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# Erotic positions for two consenting males

## *Considerations for a gay painting practise*

An exegesis presented with exhibition as fulfillment of the requirements  
for thesis: Master of Fine Arts at Massey University, Wellington, New Zealand

Robbie Handcock  
2016



## Abstract

This exegesis is an exploration into painting and gay visual culture, and investigates what might constitute a “gay painting practise”. It discusses my focus on the work of American photographer Bob Mizer and *Physique Pictorial* as source material for painting and the questions it raises regarding queer histories, gay sexuality and camp sensibilities. It considers the idea of queer utopian memory as a framework of looking back to moments of “sexual possibility” in order to transmit and receive utopian visions across intergenerational divides. It also considers gay sexuality, its ability to reimagine and restructure notions of intimacy, and its role in resisting gay assimilationist narratives.

Drawing on the writings of various queer theorists, this exegesis considers how colour, form and content may contribute to a queer aesthetic. Making the argument for camp as a style of relating to things, I aim to situate my painting practise as a “gay painting practise” through a network of gay associations, affiliations and references.



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# Introduction

In 1945, American photographer Bob Mizer founded the Athletic Model Guild and produced the quarterly magazine *Physique Pictorial*. The publication mainly featured young muscled men doing bodybuilding poses, passing off the erotic as an interest in fitness in order to get around the period's censorship laws. *Physique Pictorial* played a large part in the formation of the beefcake aesthetic and holds a particular place in a history of gay male media. My interest here is how we remember such a history and how that resonates and informs contemporary queer existence.

I believe that unlike minorities of race and class, being gay isn't inherited, thus we must look for representations of ourselves outside of the family unit. In his book *How To Be Gay*, David Halperin has investigated how a gay aesthetic works to develop "a conscious identity, a common culture, a particular outlook on the world, [and] a shared sense of self."<sup>1</sup> In the absence of gay people in our upbringings, the formation of a gay identity develops in relation to the representations we have access to – representations that may, and often are, equally optimistic, idealistic, as well as flawed and problematic. By resurrecting Mizer's beefcakes through painting, I attempt to play with nostalgia. It is at once a celebration of a particular moment in history while also exploring its continued reverberations today.

My painting practise is an investigation into gay aesthetics as a means of making sense of gay visual media. It aims to embody queer sensibilities and positions itself in the camp of "gay art" in order to discuss issues pertinent to contemporary queer theory.

In the first chapter of this exegesis, I will discuss José Esteban Muñoz's notion of queer utopian memory as one framework of looking back to Mizer's oeuvre and the world-making potentialities of queerness. Like AA Bronson's *Queer Spirits* project in 2011, summoning queer ghosts of the past, I intend to summon the ghost of Mizer through his work as an act of intergenerational bridge-building. This chapter will also discuss queer

relationships to time, particularly in regards to the video work of Ryan Trecartin, in order to explore alternative modes of being and its role within utopias.

The second chapter focuses on gay sexuality, intimacy and assimilationist identity politics. Responding to my work *Cruise Lounge*, which exhibited at Auckland window gallery Rockies, I discuss the ways in which cruising and radical gay sex practises possess the ability to restructure and reimagine notions of intimacy and kinship as framed by Patrick Moore, Samuel R. Delany and Leo Bersani. I also address queer theory's "anti-social turn" in Lee Edelman and artist Bjarne Melgaard's critique of assimilationist agendas in gay activism.

The third chapter addresses queer aesthetics and ultimately makes a case for what might constitute a "gay painting practise". I will draw on the writings of Judith Halberstam, David Halperin and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in order to discuss how my painterly and aesthetic decisions relate to a "gay network", as well as address my treatment of source material through a reading of the work of Luc Tuymans.

### *On Queer and Gay*

Throughout this exegesis, the words gay and queer at times may seem interchangeable from one another. I do, however, want to make a distinction between the two and the implications in the use of each. Queer is a word that might describe a group of people who identify outside or in opposition to heterosexuality. It operates as an umbrella term to include gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and gender non-conforming peoples. While there is a discussion in contemporary queer discourse regarding the relationship as well as conflict between sexual identities and gender identities, this is not explored in my writing here. The concerns of my thesis have largely been to do with gay male identity, sensibility and aesthetics. In this exegesis, I use the word "gay" as a short hand for "male homosexual" in order to make that distinction as well as to avoid mistakenly speaking on behalf of people where I am not qualified to do so. Where the word "queer" has been used, it is either in relation to queer theory or in reference to others who have used it.

## Queer spirits turn history on its head

At the onset of this year, my thesis project began with a particular focus on Fire Island and its significance to queer history. I wanted to explore various material associated with or that may have come out of the island directly – for example, the photography of Tom Bianchi, the work of AA Bronson, the death of poet Frank O’Hara, and the seemingly endless anecdotes of sex and celebrity gossip set on the island – but ultimately my focus shifted towards Bob Mizer and *Physique Pictorial*. Similar to Fire Island, Mizer’s work has embedded itself into a canon of gay history. My interest in Mizer is related to his significance regarding the formation of the beefcake image, notably having photographed Arnold Schwarzenegger and Joe Dallesandro, and his subsequent influence on artists such as David Hockney and Robert Mapplethorpe.<sup>1</sup> Throughout this project, much of what has drawn me to Mizer’s work is the desire to make sense of my attraction to it and its continued resonance in contemporary queer culture.

### *Queer Utopian Memory*

In July 2014, The Guardian published an article titled *Out of the Past: Gay Cinema and Nostalgia* in which author Ben Walters identifies a trend of looking back in queer film in order to readdress and represent queer historical narratives.<sup>2</sup> Out of the New Queer Cinema movement of the 1990s came films like *My Own Private Idaho*, *Poison* and *The Living End*, which embodied the angst and anger of living in the aftermath of the AIDS epidemic and resisted “positive” heteronormative representations of LGBT lives.<sup>3</sup> While there are film-

makers who are still making films with radical agendas (in the last decade Bruce LaBruce has released two gay zombie porn films and a rom-com featuring an intergenerational romance between a young man and an elderly nursing home resident), Walters argues that with societal, medical and legal progress has come a softening in tone that has resulted in a focus on “aspirational accessibility” to love and acceptance on mainstream terms. The trend of looking back, seen in films such as *Brokeback Mountain*, *Milk*, and *Pride*, can be seen as an attempt at correcting historical wrongs, but what does that atonement look like?

