

Ruben Rincon

IP Thesis

Bodyscapes

Intro

Throughout my childhood and life as a young adult, I've been plagued with varying levels of disorientation and self-doubt. Tracing back to my time in elementary school, the first instance of feeling a jolt of self-doubt was when I was punished by my mother for standing with my hand on my hip. While giving me a disapproving glance, she stated that it was wrong for me to stand like a girl. I remember questioning myself, and feeling conflicted due to my traditionally non-masculine tendencies. I was behaving "incorrectly," and I became hyper-aware of errors established by others.

I come from a traditional Mexican-Catholic household. My cultural upbringing set expectations on my behavior and mannerisms. If I was masculine and religious, I'd be deemed a good person. If I didn't want to go to church or didn't speak in a deep voice, I'd receive more disapproving glances from my family. So, I deepened my voice and started to endlessly criticize myself.

I remember the moment I first felt an attraction to another boy. I remember the fear and shame that came over my body. I tried to will it away, knowing that there'd be consequences for having these feelings. I believed that it would fracture my relationship with my mother, and ruin my life. The occasional homophobic comments from my mother and classmates at school would paralyze me. Once I realized that I was gay, and specifically in a Mexican-Catholic household, I knew that the world would become more challenging to navigate through.

Shame has unfortunately defined my experience growing up. My surroundings continued to pressure me into hiding my sexual identity, to make me aware of how my queerness conflicts with my Mexican identity, and to force me to move throughout the world with a mask as a tactic of safety and success. My upbringing caused me to consider how art can play a role in how I can learn from my traumas and help others struggling with their queer Latino identities.

During my time as an undergraduate in the Stamps School of Art and Design, I fell in love with photography. I got excited by creating compositions and learning to capture compelling images. Through the camera, I was able to translate how I see and experience the world. When I have a complete image, I have an unerasable artifact that can't be denied. My images stand as proof of an existence and way of being. So, this made me consider the act of self-portraiture. The idea of documenting myself excited me, because it gave me the opportunity to validate myself and other's identities. I translate my traumas via photography to engage with people, and show how being queer and Latino has affected the way I see myself. I believe that this act can empower others by showing pride in the examination of one's self and minority body. This has driven me to use self-portraiture for my integrative project.

I am creating a series of self-portraits to take control over the limited available representation my image and narrative as a queer Latino immigrant. My work focuses on how the body can be used to challenge notions of masculinity, race, sexuality, and the cultural constructions of the individual. Queer bodies have historically been the sites of shame, violence, and secrecy as a tactic of safety. I'm aiming to have a role in reshaping the cultural influences that lead queer bodies to experience such pain. I want my body, through self portraiture, to become a source of meditation and contemplation as I construct oppositional art in relation to a hostile/non-understanding world. By making work that highlights and focuses on a minority subject, I'm insisting on how other minority subjects deserve to be focused on.

Contextual Review

Queer academic, José Esteban Muñoz's book, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and The Performance of Politics* (1990), has been essential to my project. Muñoz's writings explore queerness, the intersection of marginalized identities, and of how queer artists have used art to empower themselves. His theory of disidentification states that queer people of color are constantly negotiating their identity in a majoritarian world that punishes and attempts to erase them. In *Disidentifications*, Muñoz (1990) defines counterpublics as "communities and relational chains of resistance that contest the dominant public sphere." Counterpublics have the capacity of world-making through art that doesn't identify with the normative scripts of whiteness, heteronormativity, and misogyny.

With the production of my work, I've taken Muñoz' ideology to heart, as the politics of my identity has been essential to my use of self-portraiture. Muñoz also states that artists who stray from the mainstream of society can use tools traditionally dominated by the mainstream to make their own subversions. Through theatre, media, and literature, queer artists can help us envision new worlds that stray from the one we are often oppressed in. Queer aesthetics become political as they aim to destabilize the perceived norm of how we should be living. I'm motivated to use the historical canon photography to place myself, my identities, and other queer latinos in the conversation about subverting expectations.

Another queer Latino academic, Lawrence La-Fountain Stokes' (2009) book, *Queer Ricans: Cultures and Sexualities in the Diaspora*, explores the way in which artists have portrayed their lives and the discrimination they have faced through cultural expressions of Puerto Rican queer migration. He analyzes the work of artists who trace their journey of moving

to the United States and having their sexuality play a major role in the experiences they encounter. These artworks that he analyses reveal a lot about the issues of discrimination and persecution faced by many queer Puerto Ricans, while also communicating specific experiences across.

