer. My gay marriage series featured bridal paper dolls that I queered by putting the groom and best man paper dolls together with images of same sex male couples, and I put the paper tuxedos on the bride and maid of honor paper dolls with images of same sex female couples. I now see how I was commenting on performativity and gender identity construction. I had also been using language by rewriting or recoding existing language or working with language that could be read as gay or queer--playing with the double meanings or slang usage of the words. I was also working with flowers as symbols and signs of queerness as well as the language of flowers used as slang. I would now need to find a way to express and engage visually with the ideas and concepts of queer theory more consciously. I wanted to be inspired by the theory and be able to use the various ideas and concepts I garnered from it as a starting point, or as another way in to my work in the studio.

When I began to think about making autobiographical prints in the form of self-portraits, I knew I would focus on trying to have some kind of visual conversation around the construction of identity and gender. I began this exploration by using my own experiences of growing up as a queer boy in the 1960's and 1970's in the suburbs of

Cleveland, Ohio. Because of the queer theory and philosophy I was reading about identity and gender construction, I started to contemplate how much being taunted and called names as a young boy had affected the construction of my own identity and gender. In other words, how much of an effect did the taunts of 'fag', 'faggot', 'fairy', 'queer', and worse, have on my own sense of my specific identity and gender? Was I queer because of how I was perceived? Was I queer because of my behavior? My voice? My interests? My style of dress? Or was I queer because I was called those kinds of names? Did the words, in affect, "queer" me? Could I, indeed, be "queered" by someone else?

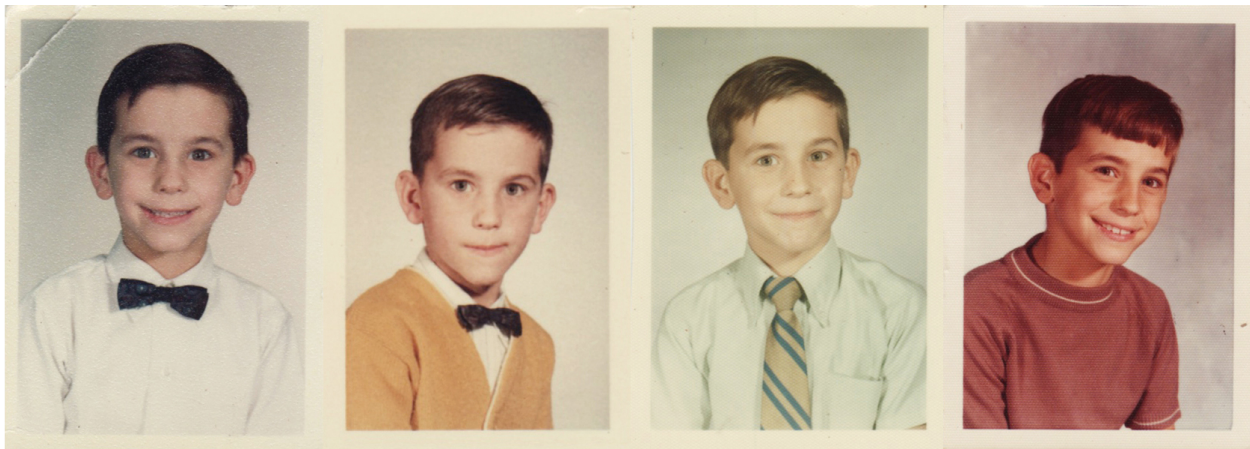
I had an interest in working with the combination and overlay of language and image in my print work. I felt a more conscious application of the principles of queer theory to both language and image might be a way for me to find other avenues of constructing the images that I make into prints. I also felt it had the potential to open up some new areas of investigation into identity that I could translate visually. I could then use the ideas to develop a series of prints with the theme of my own autobiographical identity, especially my gender identity. I was interested in the idea of a taunt and what it means in terms of the construction of identity. One taunt I heard often was "fag" or "faggot." In *Dude You're A Fag*, C. J. Pascoe, a sociologist, addresses the use of word fag and how discourses and practices of masculinity in high school are applied and manifested by both boys and girls. She writes about what she labels "fag discourse"-- how the word 'fag' is used to police gender behavior and ensure that all boys (and girls) become heterosexual and that boys adhere to and perform a very narrowly defined masculinity. "Fag talk and fag imitations serve as a discourse with which boys discipline

themselves and each other through joking relationships.” Although some of it may be joking, much of it is not done in jest. To be taunted and called a fag is still considered the worst thing that anyone can call you. Because the definition of fag identity is unstable and inconsistent, most boys will avoid showing **any** signs of being effeminate or feminine, but they are also aware of how failing at being masculine in the correct way will bring on “the specter of the fag.” Fag identity “...is fluid enough that boys police their behaviors out of fear of having the fag identity permanently adhere and definitive enough so that boys recognize a fag behavior and strive to avoid it.” Pascoe argues that “such harassment is central to the formation of a gendered identity for boys in the way it is not for girls (Pascoe pg. 54).”

Pascoe’s *Dude You’re A Fag* intersects and builds on Judith Butler’s theory of performativity and how gender is both learned and enforced. After reading Pascoe’s book, I had a greater understanding of how labeling a person as deviant or abject has a very direct effect on a person’s gender identity. It may not be that it changes a person’s sexual attractions, but it can change how a person performs their gender. There may be certain affects or behaviors that a person may tamp down or try to mitigate or repress. The person may decide to dress or behave differently in ways that do not attract the “wrong” kinds of attention. The policing of compulsory heterosexuality through the fag discourse and taunting have a direct effect on how one performs one’s gender identity--especially while still in secondary school.

Since the focus in my art was on autobiography, I began to think of ways I might start to apply or combine what I was reading with self-portraits. I decided to work with my early grade school pictures taken during the years when I began to be taunted and

mocked for being perceived as being effeminate--a fag. These scholastic portraits were a regular, normative feature of each school year. We would all line up by class and year and have group pictures taken, and then we would each sit for our own portrait. I began to consider the different names I had been called, and how they changed as I grew into adolescence. Some of the early taunts from childhood seem almost quaint and innocent to me today, with such words as fairy, pansy, and sissy, they are almost nostalgic. As I matured and entered junior high school, the taunts became more aggressive, sexually obscene, and laced with threats of violence. By high school, the perception of my identity as a fag was pretty much set in stone. The fag discourse had done its work.



Scholastic portraits of the author 1967-1970

I see these self-portraits as a way of putting myself in the picture. By using existing images of myself or creating images of myself, I can speak more personally and directly from my own experience as a gay man. These self-portraits are a way for me to apply queer theory to myself by bringing together my questions about identity with images of my not fully developed childhood self. One of the thoughts I had about visualizing gender identity was to go back and mark the school portraits with my own hand. In a sense, it would be a way of taking control of the labeling and also a way of

embracing it without a sense of shame. I was a 'gay boy', a 'sissy', a 'pansy', a 'fruit', and, a 'fairy. It was a way to reclaim and to celebrate my queerness. This is not to deny the pain those words caused me as a boy, but it is a way to return and say what was unsayable to myself then--to go back and mark myself and to mark my childhood as queer. I think this is one way of applying Sedgwick's idea of an anti-homophobic reading to the school portraits. Another approach I used in queering the prints was to employ Michael Warner's theories about shame and abjection as a shared experience for gay men. To mark the self-portraits as queer without a sense of shame or abjection, but with a sense of agency and as a fact of my queer childhood--one of many--in a straight world. A kind of graffiti that does not just say, "John was here", but "John was QUEER here."

Using the intaglio method, I drew the images onto copper plates using etching, drypoint, and aquatint. Under each image of my childhood self I wrote a taunt in bold, block capital letters: **GAY BOY**, **SISSY**, **QUEER**, and **FAIRY**. I wanted the words to look like they had been scratched and gauged indelibly onto the bottom of each frame. Around the head in each image I scratched in a series of taunts that were meant to represent a halo or aura, as well as what was in the background for me emotionally and mentally during those years--represented by the dark and hazy background in each self-portrait. I used a compass, French curves, and some plastic drafting templates to create a series of lines, curves, circles, and hieroglyphic symbols over the self-portraits. These represent the mapping and construction of identity and the idea of coded knowledge, as well as another way to go back and mark what had been unmarked or unspoken. The title of the finished quartet of self-portraits is "The Homosexual Species

in Childhood Cleveland, Ohio USA (1967-1970)". The title is a reference to Foucault's "the homosexual was now a species" statement--each of the taunts is a species which refers to the biological analogy that homosexuality is a genus with numerous species (Foucault, pg. 42).