An upcoming biopic set for release in 2017 focuses on the life of Finnish artist Touko Laaksonen, better known as Tom of Finland. Laaksonen was first published in Bob Mizer’s *Physique Pictorial* in 1957, his work featuring homoerotic fetish drawings of hypermasculine archetypes and has been described by cultural historian Joseph W. Slade as the “most influential creator of gay pornographic images”.<sup>4</sup> The work of Laaksonen is what initially led to my awareness of the *Physique Pictorial* publication, but recalling my first encounter with Tom of Finland is less clear. Perhaps it is a symptom of growing up with the internet, where instead of stumbling upon some illicit material by happenstance in the library or magazine store, my relationship to such imagery is often without context. The dissemination of content online is disassociated largely from physical time and place, but for how entwined Tom of Finland seemed to gay pornography, it somehow resonated for me differently than most erotic material. Making sense of this resonance-without-context has been a large propulsion of the looking back in my own practise.

Mizer’s depictions of bodybuilders employs posing, framing and lighting as to render the body a classical sculpture, a long established code of homoeroticism according to art critic Douglas Crimp.<sup>5</sup> This can be seen played out in the work of Robert Mapplethorpe, both as reinforcement of its homoeroticism but also in its defence as art vs. pornography, and perhaps in the continued resurrection of Leni Riefenstahl’s *Olympia* as a blueprint for future homoerotic endeavours.<sup>6</sup> Laaksonen’s work, however, is brash and unapologetic in its purpose and function as erotica. It seems unconcerned with entering any discussion regarding its artistic merit beyond the capability of drawing to portray fantasy, happy with its status as illegitimate and at odds with mainstream heterosexual values. As Wayne Koestenbaum writes, “[d]rawing’s second-class status increases its eroticism. The more “pathetic” an erotic practise, the more I esteem it. The more “pathetic” an artistic medium, the closer it resembles my ideal sexual underground.”<sup>7</sup>

Another way of thinking about this trend in looking back, and perhaps this need for atonement, is through José Esteban Muñoz’s *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. Through his writing on queer utopian memory, Muñoz asserts that the future is queerness’s domain itself; that queerness allows us to see beyond the here and now of the present and look towards alternative ways of operating in the world, and ultimately creating new worlds. Thus, queer utopia calls for an ordering of life not dictated by “spatial/temporal coordinates of straight time”, that resists gay assimilationist politics, and “to desire differently, to desire more, to desire better”.<sup>8</sup> For Muñoz, memory is constructed and inherently political and he puts forwards the argument for memory and its ritualised tellings – including through visual culture – as having these world-making potentialities.

One such ritualised telling comes in the form of Tom Bianchi’s photographs of pre-AIDS Fire Island, a popular holiday destination off New York City for gay men in the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>9</sup> He speaks of the sanctuary Fire Island provided for gay men, physically and



Fig. 1. AA Bronson and Ryan Brewer, *Red*, 2011, Duratrans transparency in lightbox

psychologically removed from the American mainland. Describing Fire Island as the “capital of Queerdom”, he writes about his first contact with the location:

In the 1950s, I discovered small twenty-five cent physique magazines at a newsstand in front of the Chicago Public Library. In one, I found a picture of Glenn Bishop at Fire Island that instantly welded an ideal male physique to a remote otherworldly beach. Fire Island sounded exotic, perhaps a made up name. I had no idea if it was a real place.<sup>10</sup>

The world-making potentiality of Fire Island is called upon here by Bianchi, hinting at that same resonance-without-context I earlier described, and is marked by longing. Muñoz offers an exploration into the affect and political desire he calls “utopian longing”, differentiating his offering from simple nostalgic discourse. In the case of Bianchi, and of Fire Island, longing can be seen as a desire for a place of belonging outside of heterosexual institutions.

Fire Island also becomes a focal point in a series of “invocations” by artist and healer AA Bronson. In collaboration with academic Peter Hobbs, the project involved a series of rituals calling upon queer spirits in Banff, New Orleans, Winnipeg and Fire Island; sites marked by the death of indigenous populations, slavery or the AIDS crisis. In their Fire Island invocation, Bronson and Hobbs calls forth “souls who have been excised from history”, “adventurers of an all-male life”, the spirits of Frank O’Hara, Tennessee Williams, and Andy Warhol, as well as the “living and dead spirits that drift about on the paths and rendezvous points of the Meat Rack or Magic Forest”.<sup>11</sup> Out of this invocation came the light box piece *Red*, made in collaboration with the artist Ryan Brewer. It shows Bronson naked and covered in red paint as a result of the rituals undertaken (Fig. 1).

Muñoz writes about queer utopian memory as having the ability to transmit visions of utopia across generational divides and here Bronson’s work is literal in attempting to bridge those gaps. The title of this chapter is a quote drawn from *Queer Spirits*, a publication of the resulting documentation from these rituals. In it Bronson writes:

We resolve to be present in our bodies, present to ourselves, to each other, and to queer spirit. We resolve to claim our voices and collective history as queers. And we resolve that queer community is a community of the living and the dead.<sup>12</sup>

As in the trend of looking back in queer cinema, Bronson’s project wants to bring the past into the present. It desires to bridge that generational gap all the while resisting a “past” and “present” dichotomy, resisting a linear understanding of time.

### *Queer Time*

Judith Halberstam’s *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* offers the idea of queer time as developing in opposition to heteronormative institutions of family and reproduction, arguing for the potential queerness to open up new life narratives and alternative relations to time and space. For Halberstam, queer time emerged at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century from within gay communities impacted by the AIDS epidemic, from those





Fig. 2 Ryan Trecartin, *I-Be Area* (film still), 2007

whose relationship with future became more and more fraught. She illustrates the relationship between AIDS and futurity with a quote from poet Mark Doty: “All my life I’ve lived with a future which constantly diminishes but never vanishes.”<sup>13</sup> Interestingly, New Zealand dancer and choreographer Douglas Wright offers a similar sentiment: “Then from my cosy position suckling at the iron breast I saw my past spread out in front of me as if it was the future, and my future, magically, became a thing of the past.”<sup>14</sup> This compression of time expands the potentiality for a life unscripted by heterosexual conventions.

As it is for Halberstam, queer time for Muñoz steps out of sync with straight time in terms of its linearity. It embraces multiple temporalities as well as their unity. Muñoz cites Heidegger’s notion of “ekstatisch”, or the ecstatic unity of past, present and future, and invokes future generations. In speaking to future generations, one is naturally presuming a future and not settling for the constraints of the present; utopia contains within it an inherent critique of the present.