As a queer Latino immigrant, I found this book to be important, as it was one of the first academic pieces I read that specifically dealt with queer immigrant issues. His analysis on queer Latino art informed me of the ways I can use my practice to translate the feelings and traumas that inherently come with being queer. Sexual identities have forced some of these artists to exile, and this made me contemplate my own experience of leaving behind Mexico, and how my existence varies as a queer person between Mexico and the United States. This led me to consider the ways I can incorporate the theme of place within my self-portraiture work, and perhaps how photos of my body can be used to trace the effects of this diaspora, which is the journey my physical body has taken from my birth in Mexico to living in the United States.

Along with the contemplation of my identity as a queer Latino immigrant, I stumbled upon the work of Judith Butler, whose academic work deals with queer theory and politics of sexuality and gender identity. In the article, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," Judith Butler (1990) states that disclaiming one's queer identity is no simple activity, it's "an affirmative resistance to a certain regulatory operation of homophobia." This idea strongly connected my leanings towards self-portraiture because through self-portraits, I can proudly display my minority identity while expressing the ways my queer identity has caused me trauma. The act of capturing myself, on its own, is an act of resistance towards homophobia and the oppressive structures that aim to erase my identities. Butler's theories on the performance of gender have also made me think about how I'd have to perform masculine in order to be rewarded by my family and

society. These theories deeply connect to my motivation of using the camera to subvert expectations of masculinity, while resisting homophobia.

Carrie Mae Weems

After finding academic and theoretical sources, I looked for the work of artists whose themes connected to the act of engaging with themselves and their identities as a political act. The first artist who had a major impact on me was Carrie Mae Weems. Carrie Mae Weems takes control of her narrative as a Black female through self-portraiture. “The Kitchen Table Series” (1990) is a series of black and white self-portraits featuring Weems in the same kitchen while the situation changes around her in each photo. The main idea of this series is to re-frame the narrative of Black women and People of Color by showing the viewer an intimate view of their lives. This portrait displays a moment of intimacy, where Weems is being tended to by a friend. I find this intimacy to be a strong resistance against the harsh world and oppressive systems she faces due to her identity as a Black woman. She is choosing to display this intimacy, and her autonomy in this act makes me consider how I can intentionally show intimacy to communicate my themes.



Carrie Mae Weems, *Untitled*, from *The Kitchen Table Series*, 1990.

Paul Mpagi Sepuya

Paul Mpagi Sepuya's work is composed of intimate self-portraits that assert the photographer's presence and autonomy in self-portraiture. As queer Black photographer, his identity plays an important role in how one views his photography. His *Mirror Study* (2017) directly addresses the viewer and makes them aware of how they are viewing him as the subject. *Mirror Study* enforces a couple of things: we are witnessing someone directly making the choice to take a photo of themselves, and the framing communicates that he is also photographing us. In this framing, he establishes his power and domain over the audience, by directly facing them. The photo is composed of a print of his back with his arm curled to hold the camera taking the portrait. However, the print itself is only a small part of the photo, as Sepuya's knee extends past the print he is holding in front of him. The rest of the photo is his actual studio space, which frames his actual body behind the print of his body.

When considering my photography, I felt connected to the way Sepuya is able to exert a feeling of control over his choice to photograph himself. As I started taking portraits of my body, I wanted these photos to feel assertive and the artist to be present. Sepuya revealed the direct image-making process of his self-portraits by using a mirror and physical camera present in the image, which inspired me on how to go about photographing my body. From analyzing his work, I gained a stronger sense of how important it would be for me to be intentional with my posing and framing.



Paul Sepuya, *Mirror Study*. 2017.

Wolfgang Tillmans

As my work evolved into more close-up portraits of my body, I noticed myself becoming more involved in creating shape and form with my body, as opposed to just photographing it. Wolfgang Tillmans is a queer photographer whose work covers a wide arrange of themes, ranging from the queer bodies and abstract explorations. Tillmans' act of abstraction was captivating, because it often made me question the subject of the image and would make me want to take a closer look . *Blushes #28 (year)* is abstract and confusing in that you're not sure what the photo is of. In the background, there's a blur with a reddish tint to it. It has a large blob-like bean shape in the upper-left corner. In the foreground, you see marks left behind, as if the figure was being dragged across the frame. The marks seem to have been left on a glass panel, and they're the sharpest part of this photo. When I looked at this photo, I didn't focus on the individual objects in this photo, but rather the shape as a whole. The sum of the parts make

the photo as enigmatic as it is. They're a feeling of mystery as you're not sure exactly what you are looking at. As my photos became more cropped in, I became less concerned about accurately capturing the reality of my body, but more drawn into creating compositions with shape and form. I've started to abstract my body in the process, because I enjoyed creating photos where my body becomes something else, something not as recognizable when it's as cropped in. My body was no longer just a body, but also a landscape. It became a figure composed of shadow, form, light, texture, and color. It started to feel like a whimsical being.