The Homosexual Species in Childhood (Cleveland, Ohio USA 1967-1970) 13" x 30" (2012)

Another piece focused on the taunt of "fruit" and the different slang or hidden meanings of the word "fruit". Fruit is not a word that would have obvious gay or queer connotations in most situations or contexts. This mixed-media piece consists of a paper mache hat covered in vintage paper gum wrappers in fruit flavors, a set of wooden alphabet blocks spelling out different taunts, and a digital image transfer of my first grade school portrait on a piece of birch plywood. The portrait is framed with rows of 1960's vintage paper gum wrapper chain with fruit flavors as well as an inner frame made of vintage soda pop bottle caps--also with fruit flavors. Above and below the portrait are two vintage wood elementary school rulers which are another way to visually represent the measuring, mapping, and constructing of identity. Beneath the

image are four cardboard playing cards from a vintage game with illustrations of fruit on them. Underneath the row of fruit cards are four more cards from another vintage game, each with a simple phrase: A Boy's Name, A Slang Word or Expression, Name of a Fruit, and What You Hate the Most. (The answer to all of them, in my mind, is my first name--John.) These layerings of fruit-related objects and images can be read in different ways depending on your point of view--with a homophobic or anti-homophobic reading or analysis, and also with a sense of both the humor and sadness that I hope this mixed media work conveys.



Self Portrait with Fruit 52" x 22" (2012) with details

I also attempted to apply these concepts around the construction of identity to a series of 30 prints I made with a photolithographic image of St. Sebastian based on a photograph I took of a sculpture of St. Sebastian that is in the Lisbon Cathedral in Portugal. After having worked with what I considered to be more nostalgic kinds of taunts--taunts that have lost some or all of their ability to offend--I started to use some of the more sexually graphic taunts that were composed with more offensive language and laced with threats of violence and anger at my perceived queerness. I worked in layers with image and language on this series of prints. I would apply the words and then overprint and bury them and then try to excavate them back up to the surface so the words would look old, worn, distressed, and a bit harder to make out. I attempted to



St. Sebastian(Lilies) 30" x 22" (2012)



St. Sebastian(Cage) 30" x 22" (2012)

make some of them look like they had been defaced or graffitied, with varying degrees of success. I brought in a variety of other print mediums to make a series of hybrid prints that were multi-layered. I brought in other visual representations of taunts like some of the gay slang derived from flowers like pansy, lily, or roses, as well as anatomical images, halos, hands, stars, and other references to religion and transcendence. I was interested in visualizing how abjection or an abject position can lead from shame and suffering to transcendence--as with the Christian saints.

St. Sebastian is an image I have come back to repeatedly in different media since the early 1980's. It is an image that I can trace back to my childhood in a Polish Roman Catholic family. Because St. Sebastian was believed to ward off the Black Plague, his image is found in some form in most Christian churches. Outside of images of Jesus Christ, St. Sebastian is the most reproduced male figure in art. He was a soldier and an athlete and was typically portrayed as a beautiful, muscular young man with little covering his naked form beyond a loin cloth. He is usually tied to a column or tree and shot through with arrows. His face is often shown with an expression of agony on it. Because these images can be perceived or read as homoerotic, this expression of agony can also be read as an expression of sexual ecstasy. This negotiated or oppositional reading of St. Sebastian as a gay icon in sexual ecstasy is way to apply Sedgwick's concept of an anti-homophobic analysis. Because of his supposed ability to ward off the plague, as well as the homoerotic subtext--his image was appropriated by many gay artists during the AIDS crisis of the 1980's and rewritten and reread as queer. St. Sebastian is another example of a high straight cultural icon and symbol



St. Sebastian (Abjection) 30" x 22" (2012)

St. Sebastian (Sacred Heart) 30" x 22" (2012)

brought low through queering and turned into a gay icon and symbol. St. Sebastian's image has often been used by gay artists to suggest an abject or deviant homosexual figure, and how that sense of being abject reflects the life experiences of so many gay men. His image was a way for me to address Michael Warner's writings about the discourse of shame and abjection, and how this binds the gay community together in their shared experience of abjection. St. Sebastian also served as a symbol of the suffering and death of many talented, young gay artists during the AIDS epidemic of the 1980's.

Queering Space: Liminality, Sacred Space, and Installation

As I explored ideas of queerness through objects and identity, I began to investigate the possibility of queering a space. Could I create experiences of queerness--through objects, people, and space? Could I queer an existing space and have that space also address queer objects and queer personae? I began to wonder if I could create a space or installation that facilitates or builds a greater a sense of queer community and an appreciation for the dialogue that can be had through art and design about definitions of queerness in the 21st century. I also wanted to create a space that helps to induce a sense of liminality. I realized that I could use theatrical conceits, exaggeration, disruption, disorientation, and sensuality as methods for queering space. I could also work with the high/low concepts of kitsch and camp, appropriation and negotiated or oppositional reading, as well as working from an anti-homophobic point of view. I created a space that at first felt like nothing out of the ordinary--a normative shop and gallery in an existing storefront. In the back half of this seemingly normal space, I created a liminal space that disrupted the normativity of the shop and gallery. It was intended to create a sense of awe or wonderment. It was meant to disrupt or disorient the experience of shopping and the exchange of goods or commodities for cash and to help create a sense or experience of the uncanny, the unexpected, the disoriented and disruptive--the queer. The front space and back spaces facilitated a dialogue about queerness or an experience of queerness and liminality--what it means, how it is defined, how it has accrued meaning in the 20th century, and how it can be utilized in the 21st century.

Liminal is defined as being in-between, and queerness is a form of this in-betweenness. If you identify as queer, you are not male and you are not female. You are ambiguous and figured as somewhere in-between masculine and feminine or figured as existing outside the norms of society. In the same way that a queer person is a type of liminal personae, a queer space is a form of liminal space; a queer space, like liminal space, can be a space that is disorienting and out of ordinary time and place. The concept of liminality was developed in the early 20th century by the anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep. He defined liminality as the quality of disorientation, disruption, and ambiguity that occurs in the middle stage of rituals or rites of passage--such as marriage, funerals, and births. He divided these rites of passage into three sub- categories:

rites of separation (preliminal rites): where the participant has left something behind or experienced some kind of symbolic death or detachment from the social structure or set of cultural conditions

transition rites (liminal or threshold rites): where the participant's sense of identity dissolves and becomes ambiguous or detached from the social structure. The participant stands on the threshold between what they left behind and what they will become. The passage through this threshold realm is a liminal state.

rites of incorporation (postliminal rites): where the participant, after passing through the liminal stage, has finished the transition, is somehow changed, and now holds a new and stable status. (Gennep, 11)

The liminal stage is a stage “where the participant's sense of identity dissolves and becomes ambiguous.” This sense of incoherence and ambiguity, of not knowing where one stands or fits in the world, is a common experience for queer people. This sense of

feeling out of place in normative spaces can often feel like one is living in a liminal space. I think this feeling becomes the norm for queer people--the sense of always feeling out of place, of not fitting in, of not belonging. Liminal space, then for queer people, might be a kind of space that feels comfortable because they are used to inhabiting spaces where they feel out of time and place and or have a sense that they do not belong.

In the 1960's, the British anthropologist Victor Turner came across van Gennep's work on liminality and expanded its application beyond rites of passage for individuals to larger groups, from villages to whole societies, and even to entire civilizations. Turner had the insight that liminality "...served not only to identify the importance of in-between periods, but also to understand the human reactions to liminal experiences: the way liminality shaped personality, the sudden foregrounding of agency and the sometimes dramatic tying together of thought and experience." (Thomassen, pg14) Turner hypothesized that a liminal state was a withdrawal from social norms and a disruption of ordinary time and space. He called the liminal stage a state of "betwixt and between." (Turner, pg. 93) He felt that this undoing or breaking down of the accepted societal norms and boundaries allowed for the the potential to scrutinize and criticize these very norms and boundaries--just as queer theory suggests. This allowed for the possibility of change and transformation into a different state and the resetting of the norms and a redrawing of the boundaries. (Turner, pg 156) Liminality is a disoriented, in-between state, and a state that facilitates the disruption of both spatial and temporal dimensions. I would argue that queerness can also be a disoriented and ambiguous state, and as such, it can be used to disrupt and disorient time and space. By queering

a space--disrupting or disorienting it--I am creating a liminal space. Queer space is also theatrical, sensuous, exaggerated, and, at times, anarchic (such as the ACT-UP demonstrations of the 1980's, and the Stonewall riots of 1969). It is meant to transport you out of your everyday reality and help you to take a different look and reconsider what you are seeing and how you are seeing it. It is also worth noting that most queer spaces were not originally built as queer spaces. Most queer spaces are normative places that have been somehow changed or transformed into something other with methods that are often spontaneous, theatrical, sensual, exaggerated, or disorienting. This is often accomplished with a mix of high and low in the materials and themes.