Much has been said about video artist Ryan Trecartin’s work in relation to technology, namely the internet, but here I’d like to make a case for its working in relation to queer time: as one Trecartin character exclaims in the movie *I-Be Area*, “I need to feel endless in both directions”. Having developed a trademark with his editing and jump cuts, Trecartin’s movies (he makes the distinction between movies, films and videos) are sped up, slowed down and reversed, rejecting linear temporality in favour of a “of a disjointed, free-associative style that purposefully fails to iron out multiplicity or contradiction”. In rejecting cohesiveness and conventional narrative, Trecartin’s films also reject the binarism of “real and virtual, male and female, self and other, gay or straight, rationality and madness, surface and subtext, style and content, time and space”.<sup>15</sup>



As in Halberstam's queer time, which develops in opposition to heteronormativity, so too does Trecartin's work, opening up alternative relations to time and space – and, of course, to the internet. In Trecartin's world, "online selves are multiple, unstable, an aggregate of images and words that can be remixed and revised; by the same token, they bring us freedom".<sup>16</sup> This freedom is a world where we can edit, revise, rework or rebrand ourselves, thus creating a reality where identity "takes a back-seat to personality articulation".<sup>17</sup>

This queer relationship to time and history formed much of the basis of my approach to Mizer and my exploration of his resonance today. Some of the first paintings I made in the MFA program were in a group exhibition of Massey University students in 2015 titled *Parallel Play*. My contribution consisted of four paintings. Two smaller works depicted figures in ambiguous positions, paintings that were the result of collages made from various contemporary pornographic images. Two larger works were paintings made from stills of Mizer's films, one from a 15 minute "loop"<sup>18</sup> and the other from a breakthrough feature-length film called *Billy Boy*. The progression of censorship laws in the US can be loosely tracked through the career of Mizer<sup>19</sup> and both of these films were made after 1968, marking a relaxation in laws regarding pornography and, in particular, male nudity.

In Susan Sontag's *Notes on Camp*, she touches on what I interpret to be an effect of queer time through her examination of camp sensibilities:

Of course, the canon of Camp can change. Time has a great deal to do with it. Time may enhance what seems simply dogged or lacking in fantasy now because we are too close to it, because it resembles too closely our own everyday fantasies, the fantastic nature of which we don't perceive. We are better able to enjoy a fantasy as fantasy when it is not our own.<sup>20</sup>

In the last chapter of this exegesis I will offer further analysis of camp as a sensibility and its relationship to painting, but here I am interested in its relationship to time and fantasy. At this time, I was interested in this difference of sexual fantasy from various points in history and what democratising depictions of both might offer. The works in *Parallel Play* all depicted scenes and hinted at narratives, which were interpreted by audiences in different ways. The ambiguity of depiction, as in the lack of explicitly sexual content, meant that content was read in a number of different ways. In people I was able to speak to, some saw in these paintings acts of violence, while others who saw eroticism were often informed by knowledge of my previous works and practise. In many ways, it was my frustration with these responses that led me to focusing on *Physique Pictorial*, and how I could depict that eroticism while at the same time providing less context.

For Muñoz, an essential component of queer utopian memory is the recollection of historical queer sex practises. In a talk titled *Mourning and Militancy* by Douglas Crimp, he describes a post-AIDS landscape as having lost a "culture of sexual possibility: back rooms, tea rooms, movie houses, and baths; the trucks, the piers, the ramble, the dunes."<sup>21</sup> Muñoz believes such recollections contribute to visions of utopia and their transmission to future generations. Mizer's films were created exclusively for venues such as the Park Theatre in



Fig. 3. *Parallel Play* (installation view), 2015



Fig. 4. *Billy Boy* (film still), Bob Mizer 1971

downtown Los Angeles as well as for private screenings held by the Athletic Model Guild. I wanted these paintings to draw attention to this moment in a history of gay erotica, particularly in thinking about the internet and how such content is now disseminated. Like Bronson's conjuring of queer spirits, it was my attempt to conjure that feeling of sexual possibility and speculate on how time has impacted on that feeling.

## All about balls

In works made since *Parallel Play* I have been interested in how painting might play a role in the summoning of sexual possibility. In September of this year I exhibited *Cruise Lounge* at Rockies, a window gallery on Karangahape Rd in Auckland. The show consisted of three paintings, two of which drew upon images from *Physique Pictorial*; a large unstretched canvas depicting a male nude with the text “all about balls” and a small stretched canvas depicting a nude figure reclining against a tree. The third work was a text based painting describing the location of glory holes in a cruise club located down the road from the gallery. It read:

This is is a men's cruise club. There are a few glory holes specially [sic] before the toilets on the left hand side, there is a place with stairs and you can go up put your cock in the glory holes and someone who is downstairs can suck you off.

This text was taken from the website Squirt.org, an online hook-up site which also features message boards and reviews of cruising locations around particular cities. While *Parallel Play* highlighted a difference in the dissemination and consumption of pornography from the late 1960s and early 1970s, I wanted *Cruise Lounge* to point to the practise of cruising and its persistence as anachronism in contemporary queer existence.

The location of Rockies informed much of my approach to installing *Cruise Lounge*, with K'Rd having a historical reputation as Auckland's red light district. I approached the window space as a kind of shopfront, a vibrant display celebrating gay sexuality. The largest work, *All About Balls*, occupied nearly the entire back wall and became hard to ignore for passersby as well as motorists driving past. Its proximity to a stop light meant cars and buses would occasionally stop directly opposite the work. I have never intended for the sexual



Fig. 5. Cruise Lounge (installation view), 2016



Fig. 6. Cruise Lounge (installation view), 2016

content of my work to be shocking or salacious, but I wanted a bold installation that was reflective of gay culture's disruptive and indiscreet aspects. The following discussion will outline historical gay sex practises and its relation to assimilationist identity politics.

