

Introduction

I grew up with two older sisters, and much of my early life was spent trying to imitate everything about them. One of my earliest memories is trying on my guilty pleasure: my sister's purple one piece swimsuit, which was too glamorous for me to resist. I was indelibly drawn to their garments: dresses, nylon stockings, bows and clips. I would often beg my mom to let me style her hair, which always resulted in a nest of ponytails, conjoined by barrettes and suffocated with a dozen colorful hair ties. My sisters and I would reenact our favorite musical *Annie*, each vying for the title role, or dance to *The Cheetah Girls* soundtrack, posing for our parents' massive VHS camera. After a few years of internalizing social and gender norms, these escapades captured on tapes and disposable camera film rolls horrified me. The dread of the boxes of evidence being uncased, of being forced to acknowledge my own perverse identity, was always a low simmer inside me. My interests turned into something I should be ashamed of, hide, and try to change. This mindset gave me the wonderfully dissonant ability to refuse and rebuke my homosexuality from the ages of 10 to 16. Even though today I'm obsessed with the power of outlandish hyperfemininity and faggotry, I still find myself falling into the illogical and habitual ravines of shame and repression.

As I have learned about and read queer theory, I've come to find such empowerment in the word *queer* itself. Repurposed from an insult to an identity, it implies a satisfaction about being disdainful to a cis-heteronormative society; it is a complex, dissonant stance where qualities that the dominant majority perceive as shameful and inferior are instead valued by the queer. As a fiber artist, I am familiar with the political power of reclamation, and I am interested in hand-crafted rugs as objects that are both physically low and aesthetically low. Inspired by the conceptual connections between the word *queer* and rugs, I conceived of a rug project titled *The Bottom* which hinges on dual meanings and depicts the embrace of inferiority, seen in the reclamation of the word *queer*, as an actual physical space. In *The Bottom*, my aim is to present a nonrepresentational, radical queer body merged with "low" objects in order visualize reclaimed inferiority.

Contextual Discussion

Queer History and Reclamation

I began this project with an interest in the word *queer*, how it came to have its manifold definitions, and how I could represent its contemporary meaning visually. Radical trans and gay activists began to use the homophobic slur to describe themselves in the late '60s, and it became a popular identifier by the early '90s, when queer theorists expanded the word to mean any non-normative identity or behavior (in theoretical contexts). One of the first published usages of the word appeared in the anonymous pamphlet *Queers Read This* distributed at NYC Pride in 1990, which explained: "Using 'queer' is a way of reminding us how we are perceived by the rest of the world."¹ The word is divisive to many, but it feels empowering and apt to use as a word to describe myself. *Queers Read This* helped me understand that the word was picked up to demonstrate how queer people are stigmatized and to resist assimilation to heteronormativity. However it didn't help me understand how the word, an embrace of an insult, can feel empowering to me and others.

To learn more I read Farah Godrej's essay *Spaces for Counter-Narratives: The Phenomenology of Reclamation*. In it Godrej discusses how reclamation operates as a tool for minority empowerment, specifically through a feminist lens: [It is] a demand for women to take the kind of authority to name, describe and create our world...defining, describing and re-creating ourselves while simultaneously defining, describing, and re-creating our social and material world."² She writes that the social process of reclamation is a tool to rewrite and regain authority over your own self-perception. I began to think about other slurs like *bitch*, *slut*, and *punk* which have all been reclaimed and used to further revolutions. Godrej's essay made me consider visualizing queerness through its negative aspects: shame, fear, internalized hate, repression, and dysphoria. Can embracing and delving into one's suffering and imposed or internalized inferiority actually be empowering?

The Queer Body As Abject

As queer theory began to develop at the end of the 20th century, an adjacent theory was taking hold in both the academic and art worlds. Abject art was a movement that, based on Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection, brought the repulsive waste of human bodily functions into the art gallery. In her landmark book *Powers of Horror* Kristeva describes abjection as disgust towards and repression of the unspeakable grotesque.³ She writes that abjection is important because oppressive institutions are built on destroying the abject, meaning those who are different: racial and ethnic minorities, differently abled folks, and those on the spectrum. Repulsion towards the body's functions is therefore a weapon used against groups like disabled folks, women, and queer people.

¹ Anonymous, *Queers Read This* (New York, NY, 1990)

² Farah Godrej, *Spaces for Counter-Narratives: The Phenomenology of Reclamation* (Nebraska, US: University of Nebraska Press, 2011).

³ Linderman, Deborah, Julia Kristeva, and Leon S. Roudiez, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York, US: Columbia University Press, 1984).