James Bidgood (L) in 2012 and Stephen Arnold(R) in an untitled self-portrait from 1983

American artists, James Bidgood (1933-present) and Steven Arnold (1943-1994), created these kinds of queer spaces from ordinary and inexpensive materials in their own homes. Bidgood used the cast-offs, leftovers, and detritus from his drag performances and window decorating career, and Arnold combined paper with found objects from junk stores and flea markets. They both created queer spaces using methods that were theatrical, sensuous, and exaggerated, and they created these extraordinary high-end looking queer spaces by using very ordinary, low-end materials. These spaces were created inside each artist's apartment as theatrical backdrops and sets for staged photographs and films, which meant that both artists worked and lived in the queer spaces they created for their artwork. (Bidgood's film, *Pink Narcissus*, was created and filmed entirely in his small NYC apartment. The film took seven years to make and Bidgood lived in and amongst the sets for the film during this entire time period.) Bidgood's color photographs and films sparkle and shine with glitter, sequins, lame, cellophane, foil, Christmas lights, and oiled skin. Arnold's black and white staged photographs are a collage of unique and visually powerful found objects arranged in startling tableaux with dramatic sets and backdrops made from inexpensive black and white cut paper. Both created the costumes and accessories for the scantily clad and nude male beefcake that they used to populate the queer spaces they created. (Bidgood was trained as a fashion designer at Parsons School of Design in NYC.) Bidgood's theatrical images are ethereal, romanticized, and overtly homoerotic, and they reference many gay male stereotypes and identities such as the sailor, the construction worker, the toreador, and other men in uniform. Arnold's visionary



Stephen Arnold, *Spheres of Immortality*, photographs of mixed media installation, 1986



James Bidgood, photographs from the *Cupid* series (L) and the *Willow Tree* series (R), 1963-1967

photographs feature male and female nudes, but his images tend to reference religion, mythology, history, pop culture, theater, and dance.

I utilized these same themes and the methods and materials found in James Bidgood and Steven Arnold's images--theater, religion, myth, exaggeration, sensuality, disruption and disorientation, and a mix of high/low materials--filtered through my own unique, queer sensibilities to queer the space in which I created the installation. The installation was conceptualized around utilizing a normative space that was formerly a commercial store front and turn it into a queer or liminal space. It is located on a well travelled downtown street, and it has large display windows facing the sidewalk. I divided this store into three distinct spaces that represent the 3 liminal stages of rites of passage as described by Arnold Van Gennep. The front section of the storefront space contained a small shop with health and beauty products and gifts, and a gallery of queer prints and queer valentines on display. I consider this front space the *preliminal* space. On first impression, it would look like what you would expect from the space. With its storefront windows and location on a busy commercial strip downtown, you would find nothing out of the ordinary, nothing you were not expecting. The shop/gallery space was divided by a curtain and a photo booth that created a back room space behind the shop and gallery. Behind the curtain and photo booth was the area in which I created a *liminal space*. It was set-up to be like one was gaining entrance into the private back room of the store/gallery or like the back room of a gay bar or club. It was designed and furnished as a sacred space set up to facilitate entrance into a liminal state or to effect some kind of somatic experience such as the feeling of time slowing down and a heightened awareness of your surroundings and your physical sensations.



Shaman

Johnny's Pop-Up Shop & Gallery: (top)the front shop & gallery with (bottom)Shaman Johnny's health & beauty product line displayed on miniature furniture



Shaman Johnny's Pop-Up Shop & Gallery: the front shop & gallery with the queer prints & product line (top) and prints from the *St. Sebastian* series and *Am I the Only Queer Here?* posters (bottom)

Behind the curtain, this hidden “back room” contained an entrance area with found object statues, mandalas, staffs, aprons, altars, and headdresses. The space was arranged into several different areas, each with a table: an altar with reliquary table and meditation space, a healing table for therapeutic body work with a large medicine chest, a kitchen table and chairs for tea and divination through the Book of I-Ching, and a table of shaman headdresses. As Shaman Johnny, I offered visitors a choice of one of these three possibilities if they were willing to cross behind the red curtains and enter the space. The meditation, bodywork, and I-Ching represent different forms of ritual which help to facilitate the experience of moving into a liminal or threshold state--a feeling of stepping out of ordinary time and space and as a way to reconnect with the Self. It was a theatrical space that was beautifully lit, with soft music, and incense. To gain entry to the back room, all that visitors needed was to show a sense of curiosity and a willingness to connect. Once this was established, I invited them into the back. Visitors unwilling to engage or who show no sense of curiosity were not shown the back room. Upon gaining entrance to the back room, there was a perceptible shift in the person’s experience as they transitioned from the front space (which is a brightly lit commercial space) into the inviting, warm, beautifully lit sacred space in the back. There was usually some kind of expression of awe or surprise when I pulled back the curtains and gave access to the back room. Most visitors expressed a shift in feeling and perception when they stepped behind the red curtains. Many lingered or settled in at the kitchen table and chairs for a conversation and some tea. It was a space where one is able to slow down, breathe, and reconnect with a deeper sense of self and become more fully embodied. Whereas the front space was a public, masculine space, the back

room was a private, domestic, and feminine space. I tried to welcome each visitor with an open heart and to approach each guest to the shop from a place of acceptance. It was intended as a place of non-judgement based on common humanity--a place where differences are dropped, a bond is formed, and community is built. A space where one can experience the liminality of being in a queer space.



Shaman Johnny's Pop-Up Shop & Gallery: Sacred Backroom with meditation and bodywork areas with reliquaries, altars, staffs, halo, power objects



Shaman Johnny's Pop-Up Shop & Gallery: Sacred Backroom with divination area and ceremonial aprons

Victor Turner used the word 'communitas' to describe a community built on this concept of common humanity . 'Communitas' is a Latin noun which refers to a community of spirit where all people are equal. Turner framed it as a community experiencing liminality together through a shared sacred community ritual or rite of passage that brings the whole community together as equals. They are all brought to the same level through the shared ritual experience, just as most gay men are brought together over the acknowledgement of the shared experience of shame and abjection. According to Michael Warner, the use of shame destroys any attempt at hierarchal relationships in the gay community. The experience of shame and abjection also helps

to create a shared bond and a sense of kinship and camaraderie. It builds trust and community through the sharing of common experiences, such as in rituals and rites of passage. Many different aspects of identity--such as class, race, and gender--fall away and become unimportant during the liminal stage of rituals. In liminal space, your place in society is not important. "Liminality implies that the high could not be high unless the low existed and he who is high must experience what it is like to be low. (Turner, pg. 97)." This idea of the high/low relationships in liminal space is also a part of the kitsch/camp aesthetic in gay culture where the high is brought low, and the low is elevated. I would argue that James Bidgood and Steven Arnold queered the spaces they created by using the concept of high/low as one of their methods.

I intended to facilitate the experience of *communitas* through both the interior design of the space and through my interactions with the visitors who came into the space. I helped facilitate this experience by offering meditation, bodywork, or tea with a fortune using the *Book of I-Ching*. The front space featured health and beauty products crafted and branded by me. These included cologne, bath salts, mints, tea, candles, and a skin salve. I also offered queer-branded tote bags, badges, mugs, and postcards. It was set up and merchandised to look like the products are for sale, but there were no prices, so that people would need to ask. Visitors were able to move freely in the shop and the gallery, which featured my prints that address issues of identity and queerness. I featured print media in the front space of the shop as well as the gallery. The queer-themed print work and queer-branded health and beauty products helped to start conversations about identity and queerness. Permission to enter the back space and meet with me were granted when a person asked about the work, was curious about

what it is I am doing in the space, or simply connected with me through conversation.