### *Cruising and Radical Gay Sexuality*

Patrick Moore's *Beyond Shame: Reclaiming the Abandoned History of Radical Gay Sexuality* details a history of pre-AIDS gay male sex culture in New York that existed in bathhouses and S&M practises of the 1970s. These men, he argues, were revolutionary in their experimentations with sex and sexuality, going as far as to recast this sexual legacy as a creative one, and its participants as artists. Such experimentation played out in bathhouses, theatres, public toilets, parks and forests. This history, Moore argues, has come to be viewed as the logical precursor and thus cause of the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s. The onset of AIDS drained the creative energy of sexual experimentation and ultimately the harboured shame that led to the gay community divorcing itself from this "tainted legacy". The result was an intergenerational disconnect between older and younger gay men who would have been able to help guide younger generations integrate sexual exploration into more balanced, less destructive lives. Moore turns to Foucault, who calls for an understanding that "with our desires, through our desires, go new forms of relationships, new forms of love, new forms of creation. Sex is not a fatality; it's a possibility for creative life." Which leads Moore to the question, what would have come of the radical sexual experimentation of the 1970s had it not so abruptly been ended by AIDS?<sup>1</sup>

In thinking about answers to such a question, I turn back to Muñoz. While Moore considers the intergenerational disconnect resulting from the shame of the AIDS crisis in very real life and concrete terms, Muñoz highlights the importance of mapping our repression, alienation and fragmentation as a gay community. In speaking to the world-making possibilities of queerness, Muñoz calls for a criticism that enables us to hinder institutional and legislative attempts to outlaw gay sociality, as these glimpses of such relations operate in a utopian manner that imagines, and could perhaps make concrete, a queer world.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps not an answer to Moore's question exactly, but Muñoz offers a framework for beginning to speculate on the significance of such a provocation. By exploring the conditions in which 1970s gay sexual experimentation was cut short, we could start looking to our present for structures that might contribute to our marginalisation.<sup>3</sup>

My excavation of Bob Mizer and *Physique Pictorial* as source material has been a means to track those conditions of historic marginalisation as well as exploring the role of sexuality in gay culture. In an interview titled *Friendship as a Way of Life*, Foucault argues that it is not just homosexual sex that people find threatening, but homosexuality as a way of life:

One of the concessions one makes to others is not to present homosexuality as anything but a kind of immediate pleasure, of two young men meeting in the street, seducing each other with a look, grabbing each other's asses and getting each other off in a quarter of an hour. There you have a kind of neat image of homosexuality without any possibility of generating unease, and





Fig. 7. *Sometimes I'm Just Too Fucked Up To Care*, 2016, oil on canvas

for two reasons: it responds to a reassuring canon of beauty, and it cancels everything that can be troubling in affection, tenderness, friendship, fidelity, camaraderie, and companionship, things that our rather sanitised society can't allow a place for without fearing the formation of new alliances and the tying together of unforeseen lines of force. I think that's what makes homosexuality "disturbing": the homosexual mode of life, much more than the sexual act itself. To imagine a sexual act that doesn't conform to law or nature is not what disturbs people. But that individuals are beginning to love one another – there's the problem.<sup>4</sup>

While this isn't to sideline sexuality from the discussion, I think it is interesting to ask what aspects of gay sex have the ability to disrupt that neat image of homosexuality and to ask what exactly is threatening about it?

Throughout my thesis project, I have also approached more contemporary representations of gay male sexuality (Fig. 7). In particular, I have looked at the work of Paul Morris, pornographer and founder of Treasure Island Media (TIM), who specialises in gay bareback pornography (pornography without the use of condoms).<sup>5</sup> Bareback pornography differentiates itself from pornography that existed prior to the outbreak of the AIDS epidemic because the lack of condom use goes against the imperative of safe sex that has been established since. TIM productions feature this as prominent components of its films, perhaps most controversially with HIV-positive performers. My interest in Morris is as a kind of contemporary outlaw pornographer and the parallels that may exist between TIM and *Physique Pictorial*, with TIM having been sued and banned from industry events due to the controversial nature of its content.<sup>6</sup>

Queer theorist Tim Dean, who has written extensively about barebacking in gay communities, considers pornography as central to the subculture. He has described Morris as a documentary porn filmmaker” and “visual ethnographer”, arguing that pornography serves as witness to those sexual practises, that it makes it visible.<sup>7</sup> While both Mizer and Morris deal in the business of fantasy, both do possess a utopian function. In his essay *Entertainment and Utopia*, film scholar Richard Dyer argues that the role of entertainment is to present “what utopia would feel like” and to offer solutions to inadequacies and shortcomings experienced in everyday life.<sup>8</sup> In an essay titled *Risk and Utopia: A Dialogue on Pornography* in conversation with Morris, feminist scholar Susanna Paasonen writes that “the utopian promise of porn is one of carnal intensity, sexual plenitude, and pleasure”.<sup>9</sup> For Paasonen, bareback pornography involves a sexual and communal utopia that is outside of what Lee Edelman calls “reproductive futurism”.

Edelman’s *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, attributes the structure of family, namely the position of the child, as the structure that defines all politics. In reproductive futurism, the future is a heterosexual imperative that must be preserved and defended as a space in which the imagined child arrives in order to provide meaning to the heterosexual logic of the present. Edelman argues that this logic is bound to all politics:

For politics, however radical the means by which specific constituencies attempt to produce a more desirable social order, remains, at its core, conservative insofar as it works to affirm a structure, to authenticate social order, which it then intends to transmit to the future in the form of its inner Child. That Child remains the perpetual horizon of every acknowledged politics, the fantasmatic beneficiary of every political intervention.<sup>10</sup>

For Edelman, resistance to such a stance is the role of queerness itself, to resist the viability of all social structures and refuse altogether any notion of futurity. If Paasonen sees bareback pornography as a deliberate mode of existing outside reproductive futurity, the easy argument to make would be to view the fetishisation of HIV as the ultimate rejection of futurity in any form. But if pornography (and the practises they portray) have a utopian function, what does that utopia look like?



### *Intimacy and Assimilation*

Samuel R. Delany's *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* is written in two halves; one chronicles his own experiences of New York City's red light district, while the other offers meditations on social aspects of gay sexual culture. Through the use of the idea of "contact relations", Delany argues that gay sexual practises like cruising, whether it be at bathhouses, porn theatres or sex clubs, provided rich and satisfying opportunities for interclass contact. He writes that "life is at its most rewarding, productive, and pleasant when the greatest number of people understand, appreciate, and seek out interclass contact and communication conducted in a mode of good will". *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* also documented the loss of such relations with the rezoning of sex industries under the guise of public safety:

As ... society dismantles the various institutions that promote interclass communications, attempts to critique the way such institutions functioned in the past to promote their happier sides are often seen as, at best, nostalgia for an outmoded past and, at worst, a pernicious glorification of everything dangerous: unsafe sex, neighbourhoods filled with undesirables (read "unsafe characters"), promiscuity, an attack on the family and stable social structure, and dangerous, non-committed, "unsafe" relationships – that is psychologically "dangerous" relations, though danger is rarely specified in any way other than to suggest its failure to conform to the ideal bourgeois marriage.<sup>11</sup>

This particular quote speaks to Edelman's resistance of existing social structures, but also finds in the idea of contact relations the ability for something more hopeful.