Wolfgang Tillmans, *Blushes #28*, 2000.

Methodology

Before diving into my process and methodology, I have to address the hurdle I had to overcome that kept preventing me from creating photos for the joy of creating photos. With my previous mindset, I felt the need to make certain types of photos. I had to release myself of the burden of being the queer Latino photographer who was driven by an expected societal to make photos that obviously spoke to my marginalized identities. My photos were supposed to be

social and political as they addressed specific issues facing queer Latino bodies. As I set out to make these types of photos, I felt myself making stuff that I thought I was supposed to make. I wasn't making stuff that came from an innate desire to explore and create. It was driven by intention and forced purpose to please faculty and peers. I found myself creating portraits similar to imagery on social media, which didn't honestly address my intention of exploring my body. My first portraits were more so about me addressing the viewers gaze by having direct eye contact be part of my photos. I overcame this by forcing myself to think less about my work-making process, and set out to have more fun with my making, which has led me to my current body of work.

I asked myself what I wanted to make, and what I would be impassioned to pursue. I needed something that made me both excited and nervous, so I ended up focusing on my relationship with my body. The process of creating my self-portraits is often transformative and engaging to my complicated relationship with my body. My body has often contributed to my self-doubt and insecurities. Yet it's always been my body, and I've felt moments of pride over my own autonomy. Part of this project has been confronting my nudity. It's been difficult to look at my naked body, and I've always felt shame at the sight of it. Taking images of my naked body is almost like an act of rebellion against myself. There's a strange feeling of liberation as I take something I've considered ugly and make it into a work of art. These self-portraits encouraged me to feel free with my body, which also made me feel as if I was breaking free from the expectations of masculinity and rigidity I've experienced due to my cultural upbringing.

An important part to my process has been the improvisational aspect to my posing. I'd practice by taking images of poses that felt inspired by queer culture, such as voguing and dance. I'd start with traditionally feminine poses, before further pushing myself to make the

poses more informed by my personality and emotions. Through photos, I'm able to visualize the way I want to depict my body on camera.



Process Image

Peer reviews and feedback has also been essential to my process. Sometimes, I tend to get lost in the little details and start to lose sight of the big image. I get too obsessed with research and over-complicate things in my mind. Having someone else look at my images and tell me what they see often changed the way I think about my images. The impressions people get often inspire me to think about the more general outlook of the images themselves and how they work as a whole. I usually start the critique process by printing out my photos and placing them on my studio walls. Once people are able to take in the photos as a whole and communicate what they get from it, I'm able to think more intentionally about what moves I have to make in order to deliver the impact I desire. In conversing with others, themes like vulnerability and intimacy came up and pivoted my direction to explore more exposed portraits of my body. My earlier work felt distant as my body was usually farther from the camera. This

then inspired me to be braver with myself by bringing my body even closer to the camera, viewer, and myself.

Creative Work

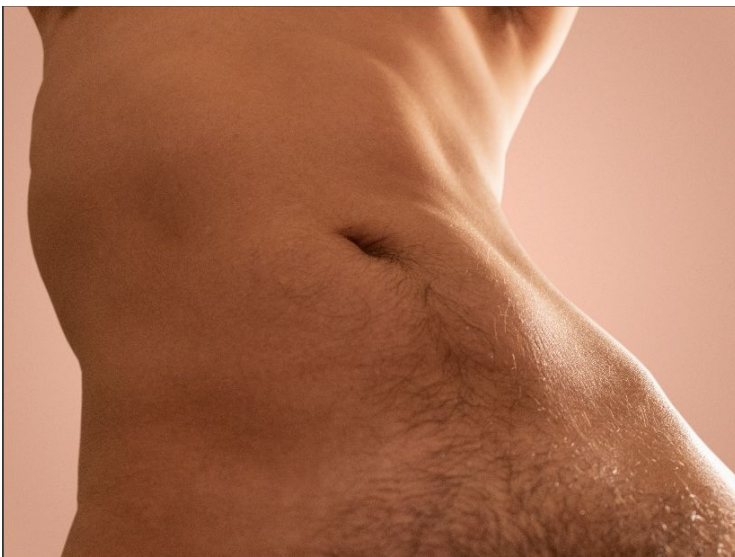
I started by removing my clothes and facing my camera. With each shutter, I created new poses to express some body language through entangled arms, a puffed chest, a stiff body, a fluid body, or an arched back. While I posed, I became hyper-aware of my body. The smallest details, such as tiny moles, discolored patches of skin, and marks from my waistband, became the largest. The more I started to photograph my body, the more I began to understand it as a vessel for my journey with my self-love, or lack thereof. My body became an epic thing, so I aimed to fill the frame with my body in a dynamic and intimate way. My body becomes a landscape that visibly captures my history with my body.