After the person agreed to meet with me, they were shown into the back room, asked to choose from one of the three options, and then spent 30 minutes with me while engaging in one of the 3 options. After we were finished, I had the visitor choose a shaman head dress from the Table of Crowns and sit for a portrait as an honorary shaman in the photo booth. The photo was a record of the experience and of the time spent with me. The photo booth operated as the post-liminal space and as a threshold between the back room that operated as a liminal space and the front shop/gallery that operated as a pre-liminal space. The photo booth portrait can be considered a



“threshold gift”--a kind of liminal object--as it is a gift “that marks the passage from one place or station to another (Hyde, pg. 51).”

Participants were also offered a free Shaman Johnny Lucky Domino keychain. The domino key chain, the time spent with me, and the photobooth portrait were offered as a gesture of generosity and as parting gifts--free of charge.

The Table of Crowns in Shaman Johnny’s Sacred Backroom. Visitors chose from one of seven shaman crowns to wear to have their portrait taken in the photobooth.



Shaman Johnny's Pop-Up Shop & Gallery: Shaman Johnny's Photobooth

Part of the concept was to queer the way sales are made in a gallery or shop--to disrupt the expected routine of shopping and the detached nature of the exchange of cash for a commodity, especially the idea of buying and selling art as a commodity or investment. In doing this, I made the experience more focused on the time spent with me, the focused attention I gave to each visitor, and the connections made by their being with the artist, as opposed to the value being on the products or artwork displayed in the gallery. Lewis Hyde believes that circulating gifts nourishes the spirits

of whole groups and binds people together. The giving of a gift at the end is about generosity, but it is also about the connection created with the people who agree to visit with me and “an affirmation of individual good will, making of those separate parts a *spiritus mundi*, a unanimous heart, a band whose wills are focused through the lens of the gift. (Hyde, pg 45).” The giving and circulation of gifts amongst groups of people to establish and maintain community refers back to Victor Turner’s definition of *communitas* as the building of a common humanity through the sharing of rituals--such as gift giving. The giving of a gift is like an offering or promise of friendship or love. Gift giving creates and sustains relationships between people. By viewing the photobooth portraits, lucky domino key chains, and queer products as gifts, and not commodities, I was putting the focus on initiating bonds of affection, connection, and shared humanity. My spending time with people in the back room, making them tea and offering cookies, and giving them my full attention was another form of gift giving--a way of giving myself to another and as way of offering connection and nourishment for body, mind, and spirit. My inviting visitors into the liminal space I created was yet another form of a gift. The giving of a gift at the end was also a way of thanking the person for taking a risk, for entering into the back room and agreeing to spend time in a liminal or queer space, and for leaving behind their preconceptions and engaging in an experience of community with me. Each visitor to the back room who spent time with me left with both a portrait and a gift and with the sense they had made a friend in Shaman Johnny.

Queer Personae: Liminality, Shamanism, and Threshold People

My research and studio work around queering objects and queering space initially came out of my interest in queer identity. This research and studio work led me to consider the idea of trying to queer another person (through the photo booth), which then led me to the idea of the shaman--a type of liminal personae or what Victor Turner labeled "threshold people".

"The attributes of liminality or liminal *personae* ("threshold people") are necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space. Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law custom, convention and ceremonial. As such, their ambiguous and indeterminate attributes are expressed in a rich variety of symbols in the many societies that ritualize social and cultural transitions." (Turner, pg. 95)

For me, this connects with Sedgwick's concept of the double-bind for homosexuals in Western culture. This in-between state which most gay men find themselves is a state, much like a double-bind, that makes it impossible to form a coherent identity and sense of self because gay men, like Turner's threshold people, "elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space." Some type of shaman figure is usually found presiding over the liminal stage of rituals, often figured as half man, half beast. In many cultures where shamanism exists, the shamans are described as intersexed--gay, bisexual, or transgendered men.

Shamanism is a practice or ritual where the shaman is able to reach altered states of consciousness through meditation or other kinds of trance states. Through

these altered states or “ecstatic experiences” the shaman is able to access and influence the world of spirits and the dead. Shamans are believed to be go-betweens or intermediaries between the human world and the spirit world, and the ability to operate in the spirit world to affect change in the human world. They are associated with the ability to heal, especially to heal wounded aspects of the soul or psyche, as well as predict the future and obtain solutions to individual or community problems. The ability of shamans to master these magico-religious ecstatic experiences led Mircea Eliade to define shamanism as a “technique of ecstasy.” He made the distinction that shamans are not merely the kinds of magicians or healers who “are to be found all over the world,” because a shaman, rather than following a prescribed route or religion, “employs a method that is his and his alone.” This parallels an artist’s search for his own original voice. Shamans have a special mastery over fire and “magical flight.” (Eliade, pg.4-6) I also associate shamans with artists, because shamans were the first artists as they combined dance, costume, props, and performance to enter trance states and perform rituals. They created and crafted symbols and objects to help explain concepts/ideas/beliefs at a time when language was not as developed.

The archetype of the wounded healer is closely associated with shamanism. Most shamans-to-be go through some kind of wounding or sickness that brings them to the brink of death and allows them to cross over to the spirit world and then to come back. In this process, the shaman-to-be is healed while also obtaining information that helps the shaman to understand and heal sickness in others. By overcoming his own illness, the shaman holds the power or cure to heal others who are suffering. This is the uncanny mark of the wounded healer. Shamans are also associated with the ability to

see visions and dreams and to interpret them. They are also known to have spirit guides who assist them in their healing work. (Eliade, pg. 33)

For me, personally, I consider my colectomy surgery (and the near death experience I had during it) my own shamanistic initiation. I realized months later that my experience was in the vein of Carl Jung's archetypal wounded healer and Joseph Campbell's archetype of the wounded self. Both are similar to the shamanic initiation where the shaman-to-be is seriously wounded and overcomes death, but then returns to life with a clearer sense of self and the ability to help others heal. At the time of my illness, I was deeply involved in meditation, and I was studying and working as a therapeutic bodyworker, as well as making art in my studio. My 2 year long initiation began with colitis which had been making me sick during the year previous to my colectomy. I ended up in the hospital after I became quite ill from the colitis. As it turned out, my colon was falling apart from the inflammation caused by this disease. I ended up having to have a complete colectomy with a J-pouch pull through. During this long surgery, I had what I would call a liminal or out-of-body experience, and I could recall much of what occurred during this time of being "betwixt and between." I am not going to go into a complete description of my near death experience (NDE), but suffice to say that I had an out-of-body experience, and I watched my surgery from above and out of my body. I also had visions, a long discussion with some kind of entities who appeared as glowing gold balls of light--an ecstatic experience. After a long discussion with these entities, it was made clear to me that it was my choice to re-enter my body or to die--my choice. I agreed to come back into my body. I awoke in great pain, but I vividly remembered a good portion of what I had experienced. Due to complications from the

surgery I developed pancreatitis, and I was not able to eat food for 3 months after my surgery, and I had to be tube fed for several months. During this time, I had a second ecstatic experience. I began to see colored auras around people and also anything that was alive, including animals and plants (and, for some reason, cut flowers!) This is not the kind of experience you can talk to your surgeon about, as there are no medical terms to describe what happened to me. I very queer experience, indeed!

After 3 months of tube feeding, I ended up having a second emergency surgery to fix a small bowel obstruction. I had become quite despondent before the second surgery. It seemed that I was not getting better after the colectomy, and I had lost over 50 pounds because the pancreatitis was preventing me from eating. When it became clear that I was going to have to have a second surgery, I decided that I was going to let myself die during it. I had been told in my visions that it was my choice if I wanted to die or go back into my body. I figured I could just decide to die during the surgery. The morning of the surgery, a close friend showed up before I was scheduled to go under anesthesia. She told me she had had a dream the previous night, and in this dream I had come to her and told her that I was going to die. She had shown up that morning to tell me she did not want me to die! I burst into tears. It was amazing to me. I then made a conscious choice to live. During the second surgery to correct the small bowel obstruction, the surgeon removed large adhesions that had formed around my pancreas. About 24 hours later, my pancreas began working again. Soon after, I was able to begin eating food again. A few days later, I stopped seeing colored auras.

So much of my surgery and the resulting near death experience mirrors the shamanic initiation myths where the shaman-to-be dies as a way to rise above human

nature. (At the time of my surgery and the removal of my large intestine, I was studying to become an therapeutic bodyworker. I was also deeply involved in meditation and I was meditating daily for an hour or more. I had also gone on several weeklong silent meditation retreats. I was, in a sense, in training to become a healer.) In this initiation process, the the shaman-to-be has his first ecstatic experiences. After the shaman-to-be dies, his body is stripped to the bone and his organs are removed and replaced by magical organs. (Eliade, pg. 34) (This mirrors the surgery performed on my body to remove my large intestine.) He is then symbolically transfigured and re-born with the ability to send his spirit on errands and to travel between the living and the dead, and thus the ability to continually die and be reborn. (This mirrors my near death experience.) This meant that the newly reborn shaman was no longer bound by the natural laws of time and space or death.