At the centre of Edelman's call to embrace queer negativity is also an embrace of the death drive: "the death drive names what the queer, in the order of the social, is called forth to figure: the negativity opposed to every form of social viability".<sup>12</sup> However, when behaviour is ambiguously destructive, oriented towards an embrace of annihilation, Leo Bersani argues that the death drive fails to provide a satisfactory explanation. Speaking specifically of barebacking practises in the gay community, Bersani argues that beyond the death drive, we face the issue that violent impulses are partly constitutive of every individual's psychic structure resulting in a divestiture of the ego. In *Intimacies*, Bersani and Adam Phillips offer a new framework for reimagining intimacy and sociality outside of heterosexual reproduction and futurity. Coining the term "impersonal narcissism", they describe promiscuous sex practises as having the ability to shatter the ego, to lose the modern sense of self and allows one to see the self in the other, not in opposition to it: "a universal relatedness grounded in the absence of relations, in the felicitous erasure of people as persons".<sup>13</sup>

Making the distinction between those who may partake in unsafe sex hoping it will have turned out to be safe and those who partake in order to be infected, Bersani argues contemporary barebacking culture offers an even more radical relational inventiveness. Often taking the form of a gangbang, where one "bottom" will be penetrated by any number "tops", Bersani argues this impersonal intimacy acts as "experientially confirming a specifically Freudian and Lacanian ontology of sexual desire as indifferent to personal



Fig. 8. Bjarne Melgaard, *Baton Sinister* (installation view), 2011

identity, antagonistic to ego requirements and regulations”. He frames these gangbangs as “laboratories in which the social viability of impulses and fantasies condemned by ego-censorship as nonviable were being tested – for their viability”. New York based Norwegian artist Bjarne Melgaard often deals with overt and aggressive gay sexuality, creating installations incorporating painting, fashion, text, and sculpture. In a conversation titled *Illegitimate Gays: The Loss of Activism* between Bersani and Melgaard, Bersani renews his call for a radical restructuring of intimacy, and therefore society itself. The conversation, in the form a film exhibited as part of Melgaard’s 2011 exhibition at the Venice Biennale, *Baton Sinister*, touches on the relevancy of continued theorisation of the death drive, utopian optimism, and the state of contemporary gay activism. The exhibition, in which Melgaard worked with local university students, reimagined its site, the Palazzo Contarini Corfu, as a headquarters of a “gay terrorist separatist group dedicated to overthrowing all sedimented and assimilationist tendencies within gay rights discourse”.<sup>14</sup>

The exhibition also consisted of posters reading “Penetration is hetero-sexist normative behaviour” and “Don’t get fucked up the ass. Period.” Melgaard’s practise employs homosexuality as a political position in direct antagonistic opposition to mainstream values. Since the AIDS crisis, mainstream gay politics in western countries have employed a largely “we’re just like you” mentality. It has argued that being gay is just another arbitrary and non-threatening category in order to allow gays and lesbians<sup>15</sup> to participate in institutions of the state, such as marriage or the army. This has been achieved largely through an assimilationist agenda.

Identity politics works in general to make the world safer for minority groups by shifting the gaze away from the particularity of minority subcultures, especially features that are disruptive and indiscreet.<sup>16</sup> While this has worked successfully in the fight against

homophobia and discrimination for some, my goal, like Melgaard, is to foreground some of those exact aspects of gay culture that are disruptive and indiscreet in order to resist heteronormative narratives.

## Erotic positions for two consenting males

*Erotic Positions for Two Consenting Males* represents the final presentation of work for my thesis project. It consists of six paintings in total, all large in scale, and all drawing from either Mizer's *Physique Pictorial* or his film work. While the previous chapters have discussed the historical and social contexts of Mizer's work, here I will attempt to address my own painterly relationship with content and style. All arguments here present a proposition to situation my work as a "gay art" practise. I acknowledge that one cannot pursue a painting practise without encountering the recurring discussion of the medium's demise. While there are indicators of painting's persistent popularity, such as art market prices, it is my position that painting remains a vital and critical practise in contemporary art that is able to speak to a range of concerns. Like Trecartin, who prefers to put forth the possibility of "personality articulation" before discussions of gender, I wish to discuss what personalities painting might contain in this present moment.

### *From the Source*

Over the course the two year MFA program, my approach to Mizer as content shifted significantly. At the onset, I approached Mizer's work as something to be mined for its formal qualities, those statuesque and muscular men, as a stand in for a kind of generic homoerotic material. It proved a rich source for that approach; the bodybuilding poses and exposed flesh is not dissimilar to what could be seen in a life drawing class and Mizer's oeuvre is vast. My



Fig. 9 *Untitled*, 2015, oil on canvas



Fig. 10 *Untitled*, 2015, oil on canvas

approach to these figures resulted in ambiguous representations, still figurative yet divorced from their source and, in many ways, divorced from its erotic charge.

As mentioned earlier, paintings in the exhibition *Parallel Play* were at times read as depictions of violence. Other paintings from year one of the MFA included similar attempts at depicting moments from Mizer's film works. Two examples included here (Fig. 9, 10) involved depictions of groups of men wrestling, with the films they were based on were a loose narrative centred around a prison fight. These works represent the beginnings of a distinct colour palette that continued throughout my work since, namely the pinks and acrid green, a result of yellow applied over blue underpainting. Again, the figuration in these works were ambiguous. Conversations moved towards issues around abstraction and the erotic nature of the source material became lost.

In year two of the MFA, much of my work has been to foreground or "quote" more explicitly the source material in order to retain, or recreate somehow, the source's erotic charge. Part of this attempt involved stripping back painterly details. As previously quoted in chapter one, "[d]rawing's second-class status increases its eroticism. The more "pathetic" an erotic practise, the more I esteem it. The more "pathetic" an artistic medium, the closer it resembles my ideal sexual underground."<sup>1</sup> It was with this in mind that I attempted a kind of "pathetic" painting, simplifying painterly efforts to basic colours, brush strokes, and working quickly in single layers of paint. Additionally, this introduced the use of text in my paintings, further attempts at tying the work to its sources (Fig. 11, 12).