An example of abject art is H.R. Giger's overtly sexual paintings of human-machine hybrids (Figure 1). Giger's manipulates the human form, which melds into his complex mechanical backgrounds, implying a sense of infinity and blurring the boundaries between the self/subject and the other/object. Kristeva writes that this defiance of categorization is precisely what drives those who hold the power in society's repulsion for and extermination of the abject.⁴ The queer body (like the intersex, genderqueer, and non-passing body) is scary, ugly, and threatening to the straight canon of gender and sexuality. Therefore, representing the queer body in art is a means to threaten it. This changed the aims of my project from merely visualizing queerness to depicting the queer body in abject, disjointed, and non-linear ways.

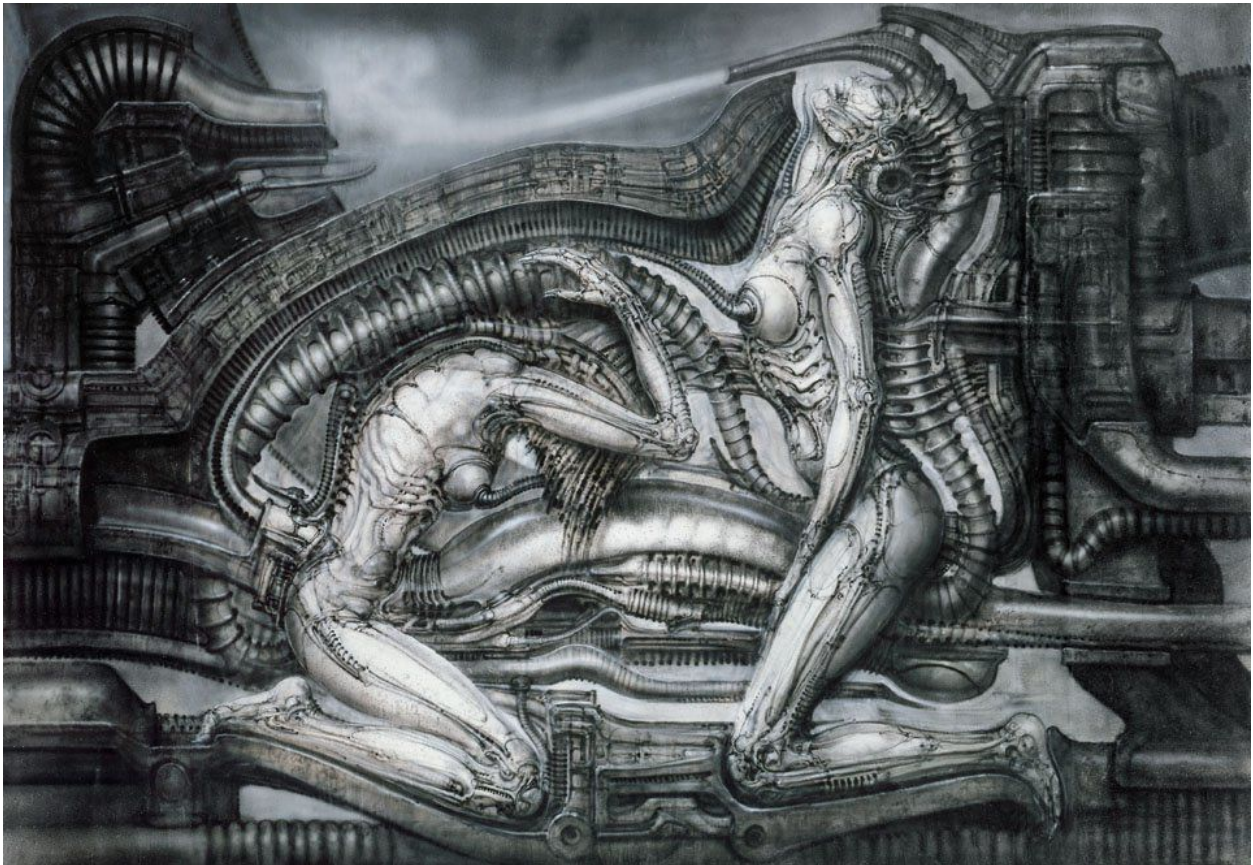


Figure 1: "Erotomechanics VII" by H.R. Giger, 1979

While Giger's work morphs the human body into something less discrete and more abject, it does not serve to explicitly subvert social hierarchies and systems of oppression; I think it is quite heterosexual and sexist. In his series *X Portfolio*, artist and photographer Robert Mapplethorpe exposes viewers to extreme and obscene homosexual BDSM acts (Figure 2). I'm drawn to *X Portfolio*, but at the same time it is too explicit for work I'm comfortable making; I aim to suggest the erotic and the abject but leave just enough space for less severe

⁴ Linderman, Deborah, Julia Kristeva, and Leon S. Roudiez, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York, US: Columbia University Press, 1984).

interpretations. However, Mapplethorpe expertly captures how gay fetish subcultures find empowerment through pain, submission, and degradation. Those who engage in BDSM and extreme gay sex accept and even coalesce into the abject, as shown in Mapplethorpe's photo of a man being urinated on and another of a man penetrating himself with a whip. Embracing the abject, a harshly inferior concept, is an escape from stigma and contempt for queerness.