In my studio practice, I am exploring the duality of the shaman/artist as a liminal figure who has the ability to travel between realms and who uses art as a way to create symbols, objects, and spaces. These artistic creations are then used to help facilitate and explain what the artist/shaman sees and what he wants to communicate in the service of the healing of both individuals and the community. The shaman and the artist are like bridges or connectors. They help to bring people and communities together. They both have the ability to perceive the breaks or fissures in individuals and in society, and then to bring attention or focus to the problems that need intervention or healing. They then support and promote the healing or closure of these breaks and fissures. Both have developed the ability to move between different social realms and to

be able to be present with all kinds of people from all levels of society without judgement.

This duality of the artist/shaman seems to reflect my own life experiences, as I have been both an artist and a healer. For 18 years, I worked simultaneously as an artist and as a healer. Although my studio practice is directed towards my own process, and the healing practice was directed at the client's process, I found both to be creative practices that seemed to compliment, support and inspire each other. My studio practice informed my therapeutic bodywork practice, and my bodywork practice had and continues to have an influence on the art I make in my studio. Much of my art addresses themes of spirituality and social issues, especially gay rights and human rights. I also see the persona of the artist/shaman as a way to bring together the seemingly diverse careers and interests I have had and the different paths I have travelled through my life. In retrospect, as I put this all together, my interests were not really that far from each other when they are framed with the archetype of the shaman or the wounded healer.

I have studied theater, art, music, therapeutic and energetic forms of bodywork and healing practices, Vipassana meditation and Buddhism, and medicinal herbs and healing diets. I did my final thesis for my BFA degree on masks and mask-making. All of these different subjects seems to relate back to the shamanic traditions of the healer/artist. They all seem to somehow be connected with liminal spaces. Such as the liminality of the theater and its connection to religious rituals. The use of lighting, costumes, and sets to create another world outside of our normal day to day existence. The use of music both to create mood and to enhance the possibility of entering into a trance state. My studies of various forms of therapeutic body work and energy based

body work modalities such as Polarity Therapy energy-based body work, Cranial Sacral Therapy which works with the cerebral spinal fluids and the sacrum and cranial bones, Somatic Experience for working with shock trauma, and various forms of deep tissue massage all relate to the shaman being a healer of bodies. I was raised as a Roman Catholic, so I was steeped in and am familiar with the rituals and holy days of the Roman Catholic church's calendar. My study of Vipassana meditation and Buddhism exposed me to eastern forms of thought around religion, and I experienced many of the rituals that are part of the Buddhist and Catholic traditions. This coincides with the shamanic uses of ritual in healing and in spiritual and communal ceremonies. My study and knowledge of herbs and herbal preparations also mirrors the shaman's use of plant materials in medicine and ritual. Pictographic images of four-fingered shamans have



Pre-historic pictograph of a shaman from *The Panel of the Wounded Man* in the caves of Lascaux



Pre-historic shaman pictographic rock painting from the San Rafael Swell in Utah (detail)

been found in the caves at Lascaux, as well as at sites in Montana, Utah, and South Dakota. Due to an accident with a radial arm saw, I seriously injured my hand and had to have my left index finger amputated. Thus, I also have a “four fingered shaman’s hand.” (Tucker, pg. 176) Lastly, in many shamanic societies, those whose sexuality was ambiguous or were considered to be of a third sex were often initiated and trained to be shamans. I also happen to be gay man. All of these characteristics, interests and areas of study, along with my “wounding” through surgery--my left finger amputation and my colectomy, and the ecstatic experiences of the near death experience and my ability to temporarily see auras, and the other events that followed seem to put me firmly within the realms of the wounded healer and the shaman/artist.

Shaman Johnny's Pop-Up Shop & Gallery

When I saw all the life experiences I have had that mirrored the steps of a shamanic initiation, and I realized that I could actually situate myself within the realms of the shaman, I decided to create a queer or alternative persona whom I call Shaman Johnny. I then went about creating a costume for Shaman Johnny to wear in the pop-up shop and gallery. I had a bright red two-piece suit made overseas in Hong Kong, and I constructed a shaman headdress and a ceremonial hostess apron to wear with the suit. I finished the ensemble with a turquoise blue shirt, a red gingham bow tie, and black & white shoes with red & black checkerboard socks. For good measure and to put the finishing touch on my shaman drag, I grew a beard for the first time in my life.



Shaman Johnny (r) with a visitor to the pop-up shop & gallery in front of Shaman Johnny's Photobooth

In creating Shaman Johnny, I had in mind two American Outsider artists, James Hampton (1909-1964) and Loy Bowlin (1909-1995). Both created their own private installations and an alternative persona to inhabit these environments, much like what I was creating with the persona of Shaman Johnny and his pop-up shop and gallery with a sacred backroom as a fitting backdrop for the Shaman Johnny persona. When I was conceptualizing and creating Shaman Johnny's Sacred Backroom which is filled with altars, shrines, crowns, and power objects, Hampton's installation came to mind. James Hampton's one room environment was a shrine to religion inspired by the Book of Revelations and his own spiritual visions. It was located in a back alley garage in Washington, D.C. Hampton aspired to be a store front preacher using his homemade shrine as his place of worship. At the same time, I was also referencing the character and art environment created by Loy Bowlin. Bowlin's environment consisted of his modest four room house located in McComb, Mississippi. The entire interior, including all the furniture was covered in a rich tapestry of densely painted and glittered patterns, along with a custom painted and glittered Cadillac and his own set of brightly colored rhinestone studded suits--one for each day of the week--complete with a rhinestone studded cowboy hat, cowboy boots, glasses, and a pair of dentures. Loy Bowlin was the self-proclaimed "Original Rhinestone Cowboy."

I was originally drawn to Loy Bowlin because of the poignant story of how he became The Original Rhinestone Cowboy. Born in 1909, Bowlin was the seventh of twelve children. He grew up in a life of poverty on a stock ranch in Franklin County, Mississippi. He and his family struggled to stay fed, clothed, and sheltered. His adult life brought more struggles and a continued life of poverty in rural Mississippi. He married



The World's Most Famous Entertainer The Original Rhinestone Cowboy Loy Allen Bowlin; color photograph in artist-made frame, 1977; 22.5 x 18.75 in.; John Michael Kohler Arts Center Collection, Gift of William E. Bowlin

Ina Mae Mitchell in 1933, in the midst of the depression; and by the end of the 1930's they had lost 2 of their 3 children. By the 1950's, Bowlin's life began to come apart. His service station-grocery store failed, he and Ina Mae divorced, and, soon after, he suffered a nervous breakdown. He checked into a mental hospital in 1956 and was treated with electroshock therapy. He checked out of the hospital that same year, managed to sustain a stable life, and found work for the next 16 years as an auto repair

mechanic. After his retirement in 1972, he was filled with loneliness and overwhelmed by his continued emotional struggles with depression. Around 1976, Bowlin believed his



Loy Bowlin, *Beautiful Holy Jewel Home* (installation detail, (L)living room, (R)bedroom & hallway), c. 1985-1990; John Michael Kohler Arts Center Collection. Photo: 2006, John Michael Kohler Arts Center Artist Archives