In foregrounding the source material, I hope for my work to embody the idea of "network painting". Art historian David Joselit has called for a painting that is "beside itself", painting that rejects a self-contained, self-referential mode of existing to one that embraces broader social, technological and economic networks in order to establish context.<sup>2</sup> In this way, I hope to be able to also bring to the foreground gay histories, sexualities and relationalities and establish my own painting in a network of queer concerns.

*Thinking Through Painting: Reflexivity and Agency beyond the Canvas* was the title of an event held by abc (art berlin contemporary) on the theme “about painting”, resulting in a publication of the discussions and panels held. In it, Peter Geimer discusses the relationship between existing visual media and its use as source material in painting. He discussed the work of Wilhelm Sasnal, Gerhard Richter and Luc Tuymans, ultimately questioning their stance in regards to the role and status of painter when it comes to dealing with photography. Speaking specifically to the work of Tuymans, Geimer identifies two main types of comment when critics or curators discuss his work: (1) That Tuymans began working at a time when painting was considered dead and through his perseverance with painting, he has found a means of enabling painting to survive. (2) That through Tuymans’ research and intellectual exploration, he establishes themes within his paintings as “historical facts”. Thus, his paintings have a “meaning that goes beyond the visible and that cannot be deciphered through mere observation”.<sup>3</sup> That meaning must be found outside of the painting.

In the case of Tuymans, ambiguity of depiction acts as impenetrability, encouraging the idea that meaning exists beyond the painting. In *Der Architekt* (Fig. 13), Tuymans has used amateur 8mm film footage showing Hitler’s architect Albert Speer while on winter holiday. Tuymans’ particular film still depicted in the painting shows Speer having fallen to the ground, sitting in the snow. The painting is largely monochromatic, a lone figure with skis, poles, and an indefinable white face is surrounded by empty space. The curator of the exhibition *Der Architekt* featured in also reiterates Tuymans’ meaning-beyond-the-canvas, writing that the film still:

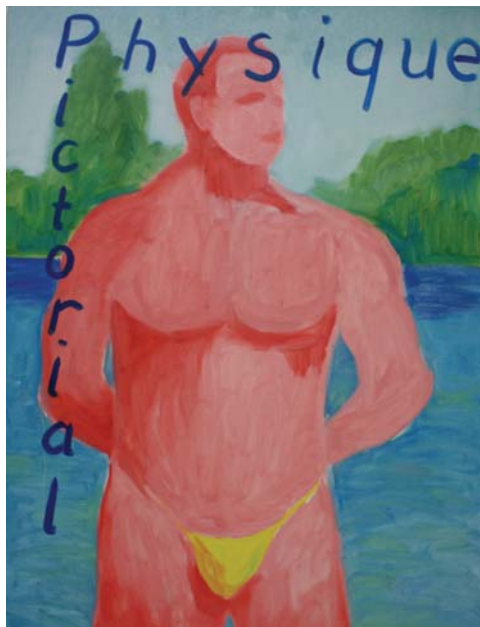


Fig. 11. *Physique Pictorial*, 2016, oil on canvas



Fig. 12. *Fritz*, 2016, oil on canvas



...as a metaphor for [Speer's] life could not have been anticipated by anyone at the moment of the incident. It was the history for which he stands that first enabled this banal event to be translated into a metaphor – one no longer decipherable via the mode of language. It was the picture – arrested between the film image and the painted image as the image of history – that first presented the artist with this possibility of interpretation.<sup>4</sup>

This statement takes the position of *Der Architekt*'s source material being banal or irrelevant in order to elevate the work of Tuymans. The mythologisation of this painting lies in its claim to be able to transcend its underlying photographs and film. However, Geimer believes that “film and photography must be continuously called up and kept alive as energetic models, as it is only through these that painting can obtain its sensory effects”. He argues that the source material provides a “reservoir of the real” from which the explosiveness of Tuymans' work is borrowed. Also implicit in this is a hierarchy between high and low art, Geimer writing that it is “[o]nly when the film image of the fallen Speer has been made to appear as “disappointingly banal” is it possible for the hand of the painter to elevate it to the status of art”.<sup>5</sup>



Fig. 13. Luc Tuymans, *Die Architekt*, 1997

Thus my attempts to make my source material more explicit, more present, within the paintings themselves. This change in approach is largely evidenced through a change in the handling of paint. Instead of loosely rendered and flowing figures, bodies have become sharper, more descriptive. These bodies are outlined, almost cartoon-like, to assert their presence. Some paintings are direct copies of *Physique Pictorial* covers, text and all. Geimer does acknowledge in his critique of Tuymans the difficult differentiation between positive openness and obfuscation, stating that his point is not to demand a clear stance or message from the artist but to call into question the subjugation of source material by Tuymans and his commentators. He writes that the “stronger the removal of meaning is visually evident, the more emphatic the search for profundity becomes”. By attempting to resist producing ambiguity in my own work, I am hoping to also resist what I see as a masculinist search for the profound.

### ***On Colour and Form***

The use of vibrant and intense colour has been consistent in my work. When it comes to painting, Judith Halberstam argues that colour sparks irrational reactions parallel to homophobic responses. She writes that “[i]f straightness (masculinity in particular) is associated with minimalism, then excess (of form, color, or content) becomes the signification of the feminine, the queer, and the monstrous”.<sup>6</sup> Although in this case, I believe Halberstam to be aligning straight and masculine art with modernism, she also points to intense colour’s proximity to the decorative and feminine. It has been with this in mind that I have approached colour.

The paintings in *Erotic Positions for Two Consenting Males* prominently features yellows, pinks, reds, blues, and greens. These colours I see as homage, as inference, and occasionally borrowing from other queer artists<sup>7</sup> – Trecartin and Melgaard as previously discussed, but also of David Hockney, Andy Warhol, Keith Haring, Hernan Bas, Elizabeth Peyton and Celia Hempton.

Tracey Emin’s 1996 performance and resulting painting installation *Exorcism of the Last Painting I Ever Made* was an attempt for Emin to reconcile herself with painting. Like Joseph Beuys’ 1974 performance *I Love America, and America Loves Me*, where he lived in a gallery with a wild coyote for seven days as a symbolic act of reconciliation with nature, Emin locked herself in a gallery with nothing but canvas and art materials. She began with imitating artists she admired, such as Egon Schiele, Edvard Munch, Yves Klein, ultimately resulting in her now signature painting style.<sup>8</sup>

For me, this speaks back to the idea of “network painting” and how colour might play a role in situating a work within certain networks. When viewing painting, it is inevitable associations are made with other painters, whether that be through subject matter or formal qualities. My employment of colour has been an attempt to regulate those associations, to invite into the room other artists with whom I share either aesthetic or political concerns. If a gay aesthetic works to develop “a conscious identity, a common culture, a particular outlook on the world, [and] a shared sense of self”,<sup>9</sup> then I have chosen to approach colour as something that can be mapped and traced within a network of fellow queer artists.