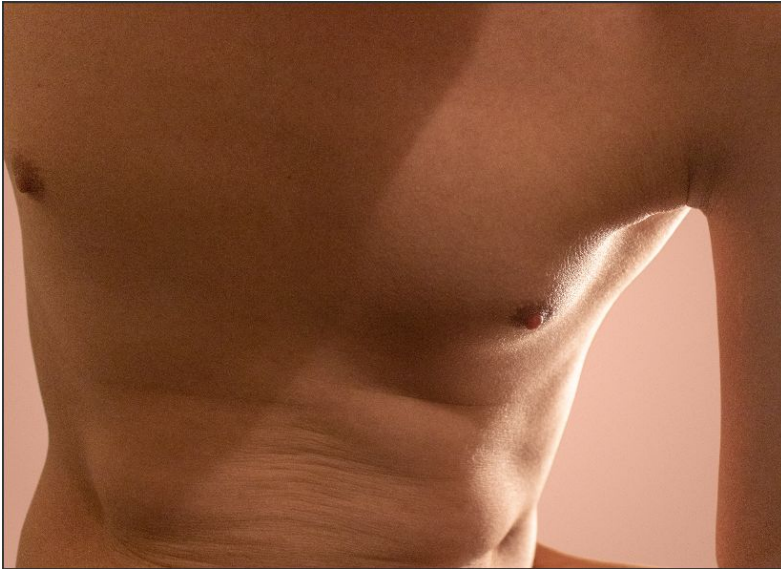
Bodyscape #1

It's important for me to see my body as a source of power. For me, these portraits are about tackling my insecurities of body weight, scars, marks, and texture. The composition of the photo above shows a low angled view of my body, as if it's towering over you. My arms are stretched out and open. I felt confident and strong taking this portrait. The backgrounds of my portraits are similar in a peachy-tone, resembling a similar color of my skin. The background is

plain, because I wanted my body to be the only focus, with light being used to intentionally frame the edges of my body. In talking about my photos, I find it helpful to talk about them as if they are a whole. They are intended to work together, as it reflects the process of me becoming more tuned in with my body as I experiment with posing. Each frame is a chance for me to learn about my body and become more involved in my relationship with it. Creating balanced compositions is what drives me to think of different ways of showing my body. Creating these works helped me resolve the relationship I had with my body, because it gave me the chance to listen to it speak and guide me. I gave my body the focus and attention it deserved, which made me realize that I've often been neglecting it. My body became a vessel for me to physically eject the expectations of masculinity. I realized that my framing could empower others to also physically reject societal and cultural expectations by how they become autonomous over their own bodies.



Bodyscape #2

*Bodyscape #3*

Conclusion

When I started to think about what I wanted to make and why I wanted to make, the most important thing for me was for the work to be personal and introspective so that I could reflect on my identity and discover the way others could relate. By taking an inward-focussed approach to my work, I'd be able to learn more about myself and illuminate the way I've experienced the world. Through iteration and evolution, this project has become a mediation between myself and my body, with photography bringing an ongoing dialogue. I've been able to look at my body in a different way, something I've never been able to do before. I've learned to view it as a unique being of its own. I set out with the intention to learn about how I view my body, and came out with a deeper understanding and appreciation for its multifaceted nature. I celebrated my queerness and became empowered as I created landscapes of my identities. Though this project was heavily beneficial to my own relationship with my body, I'm hoping that it can inspire others to embrace their bodies and take control of their narratives.

As I continue to make work, I'm interested in further pursuing explorations of the body. There's an endless potential of expression and examination for how our bodies represent us. Besides markings on flesh, posing and mannerisms indicate who we are and how we feel. I'd like to use photography as a vehicle for continuing my exploration into viewing the body as a landscape and source of knowledge. I'm also considering branching out to photographing other people's bodies, as it allows me to connect with other people and examine the relationships people have with their bodies.

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