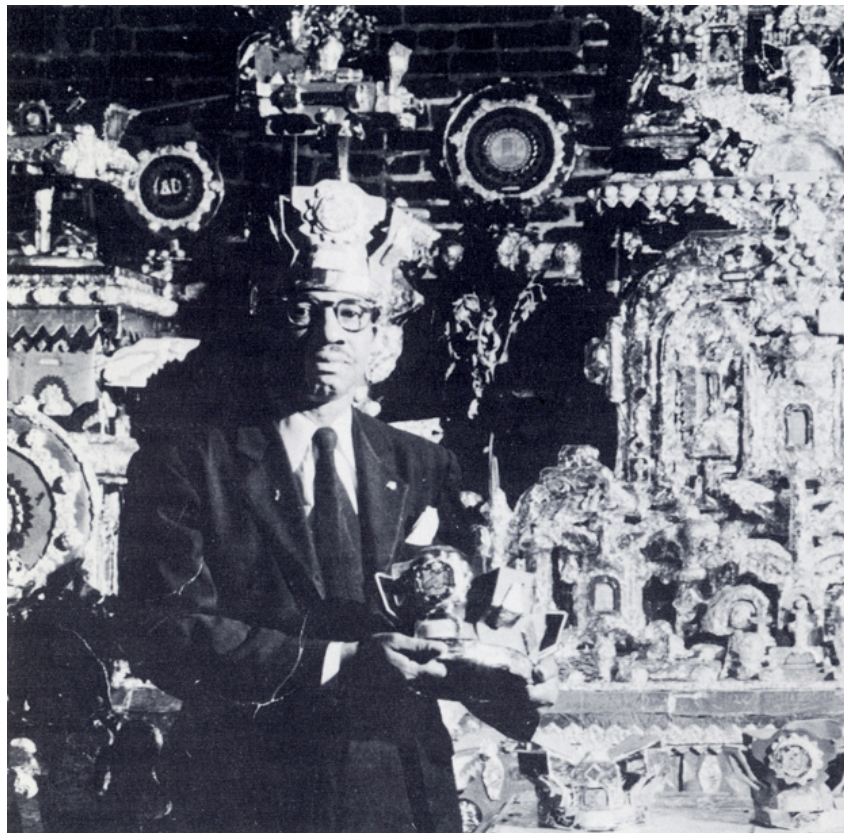
prayers for something to end his loneliness and make him happy had been answered when he first heard Glen Campbell's rendition of *Rhinestone Cowboy* on the radio.

Because he felt the lyrics of the song so reflected his own life, he took it as a sign and he adopted it as his new moniker. He began calling himself "The Original Rhinestone Cowboy."

When Bowlin first began appearing in town in his orange Rhinestone Cowboy ensemble, he drew an enthusiastic response from the crowds that gathered around him. As the song had been popular on the radio, they naturally called him a Rhinestone Cowboy--just as he had hoped! He loved dressing up and performing his act for the people who stopped to watch. He was a down home musician who played the harmonica and enjoyed buck dancing, a cross between tap dance and clogging. He also told stories. Bowlin felt transformed by all the interest and attention his glitzy outfit and new persona attracted. He thrived in the limelight and loved to entertain. He began to drive his Cadillac into McComb each day dressed as the Original Rhinestone Cowboy and soon became a fixture of the downtown scene. He told the story this way to journalist Dinah Zeiger , “I was laying on my bedside just as lonesome as I could be. I was by myself and so lonesome the tears just come in my eyes. I was so lonesome I prayed and said: “Lord, give me something to make me happy.” Now you won’t believe this, but the Lord told me to make an outfit. I went downtown and bought me a suit and became Rhinestone, and I ain’t had one moment of lonesomeness since.(Zeiger, pg. 38).” Bowlin had created a community, or a sense of “communitas”, for himself by becoming the Original Rhinestone Cowboy and fashioning a beautiful environment as a backdrop for his alternative persona. One of my goals for Shaman Johnny’s Pop-Up Shop & Gallery was to create this same sense of communitas through the experience of meeting and spending time with Shaman Johnny.

When his health began to make it too difficult to travel outside of his modest home, he began to transform it into a bejeweled palace that would serve as a fitting backdrop for the Original Rhinestone Cowboy. Since he was no longer well enough to

travel, he also hoped it would attract visitors to his home. In the early 1980's, Bowlin began to adorn the walls, ceilings, and furniture of his home with a mosaic of patterns done with glitter, paint, and plastic rhinestones. Each room had a color theme and a repetitive pattern. The ceilings were hung with glittered Christmas ornaments and other decorations. After Bowlin finished his his art environment in 1993, he had a sign made that hung on the front porch. It read "The Beautiful Holy Jewel Home of the Original Rhinestone Cowboy." Bowlin died in 1995 and the house and most of the suits were eventually acquired by the John Michael Kohler Arts Center in Sheboygan, Wisconsin where the entire house and it's contents are occasionally put on display (Umberger, pgs. 225-241).



A portrait of James Hampton wearing one of the 25 crowns he made as part of *The Throne* environment

James Hampton was born in 1909 in Elloree, South Carolina, one of four children. His father was a black Baptist minister during the late 19th century revivalism movement that spread through the churches of the American south. Not much else is known about Hampton's childhood. At the age of nineteen, he moved to Washington, D. C. to live with an older brother. He worked various jobs as a cook until he became a government laborer in 1942. After a short stint in army, he returned to his job with the government as a night janitor and kept it until his death. Hampton was a religious man and a reclusive loner with few, if any, friends. At some point he began to have visions that he believed came directly from God. They were not dreams, but visions or visitations by angels, the Virgin Mary, and the first man, Adam that appeared before him and talked directly to him. Around 1945, inspired by these visions, Hampton began to build a shrine or sanctuary made up of numerous elements--altars, plaques, chairs, offertory tables, candlesticks, crowns, angel wings, pulpits, statues--constructed largely from found and scavenged cardboard, pulp board, kraft paper, discarded furniture, lightbulbs, and boxes which he covered with gold and silver foil from cigarette packs, wine bottles, and liquor store displays, and aluminum foil from restaurants.

Around 1950, he rented an unheated, rundown garage near the boardinghouse where he lived. At midnight, after his shift as a janitor, he worked for hours on the components that would make up what he called *The Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations Millennium General Assembly*. He believed he was being divinely instructed by God to create a vast array of glittering, intricate objects that would make up The Throne. It is known that he conducted private religious services in the garage on Sundays, and that he wanted to be a minister when he retired. There is speculation that he might have

wanted to set up *The Throne* in a storefront ministry in D. C. James Hampton's work closely parallels the Book of Revelations, and he seems to be trying to recreate, in gold and silver foil, St. John's vision of the throne of God as one of shining silver and gold. Hampton considered himself a prophet because he had visions similar to those of St. John in the Book of Revelations. He took to recording his visitations and visions in a secret personal script in a small black book which he signed "St. James"--a self-proclaimed prophet. At the bottom of each page is the single word, "REVELATION." This script also appears all over the objects that make up *The Throne*. It has still not been deciphered. Hampton worked on *The Throne* until his death in 1964. Although he left his life's work unfinished, James Hampton completed over 200 objects that constitute *The Throne*. (Roscoe, pgs. 13-19).

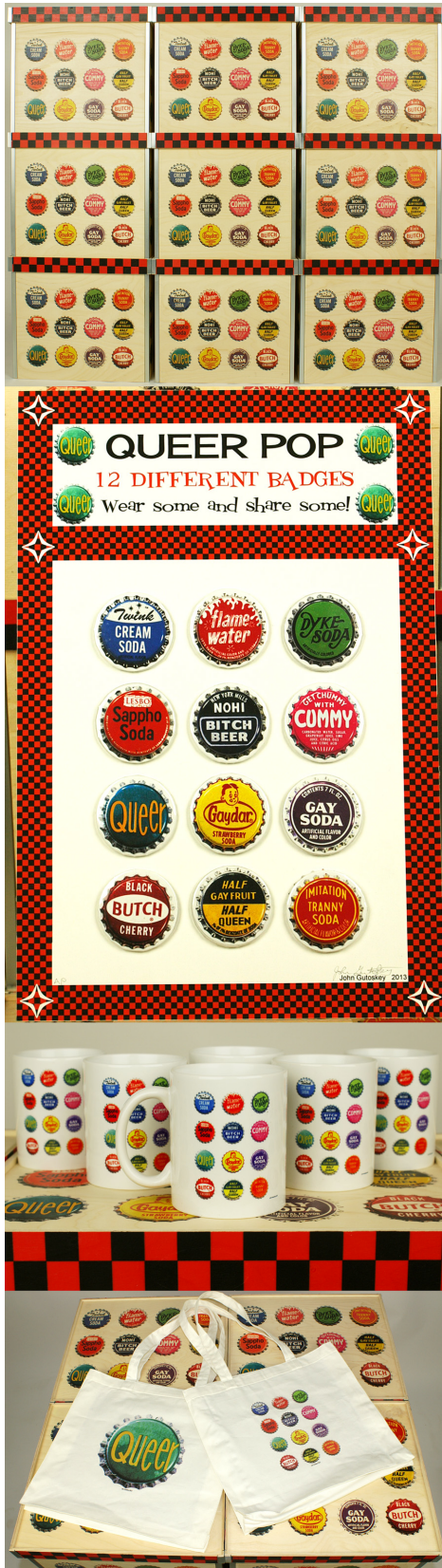


James Hampton's *The Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nation's Millennium General Assembly* (ca. 1950-1964)
Smithsonian American Art Museum

Both Loy Bowlin and James Hampton, like Joseph Cornell, can be figured as queer. Like Cornell, both were untrained artists. Their unusual life stories, their lives lived largely on the margins of society and away from any real exposure to the world of the arts, combined with their odd personalities and the creation of other worlds and alternative personae to inhabit frame them as queer. Much like gay men who need to find or create their own culture, both Bowlin and Hampton did the same. Both were positioned or oriented against what is considered to be the accepted norms. They created alternative or queer personae for themselves, as well as alternative environments to inhabit. They were both described as peculiar, strange, outlandish, or weird. They both used queer aesthetics to create their environments. All the glitter, rhinestones, and shiny foil, the mix of high and low, the more is more aesthetic, the theatricality and eccentricity, and the alternative personae mark their work as queer.