Figure 2: "Jim and Tom, Sausalito" by Robert Mapplethorpe, 1977

Conceiving The Bottom

Power dynamics and degradation are central to BDSM: the "submissive" in a relationship with a "dominant" finds empowerment through inferiority. To me, this is similar to how reclamation allows minorities to consensually gain autonomy over their own status as abnormal and inferior. When one can't escape being marked as low-status, the one solution is to embrace the lowliness, dive deeper into it, and throw it back in their faces. How can this idea be represented visually?



Figure 3: "cochi" by ektor garcia, 2017

Artist ektor garcia, who was featured in the recent New Museum exhibition *Trigger: Gender as Weapon and Tool*, also plays with the idea of lowliness. His installations of metalwork, leatherwork, and many other media are predominantly set up on the ground and his fetishy materials create an environment of sleaziness (Figure 3). Weaver Josh Faught roughly stitches together dissonant textiles, low text, and pop culture objects to create an abject art, not through bodily waste but through queer aesthetics (Figure 4). Faught, in his interview with Kate Mondloch for the Museum of Contemporary Craft's *Call + Response*, says: "I'm going to push [the piece] down as far as it will go. I'm going to pick a low material, cover it in a really sloppy way, and then I'm going to choose a really pathetic text that brings it even lower...I'm going to make the pride and dignity of the piece sink as much as it's trying to tower and monumentalize itself."⁵ Similar to garcia, Faught uses materials strategically to lessen the esteem of his work, however Faught's work is much tamer than garcia's, and does not have the level of eroticism I aim to depict in this project.

⁵ Kate Mondloch, *CALL + RESPONSE* (Museum of Contemporary Craft). Accessed September 17, 2018. <http://mocc.pnca.edu/callresponse/pairings/faught.html>.



Figure 4: "Triage" by Josh Faught, 2009

Artist Vanessa Barragão creates machine tufted and latch-hooked rugs which realistically mimic coral reefs and seafloor plants (Figure 5). Barragão uses dynamic differences in pile height to add depth to her work and create a sense of organicness, which introduced me to the possibility of using depth to suggest bodily forms in my rugs (however, Barragão often utilizes crochet, which I think is a technique that looks too conservative for my project). This led me to approach the project by thinking about the human body distorted *into* physical representations of lowly objects in lowly places: sewers, manholes, vermin, asphalt, sidewalks, and toilets. Here, the queer body becomes abject, becomes physically low, mirroring queerness' low status, and finds empowerment through it.



Figure 5: "Bleached Coral" by Vanessa Barragão, 2017

Queer Aesthetics

In *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject*, Fabio Cleto writes that throughout the etymological history of the word *queer* it has connoted a "twisting and bending" of truths, norms, and expectations.⁶ He argues that this meaning is utilized in queer aesthetics (a style of making developed by queer artists) in order to weasel, or twist, their way out of heterosexual aesthetic standards, binaries, and norms.

⁶ Fabio Cleto, *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: a Reader* (Edinburgh, UK: Edinburg University Press, 2008).



Figure 6: "If I Could" by Sarah Zapata, 2017

This is exemplified by queer fiber artist Sarah Zapata who makes latch-hooked rugs and wall hangings consisting of vibrant, clashing swaths of color (Figure 6). Her work is an embrace of the feminine and the handmade, as she explains when interviewed by Joyce Lovelace for *Craft Council*: "I'm performing how I'm theoretically supposed to, but working within those confines to break down that means of control."⁷ Zapata works with stereotypes about her own identity in order to hold power over them: "There's so much about our lives that we can't control. Yet our perception, and what that means moving forward, is something that to some extent we can." Zapata's philosophy about her work has guided me to believe that depicting how hegemonic powers often (hurtfully) see us is a small way to gain control over how that affects us when we have little control over the actual discrimination and prejudice. Queer aesthetics provides a loophole in which to "twist" out of the grasp of heteronormativity and use its own weapons against it.

⁷ Joyce Lovelace, *Women's Work, Reworked* (American Craft Council).
<https://craftcouncil.org/magazine/article/womens-work-reworked>.

Methodology

I began this project with a proposal to create two to three large-scale, latch-hooked rugs. Latch-hooking is a technique where strands of yarn are knotted onto mesh canvas, and I saw this as an effective means of creation because of its low status. It is not only a craft, but one that is sold as pre-made kits depicting kittens, rainbows, and American flags at craft stores everywhere. This is a process imbued with camp, and using it already establishes a reclamation of inferiority. Even more, this technique is texturally and materially optimal because it naturally resembles fur, body hair and organic matter. With this in mind, I set out on my first latch-hook prototype. I aimed to create a texture that alludes to both untrimmed body hair and grassy shrubbery and underbrush. Here I began to draw in imagery relating to an actual geographical *bottom*: the ground and seafloor.