This thesis project has also marked a significant scaling up of work in my practise.



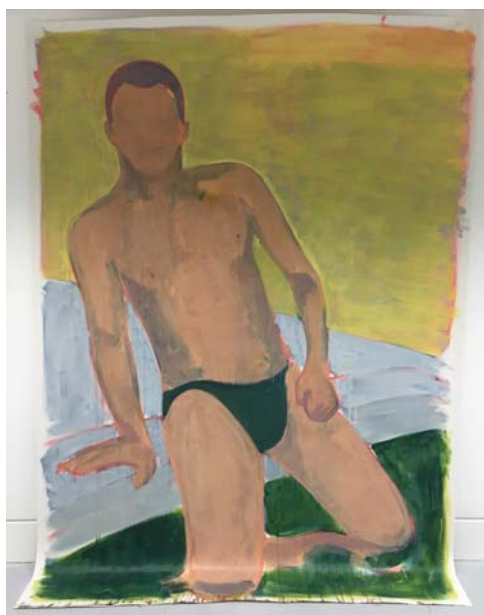


Fig. 14. *Monte*, 2016, oil on canvas



Fig. 15. *Untitled*, 2016, oil on canvas

Beginning the MFA with modestly sized canvases, the works in *Erotic Positions for Two Consenting Males* range from 1800mm to 2800mm at their longest sides. While large works of art have a tendency to court monumentality, I hope the unstretched canvases in this presentation work to resist pomposity, to maintain a sense of the provisional, the flippant and the playful. *Monte* (Fig. 14) and *Untitled* (Fig. 15) are the two largest works included in the exhibition and both are direct references to *Physique Pictorial* cover images. The way in which they are hung means they peel away from the wall like a page, suggesting a lightness that is juxtaposed by their weight.

The dramatic change in scale required a change in approach, marking a significant shift in my treatment of paint. Compared to my larger works, smaller canvases felt somehow manageable. Thick, smudgy brush strokes moved to thin washes over vast surfaces. On larger scale works control is more challenging, resulting in a tension between how much control is exercised and how much is let go, letting gravity dictate paint's behaviour.

There is a decision making process based on composition in regards to allowing the paint drip and when to curtail it. In many of my paintings, the drip is a prominent feature and I consider it an homage to Keith Boadwee. An American artist, Boadwee's practise utilises painting, performance and photography to explore themes around the body and queer identities. In his painting, for instance, Boadwee has continued to use a method involving the use of an enema to then expel onto canvas paint via his rectum. The exhibition "PLAID" (Fig. 13) is the result of a collaboration of Boadwee with previously mentioned artist AA Bronson. Using this paint enema technique, the pair has created a series of plaid paintings. The works without this context operate as a formal exercise in painting, a reference to abstract expressionism, but the process of paint application grounds the work firmly in the queer body:



Fig. 16. Keith Boadwee and AA Bronson, *PLAID* (installation view), 2016

The material of the body is spewed onto the canvas. Sanguine red, bilious green, shit brown: a dripping stream of interleaved humors crisscrossing the canvas. Two assholes creating a dense weave that is from the body, but transcends the body; a fireworks display of anal abandon. Two assholes are better than one.<sup>10</sup>

If Andy Warhol abandoned the drip in retaliation to the masculinity of abstract expressionism, Boadwee employs the drip to subvert and pervert it.

### *How to do Gay Painting*

Turner Prize-winning artist Grayson Perry created the 2012 documentary series *All In The Best Possible Taste with Grayson Perry* for the UK's Channel 4. In it, Perry analyses the idea of taste and its relation to various British social classes, namely that of working class, middle class and upper class tastes, and creates artworks in response. His explorations touch on a range of taste decisions made by each group, including home décor, cuisine, entertainment, cars, and, with Perry a self-identified transvestite, the fashion choices of men and women. Through interviews, the series offers insights into how taste, style and cultural objects may be revealing about a collective identity.

I bring up this series for a particular moment that struck me in the second episode on middle class taste. Sue and Norman, a couple from the affluent Kent town of Tunbridge Wells, offer a tour of their home. As the camera follows them through their living spaces, they speak to the stories behind various objects and artworks; gifts from friends, an early Gauguin print from Sue's father, their William Morris wallpaper. Sue then draws attention to two ornaments on a mantelpiece. She notes that they are from European retail chain store T.K. Maxx for

£7.99, exclaiming that “They’re just the thing!” and “I love T.K. Maxx. I’m mad about it!” Perry offers Sue and Norman’s tastes as a display of cultural capital<sup>11</sup>, and Sue’s chain store revelation as a knowing nudge to those who can interpret the message: I know the rules of good taste, I know how to break them, and I want you to know I have the confidence to do so.

In this moment I experienced the confronting cringe of identifying with Sue. My interior design decisions are likely similar to many 20-something artists living in New Zealand’s capital. I own second hand mid-century furniture, a Rita Angus reproduction, matching Moroccan silk throws and rugs, several pour-over coffee contraptions, and I have found myself on several occasions pointing out to guests the lamp and side table I bought from Kmart. And I do this with pride in thinking that “you’d never tell”. I say this was confronting because, coming from a working class family, I had never previously so explicitly considered my own status of class. And for this realisation to come by way of my aesthetic decisions, the diagnosis coming well after the symptoms had appeared, was all the more striking. It’s in this feeling I want to consider how aesthetics might be coded to reveal information regarding sexual identities.