Once I created my own queer persona of Shaman Johnny to inhabit the shop and gallery, the installation for my exhibit began to fall in place around him. Next, as mentioned earlier, I went about creating a line of Shaman Johnny branded products to sell in the shop. At this point, I had also produced a line of queer products based on my print, *Queer Pop*, as well as a series of prints featuring the character of Shaman Johnny. The original print, *Queer Pop*, and the digital photo booth I created were a tongue and cheek nod to Andy Warhol, the king of Pop Art and one of the 20th century's iconic queer artists. When it came time to design the front of the space that contained the retail shop and gallery, I looked to Warhol for inspiration. Warhol sent his wealthy clients to a photobooth at an arcade at Broadway and Forty-seventh Street in Manhattan to have pictures taken. For a short time, Andy even had his own Auto-Photo

booth at the Factory (Goranan, pg. 73). He then used these photobooth strips to create and produce his silk-screened fine art portraits of these wealthy clients and famous celebrities. Taking my cue from Andy Warhol, I used the prints I made to wallpaper the walls of my shop and gallery. I then hung framed versions in front of wallpapered walls as a way to merchandize the Shaman Johnny and queer product lines. I then printed my own set of queer pop crates to mirror Warhol's Brillo boxes. I also took Warhol's use of his Factory to produce his art to the next logical step in the 21st century. I used Vistaprint, a commercial printer that will print your fine art images and graphics on a wide array of products including note cards, mugs, phone cases, tote bags, notebooks, T-shirts, pens, and so much more. I believe that if Andy Warhol was alive today, he would be downloading his images onto Vistaprint and having them reproduced on a variety of objects that would be put up for sale in a gallery. Keith Haring did a similar thing with his own original designs in his Pop Shop in Manhattan which opened in 1986 and continued until 2005--15 years past his death from AIDS.



Products based on the print, *Queer Pop*, including (top to bottom) crates, badges, mugs, and tote bags



Top row: Warhol silk screens used to wallpaper the walls then hung with more framed silk screens at the Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh, PA.

Bottom row: (L)Brillo Boxes, Yellow, 1964, White, 1998. (R)In 2012 Target sold Warhol-inspired Campbell's Soup cans celebrating the 50th Anniversary of Warhol's seminal work, *32 Campbell's Soup Cans*, from 1962

Warhol was an obsessive collector, who lovingly displayed his collections in his Manhattan apartment. In the same way, I turned to my own private collections as a way to dress the interior of the shop and to display the merchandise. I had gathered a small

collection of child size furniture. I viewed them as liminal objects. As objects that were betwixt and between the world of adults and the world of childhood. As toys, they have a way of taking us out of ordinary time and place that puts us in the realm of memory, fantasy, imagination, and fiction. In her book, *On Longing*, Susan Stewart labels the miniature toy as transcendent. “The transcendence presented by the miniature is a spatial transcendence, a transcendence which erases the productive possibilities of understanding through time. Its locus is thereby nostalgic. The miniature here erases not only labor but causality and effect (Stewart, pg. 60).” In this way, the miniature is both liminal and queer. It is out of scale, out of the ordinary, out of time and place. It is disruptive and disorienting. I also appreciated how the miniature scale toys were gendered. The desk with its world map, the tricycle and wagon, and the wheelbarrow were made with boys in mind--they refer to the masculine, the public, to physical labor, to a life of the mind and exploration. The ironing board and iron, the kitchen hutches, the dressers with mirrors, and the baby carriage were made for girls--they refer to the feminine, the private, the domestic, to motherhood and housework. Being a queer boy, I was drawn to both, but found my imagination sparked more by the toys that were made for girls. I also appreciated the positive attention, reactions, and nostalgic stories they brought forth from visitors to the shop and gallery.

Shaman Johnny’s Pop-Up Shop & Gallery: Assessment

My plan for this installation was to connect with people who came to the show, to have conversations with them about what queerness means in the present moment, and to create a sense of wonder or awe when they were invited into the Sacred Backroom. I was not trying to be aggressive or come on too strong about the topic of

queerness, but it was pretty obvious by from what was displayed in the space. I would use whatever questions or comments people had to enter into a conversation with them about queerness. All anyone needed to do to receive an invitation into the back room was to be curious, and to engage with me or to try to connect with me. I also wanted to create an experience of liminality upon entering the Sacred Backroom. The space was set up to allow visitors, if they were invited into the back room, to walk through a ritual that began at the front door, continued through the shop and gallery, then into the back room where we would meet and I would offer meditation, the I-Ching, or bodywork, and finally out through the photobooth after having a portrait made wearing a shaman crown.

I was dressed as Shaman Johnny and present in the gallery for 16 days over a 3 week period from March 11-April 1, 2014. I had a gallery attendant each day who sat in the front shop and gallery area. They welcomed people when they entered the space with, "Hello. Welcome to Shaman Johnny's." I would then come out from behind the red curtains that divided the space in half. Dressed in full Shaman Johnny regalia, I would enter and say, "Hello. Welcome. I'm Shaman Johnny!" I felt as though the bold and crazy shaman costume I was wearing disarmed most people and made them laugh and relax. I also felt the costume created a kind of aura that made me more approachable, and, at the same time, I found the costume erased my own sense of self-consciousness. It was surprisingly liberating. It allowed me to be me, but not me. I liminal persona--somewhere in between myself and the shaman. I was not performing as some character like an actor would perform. It was more performative in nature, as it was more the construction of an identity through a costume, than the creation of a

separate character that I inhabited and performed as though it was someone else quite different from myself. I was still myself, but the presentation of that self was transformed by the shaman costume, or shaman drag, I constructed to represent Shaman Johnny. I was citing the idea and image of a shaman--the hat, the beard, the head dress, the physical trapping of the Sacred backroom--to construct the facade of an alternative persona. I found this very compelling, as it was not something I had thought about before the show opened. In a way, the shaman drag had the effect of queering me, but in some ways that I had not anticipated.

The idea that the shaman drag I created would function as a mask and as a screen for others to project on, and, at the same time, have a liberating effect on me was surprising and very enjoyable. I was able to drop my guard and just be present. It seemed to allow people to connect with me and to project onto me their own ideas of what my shaman costume signified. My Shaman Johnny drag and the display of queer prints, queer valentines, and the line of Shaman Johnny products displayed on the red toy furniture all helped to create a festive, carnival-like mood and facilitate visitors engaging in conversation. My intention for each day was to be present with an open heart and to come from a place of non-judgement and compassion. I tried to engage or connect with each person who came in to the shop, and to answer any questions and address any comments. If I was in back meeting with other visitors, the gallery attendant would let me know when new visitors arrived, and I would come out or have them come into the back room. I just went with the flow of people in and out of the gallery. It was an improvisation each day. The experience of being in the gallery everyday and to be able to talk to visitors about the installation and the work displayed was, for me, a

transformative experience. I felt that it made a big difference for both myself and the viewer to be able to answer questions and engage in discussions about the work I had made and put on public display. Meeting with so many people helped me to talk more clearly and specifically about my work--what the work meant for me and why I had made the installation. I felt as though many people walked away with a much better understanding about queerness and queer theory, because I was there with the work and willing to talk about it and engage with people. It made me realize how rare it is to view a work of art and have the artist there to talk with you about it. In this way, I was able to reach more people at a deeper level and create a positive and much richer gallery experience.