Figure 7: Initial material study

I experimented with vibrant, clashing color combinations, and adhered swatches of fabric together with latch-hooking onto the mesh canvas (Figure 7). While the outcome achieved a successful garishness, through reflecting I realized I wanted the rugs to feature

more representative and specific subject matter. In my second material study I contended with representing low imagery that suggests a physical space. Evoking the matter found in low, harsh environments, I tried to experiment with representing sea anemone, crustaceans, mold and rats, in an attempt to parallel a queer body.

Here my material study felt limited, and my process turned more research-dominant. At this point my instructors advised me to look into abject art, and from reading Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* I understood even more-so the power of obscenity, and the project again evolved into an even more representative space. Orifices became a useful visual symbol to represent a radical queer body, as well as to give another dual meaning to the piece: *bottoming* and *the bottom*. I resolved to execute the rug as a body melded with the ground, where the terrain of each blurs together. My question then became: what rug-making technique will allow me to execute this? I looked at artist Vanessa Barragao tufted ocean rugs and learned that machine tufting would allow me the most detail and dynamic depth in order to suggest bodily and organic forms.

After creating one more latch-hook prototype, I ordered a machine tufting gun. While I learned how to use the tool, it became clear that the technique was a big undertaking, and I committed to only making only one five foot by seven foot rug instead of two or three. From here, my process became centered around planning the composition for the final piece (Figure 8). I chose to work digitally, to improve iteration speed and to have a wide and vibrant color palette.

While sketching, I moved away from natural imagery (sea anemone and rats) and opted for sewers, manhole covers, and drains. Furthermore, instead of swaths of body hair, I concentrated this aspect into thin, long ponytails strewn throughout the rug. Both aspects add a blurring of boundaries to the piece where the orifices, manholes and drains, ponytails, and sewage leaks contrast and interplay. I played with color and complexity until deciding to take the most compositionally (in my standards) minimal route (Figure 9).



Figure 8: Digital iterations of compositions

Confident with the composition, I began actually tufting the piece. This was the most challenging part of the entire project, and I faced many hitches. I learned that I had been naive about yarn supply: tufting such a large rug required so much more yarn than I anticipated, and finding yarn in my desired colors in enough supply was almost impossible. To compensate, I decided to produce the skin-colored background not through one solid color, but through several yarns with subtle variations in hue and shade. Instead of adhering strictly to my already made composition, I worked with colors I was able to find.

Creative Work



“The Bottom” by Thomas Callahan, 2019

The Bottom is a 5 foot by 7 foot rug, displayed on the floor, near the corner of two blank white walls. The majority of the rug is carpet-length and a light, caucasian skin-tone color. From here, tufted into the rug are a manhole cover, a toilet seat, a suspicious looking yellow stain, and several amorphous shapes that protrude out from the carpet-length background. They are orifices, mouths, cloacas, anuses, nipples, stomae, and pimples. The shape of these openings and spots are echoed by the representations of sewers and drains. Furthermore, long tussocks sprout out throughout the rug, ranging in color from natural browns to harsh neons to grimey greens. Similarly, single strands of black yarn also protrude out from around the rug, resembling coarse pubic hairs. On top of all of these references to filth, human organs, bodily functions, and pubes, delicate pink hair bows and clips adorn the ponytails (one braided), and finally, rhinestones are embedded throughout, like jewels gleaming in a river bank.



"The Bottom" by Thomas Callahan, 2019

The piece contrasts a multitude of clashing parts which create a genderqueer dissonance, where binaries and poles are dissected and forced together. The rug surely depicts a body, but its limits and qualities are confusing: it is part of the ground, yet its unnatural artifices and excess contradict that. It is imbued with a lack of worth, and flaunts it. While I think the piece is successful in visualizing an embrace of inferiority, I don't think a lot of the inferior elements of its craftsmanship work towards that concept. Its color scheme is unbalanced and disjointed, its texture is uneven, and the abundance of elements is too messy in places. It is surely an exciting piece that draws the viewer in and conveys a unique message, but it is not utmost effective in conveying that message.



"The Bottom" by Thomas Callahan, 2019

Conclusion

My goal in this project was to explore queer reclamation's embrace of inferiority and to challenge cis-heteronormativity through aesthetics. I'm proud of the unique concept I crafted and the interest that viewers took in the piece. I learned a valuable skill in the process, and I am eager to continue honing my ability to tuft. I am still interesting in creating queer spaces through rug-making, and I will absolutely continue this project. I feel equipped and able to tackle challenges and to make my ideas into reality into the future.

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