David Halperin’s *How to be Gay*, which I have referenced throughout this exegesis, is an analysis of male homosexuality as a cultural practise, unpacking many stereotypes associated with gay men’s taste and sensibilities. In the chapter *The Meaning of Style*, Halperin discusses this very idea of artifacts and their imbued meanings and points to the difficulty of explaining our visceral responses to such codifications, despite the ease at which we might read them. He writes:

We are not dealing with the mysteries of the universe or the wonders of nature, after all; we are dealing with human cultural productions and their significations, with our own social world. Each object or activity has been manufactured and designed with careful intent and laborious deliberation by people like ourselves. It has been specifically intended to produce the specific effect on us that it does in fact produce. So why can’t we specify what that effect is? Why can’t we describe coherently and systematically what the object means to us, along with the precise stakes in our response to it? Why can’t we identify the values that are at issue in our likes and dislikes, which seem to play such a crucial role in defining who we are?<sup>12</sup>

To answer this question, Halperin claims in some cases a contextual study of styles and their histories may be sufficient in unpacking their meanings, through their network of associations. However, in relation to style, taste, class, gender, sexuality and identity, the answers remain elusive due to a lack in critical tools and vocabulary needed to describe those feelings.

The painting *Ed and Cliff* (Fig. 16), for instance, depicts two males reclining and holding hands. For me, this image is illustrative of the approach early *Physique Pictorial* employed to cloak from censors and the moral public its homoerotic nature. The content is not overtly sexual, the two men’s relationship able to be viewed through the lense of “male friendship”. What then enables a viewer to interpret this as “gay content”? I have attempted to anchor this image firmly in the homosexual (as opposed to the homosocial) through use of

a “queer colour palette”, as discussed previously, but also in the way it relates to the other paintings in *Erotic Positions for Two Consenting Males*. Paintings like *All About Balls* or the exposed ass of *Untitled* (Fig. 14) work to bring *Ed and Cliff* firmly out of the closet.

Collaborative duo Rosie Hastings and Hannah Quinlan Anderson in their project titled *@Gaybar* explore queer iconography or gay tropes in order to examine its significance and reverberations in visual culture. Wary of straightening out or archiving a history of gayness, they argue that academic language does disservice to queerness. According to Hastings and Anderson, words like “camp” and “kitsch” are terms appropriated by straight people to make sense of a messy queer experience and call for the invention of a new critical language.<sup>13</sup> Here, however, I will touch upon the ideas of kitsch and camp as something possibly helpful in thinking through ideas of recognition and self-identification.

In *Epistemology of the Closet*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick offers a differentiation in camp and kitsch via the reaction of the individual to spaces and practises of cultural production. For Sedgwick, kitsch can be attributed while the recognition of camp asks:

What if the right audience for this were exactly *me*? What if, for instance, the resistant, oblique, tangential investments of attention and attraction that I am able to bring to this spectacle are actually uncannily responsive to the resistant, oblique, tangential investments of the person, or of some of the people, who created it? And what if, furthermore, others whom I don't know or recognize can see it from the same “perverse” angle?<sup>14</sup>

In other words, the recognition that a creator of something might also be gay, and that other gay people see the same thing.

If we were to think about painting specifically in these terms, then camp-recognition would lead to the conclusion that whoever the painter was is also gay. Again referring back to *Thinking Through Painting*, Isabelle Graw writes on painting and indexicality. She proposes that painting not be conceived as a medium, but as a “production of signs that is experienced as highly personalized”.<sup>15</sup> For Graw, if painting can be read as traces of the painter, then painting carries within it the impression of the author's presence as an effect. Thus, the indexicality of painting means that painting is able to be intriguing in a way that only an intriguing person could be, Graw making the proposition for painting to operate as a “highly valuable quasi-person”.

Graw argues that this is particular to painting as a medium, that historical arguments have made the case for painting's subject-like power over other modes of art making. From this, I would conclude that painting then has a particular ability to convey, encapsulate, or practise camp. While Hastings and Quinlan criticise the use of the word itself, Halperin does attempt to expand on what camp could mean. In his examination of Sontag's *Notes on Camp*, Halperin works to further her arguments for camp as a style. He argues that camp on its own is not just an aesthetics, but a style of relating to things or a genre of practise.

It is in this sense that I have considered my painting practise within this thesis project: a style of relating to things. Specifically, a gay style of relating to things. My practise positions itself within a network of gay cultural production and their spokespeople. I consider myself and my work alongside a lineage of gay artists and thinkers: Mizer, Bronson, Melgaard, and Trecartin; Hockney, Haring, and Warhol; Muñoz, Edelman, Halperin, Koestenbaum and

Bersani; and I have borrowed from non-male identifying queers in hopefully respectful ways. While I agree with Hastings and Quinlan in their call for a new vocabulary, I have attempted to formulate a visual language that describes one particular “messy queer experience”.



Fig. 17. *Ed and Cliff*, 2016, oil on canvas



## Conclusion

*Erotic Positions for Two Consenting Males* refers to the title of one of Mizer's films, but can also refer to the positions of audience to painting and to artist. This exegesis proposes my painting practise as a gay artistic sensibility based on a style of relating to things. It relates to a queer approach to history, to queer utopian memory as a means of communicating visions of utopia across intergenerational divides. Like AA Bronson's invocations, I hope to summon "queer spirits" across time and space through painting – the spirit of Bob Mizer and the sexual energy of his work. It also relates to gay sexuality, its depictions in visual culture and its potentiality to reimagine and restructure notions of intimacy. I have examined historical gay sex practises through the writings of Leo Bersani, Lee Edelman and Samuel R. Delany, and through Bjarne Melgaard I have considered how this culture may work to resist gay assimilationist agendas.

In this exegesis, I have considered how my practise situates itself in this "gay network" through the use of colour, form and content. I have discussed my attempts to flatten out the hierarchy between photography and painting in my work by making explicit reference to my source material in the paintings themselves. By resisting the production of ambiguity in my work, I have hoped to also resist self-containment in order to embrace broader social and political networks in order to establish context.

*Erotic Positions for Two Consenting Males* explores the intellectual possibilities of "thinking through painting" while also celebrating its visceral capabilities. It aims to raise various discussions pertinent to contemporary queer theory while reconsidering camp-identification as a style of relating. Through painting, it aims to explore our relationships towards gay cultural production and its reverberance for contemporary queer existence.





# Notes

## *Introduction*

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## *Chapter 1*

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12. Bronson, AA. Hobbs, P. 2011. *Queer Spirits*. New York, NY: Creative Time, 94
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14. Wright, D. 2004. *Ghost Dance*. Auckland: Penguin, 20.

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## Chapter 2

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7. Ibid.
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12. Edelman, *No Future*, 9.
13. Bersani, L. Phillips, A. 2008 *Intimacies*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p39.
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### Chapter 3

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5. Geimer, P. 2012, quoted in Binbaum, D. Graw, I. Hirsch, N. (Eds.) *Thinking Through Painting*, 31.
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