Most people were struck by a sense of awe or wonderment when they first stepped through the curtains into the back room. They expressed surprise and disbelief that there was a sacred shaman space behind the shop and gallery. For most, it was a totally unexpected environment. There was a big shift in mood from the public front shop and gallery to the private, Sacred Backroom. My sense was that many visitors felt taken out of ordinary time and space, as many of them commented on how calm or settled the space made them feel. Many people lingered, talked, or just wandered around and looked at all the sacred objects I had made to fill the space. People seemed to soften and let down any defenses upon entering through the curtains. There were even people who came back several times to visit with me and talk. Many visitors sent their friends in to see my show and to meet me, to see the Sacred Backroom, and have a portrait taken in the photobooth. The overall design of the Sacred Backroom with the all the sacred objects and the soft lighting, music, and candles seemed to have a very

pronounced effect on all who entered into it. I felt the space was very successful in creating an experience of liminality. Most of the comments and exclamations people made seemed to support this idea. I would love to create something that was more permanent than a three week exhibition permits. A permanent space would allow me to take the design of the interior into a much more complex and layered experience, and turn it into an environment like Loy Bowlin's *Beautiful Holy Jewel Home of the Original Rhinestone Cowboy*.

Over the course of the 3 weeks, I had only a handful of people meditate with me or receive bodywork from me. I found most visitors were interested in throwing their I-Ching. The I-Ching seemed to be the least risky, and most people opted for it. I always offered a cup of tea and tried to create a sense of generosity of spirit and a giving of my time and attention with each person. In the end, it worked best for me, as I could have a half hour conversation while we threw the coins, drank tea, and read from the book of I-Ching. It also allowed for me to meet with 3 to 4 people at a time, when necessary. Often, it would be several people who had not met before. This seemed to create a sense of communitas that I was after. The other two options were done in silence, so I gained the most insight and information from throwing the I-Ching with people who were invited into the back. Over the course of 3 weeks over 400 people came into the shop and gallery. I met with over 300 people in the back room, and I took over 200 portraits in the photobooth. Not everyone was invited into the back room. Some people left before I came out, some would not engage with me, and some showed no curiosity at all. I estimated that about 25% of the people who came in to the shop and gallery did not get

invited into the Sacred Backroom. Many of these same people did not even ask what was behind the red curtains!

During the run of the exhibit, I only had one conversation with a visitor who seemed to take the opposite message away from what I had intended. This happened on the first day the installation was open to the public. After talking with this visitor in the front shop and gallery, I invited him into the back room. He seemed to understand what I was talking about when we were up front looking at all the queer art and queer valentines with their homoerotic male nudes, but once he stepped into the Sacred Backroom he began to make racist, homophobic, and misogynistic comments. It was an odd shift in the conversation, and it did not happen until we crossed behind the curtains and into the Sacred Backroom. I could not understand how the conversation had taken such a turn. Maybe he felt he could let down his guard in the back room. I kept trying to interrupt and tell him that he misunderstood what I was trying to say and explain it to him, but to no avail. We were talking past each other. After our ten minute conversation hit a lull, I walked out through the curtains into the front in the hopes that he would follow me. It worked, and I walked him to the front door. As he was about to leave, he made one last comment about a woman in a full mask. "That should be illegal!", he exclaimed. I said I had no idea what he meant by a "full mask." He then pointed at a woman standing in front of a store across the street in a full black burka as he walked out the front door. This was the only interaction I had of this kind with a visitor to the space. I fully expected I would have more conversations like this one, but this did not happen. As this singular conversation occurred on the first day the exhibit was open,

it somehow seemed to clear out the whole space for the rest of the show. All the rest of my experiences with visitors to the show were positive.

I spent 8 hour days meeting with visitors to the exhibit. I was kept busy most days with a steady trickle of guests. The busiest time of day was after 2PM until I closed at 7PM. Several nights I stayed until 8PM, as there were too many people; and I was having a great time being in the space and hanging out with a wide range of guests that reflected the Ann Arbor community. I had many fascinating conversations about what the word queer means in the 21st century. Many people understood and related to the concept that queer has a larger meaning beyond sexuality and gender. Most also knew it as a derogatory word that is equivalent to “fag”. I would often say that if you identify or position yourself against what is considered the norm, then you are queer. Many people related personal experiences and stories about how they could relate to being queer because of race, class, body shape, style of dress, religion, choice of lifestyle, and the myriad ways each of us can be figured as “not normal.” I met with many undergraduates who expressed a frustration with identity politics and a need and desire to move away from being stereotyped and labeled because of how they looked or were perceived. Many were perplexed that queerness was still a problem. Most have queer friends, and, for most of them, it makes no difference. They also expressed a desire to move past race, class, gender, and religion. In general, almost everyone was open-minded and curious about queerness and wanted to learn about queer theory.

Conclusion

My lifetime obsession with collecting and making art of my collections has everything to do with my gay identity, and vice versa. Long before I became familiar with queer theory, I was queering my home, my gifts to my partner, and the way I witnessed my world. As a working artist, I have been drawn first to collage and assemblage as a medium for fabricating multilayered visual poems and more recently as a printmaker, taking images from pop culture or my own autobiographic repertoire and queering them. My marking of images, objects, people, and space by queering them empowers me to mark myself through my art while remaining fluid and attentive to the ebb and flow of my own growth and to the changes (or lack thereof) in my culture. By seeing queerly as artist and gay man, I can understand queerness in both theory and practice. Indeed, seeing my personal history through the lens of queer theory provides me with frames to view my identity as a gay artist/collector--as a curator of queer. I found I was appropriating discarded items from straight culture and rewriting, recoding, and re-contextualizing them so they could be read as gay or queer. This marking of found and autobiographical materials has offered me a means of addressing gay social and political issues, as well as more personal issues of concealment and visibility. By learning to mark or queer my largely autobiographical work, I begin to participate in a larger dialogue with issues that are both intensely personal and bridge the worlds of art, culture and queer studies.

My project draws largely on the work of Judith Butler, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and Michael Warner. As a visual artist, the focus of my research project has been an attempt to put queer theory into practice in my studio by visualizing the concepts and

ideas of queer theory through my artwork--mainly collage, assemblage, print making, and installation. From Sedgwick, I drew on the concept of an anti-homophobic analysis and queering--teasing out the queerness, and marking, rewriting, or making visible the queerness that is concealed, unmarked, and unnamed. I drew on Butler's theories of gender construction and performativity, and from Warner, his theories of shame and abjection. I applied these theories to the assemblage work of Joseph Cornell and to my studio work with the valentine, found objects, St. Sebastian, the self portrait, and my own scholastic portraits from elementary school. In the print work, one of the practices I drew on was the marking of myself, especially my childhood self, as queer. I also applied this practice to objects related to my childhood. I did this largely through language--language combined with visual imagery--using puns, slang, double entendres, and by rewriting the existing normative texts as queer or marking objects as queer that were previously unmarked, such as pop bottle caps, chewing gum, and alphabet blocks. I chose the image of a naked St. Sebastian pierced with arrows because it was an image that allowed me to work with Michael Warner's concepts about shame and abjection. It is also an image that I could read or mark as queer because of the homoerotic overtones and the reading of the expression of agony as ecstasy or pleasure. The marking of my own scholastic images by using slang to mark them as queer was one way I tried to put Judith Butler's concept of gender construction into practice in my studio work. I applied these same concepts--performativity, gender construction, queering--along with Arnold Van Gennep and Victor Turner's work on liminality and liminal personae, to the creation of a queer personae, Shaman Johnny. I

then created a queer or liminal space for Shaman Johnny to inhabit and as a place to meet and connect with the public.

I have extended the practices of queer theory from my studio into gallery and museum culture. As an artist, it is one way I can try to make visible to the wider public, issues of queerness and the concepts and ideas of queer theory. I am developing a poetics and aesthetics of queerness within the very public realm of the visual arts, and contributing to a dialogue that is in its early stages. There are many aspects of my installation that I would like to pursue in the future. I would like to do more research on power objects and reliquaries and create a wider body of work based on this research. I would also like to continue to create the shaman headdresses and ceremonial aprons and to mount a show that just features them alone. I intend to mount this show in other venues. I think it would be useful to exhibit *Shaman Johnny's Pop-Up Shop & Gallery* in other towns and cities to see what the response would be in a more urban or a more rural setting. It would also allow me to make some adjustments to the space and to how I move through the space and engage with visitors as Shaman Johnny.

Some of this work has been featured in exhibitions at The Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender, and Reproduction, in the New York City gallery exhibition, *Round Hole Square Peg*, which was conceived with the intent to redefine a queer aesthetic for the 21st century, and it was also featured in The Advocate online.

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