

Growth in Confinement
Finding oneself in comfort and familiarity

A message from myself
to myself

A senior thesis exploration by Jess Levin
BFA Sculpture
Purchase College, SUNY



Baby Blanket, 2021
6 in x 5 in x 3 in
Ceramics



My art encompasses the feeling of playfulness and wonder while also serving an underlying feeling of uncertainty. I capture the scary yet wonderful nature of self-discovery and exploration of gender and sexuality in adolescence through large-scale and colorful sculptures. I believe it is so important for children to have accessible representation for all identities. Queerness deserves to be spread and recognized as part of being human.

From Play-Doh to ceramics, any type of clay as a material is wonderful for me. I have always felt connected to it, and have enjoyed how every part of the process is created by my hands. There is no inch of a final product that I haven't touched or molded myself. I have recently begun to explore how incorporating fibers juxtaposes the cold and hard connotation fired clay carries. Adding small final details with string or fabrics adds a layer of warmth and comfort, much like the comfort of feeling certain about who you are. Ceramics are also incredibly fragile. Understanding that you must treat a piece with care and awareness is vital. This parallels the concept of identity. Using clay as a means to create these pieces demonstrates how easily moldable and breakable the developing mind of a child is. It is so important to be able to be a child on your own terms, and I don't believe this opportunity goes away once you reach a certain age.



Imagination is an essential part of any child. Playing pretend as a child is the gateway into self exploration. The mind of a child is extremely vast, and absorbent like a sponge. When I was a child, all of my imaginary friends were boys. When I would play pretend with my classmates, I always took on the role of a boy as well. I wasn't sure why at the time, but it felt right not conforming to the expectation that I would play as a girl. My piece Marvin encapsulates the imagination of a child by giving life to comfort objects such as stuffed animals and matching pyjama sets. All of my art pieces feel like my children. They are all self portraits of me, and thus extensions of myself. They are my body. Marvin is no exception to this. I wish I could have lived the childhood Marvin depicts. I am still allowed to enjoy dinosaur pyjamas and stuffed animals, despite entering adulthood, but the innocence and ignorance of being a child has left. I consider Marvin a pivotal moment in finding my voice as an artist. Experimenting with textures and shapes by carving into the clay, not worrying about how clean and neat the lines are gives the piece a playful atmosphere similar to the scribbles of a child's drawings.



Marvin, 2022
8 in x 12 in x 12 in
Ceramics and fibers

Being sent home from school during the spring semester of 2020 forced me into a lot of self-reflection. I didn't have constant distractions from friends or schoolwork at the forefront of my mind anymore. Before my queer journey started (or perhaps this could be considered the very start) I remember having a fleeting thought as I lay awake one night in high school. What if I'm trans? And then I pushed that thought into the depths of my mind and tried to forget about it. As it turns out, being stuck home with not much to do makes a lot of these types of thoughts resurface, even years later, in a matter that needs to be dealt with.

The bed is a safe space, and blankets are like armor and a shield that protects us from the outside. I've spent countless nights lying awake in bed wondering why nothing felt right. My self-exploration journey has made all the hatred I've felt towards myself and my body growing up make sense as I realized I'm not who I was raised to be. I am not woman. I have never been a woman. I don't know if I'm a man either. I exist as a human, and I enjoy expressing myself through my masculinity. This doesn't mean I, or anyone around me while I was growing up for that matter, did anything wrong. This is the part I struggle with—nobody did anything wrong! Queerness isn't wrong. Queerness is beautiful, queerness is love. To be queer is to love yourself for exactly who you are. This can be, admittedly, extremely difficult. Loving yourself for something you don't see represented around you is hard. Putting words to your feelings and experiences without seeing it done before can feel impossible. As I step over the

threshold into adulthood, I'm able to meet and see others who share my confusion and frustrations. Unfortunately, because I've only recently started to accept myself for who I truly am, I missed out on many beautiful queer moments of childhood and teenagehood, and I am forced to accept this. On the other hand, I can finally recognize the things that have caused me pain and move forward from them in a healthy matter—which I explore in my art.

Social media platforms make finding and connecting with people that share these thoughts extremely accessible. Seeing so many others talking about their relationships with gender make it a bit less scary. Exploration of the self is a personal adventure that one is not obligated to share with anyone, but the people who do choose to share aid in the fight to normalize queerness. Queerness is more common than the mainstream media leads us to believe. Teenagers and young adults now are finding it easier to express themselves without fear of being judged by those around them.



Conversation 2, 2022
9 in x 4 in x 5 in
Ceramics

A large part in my queerness is exploration of the body. My body has always felt like a vessel I am inhabiting but am not close with. Hours spent staring at myself in a mirror make me feel disconnected from myself as depersonalization sets in. I loath the parts of my body I can't easily change. I escape these thoughts through putting this energy into my practice. The body as a form should be played with, and I explore this by obscuring the traditional masculine and feminine "ideal" body types in my series titled Conversation. These pieces started as a study of gravity in clay, by packing the clay in small sections at a time to build up mass. This strategy is ideal for yielding soft, organic forms. In these pieces, masculine and feminine forms are mashed together to create a new body, one that isn't defined by traditional views of genitalia. The pieces are glazed with muted colors to capture the undertones of the skin, and then finished with a layer of wax to give the illusion of flesh.

I work intuitively. When I start a new project, what I originally think will be the end result could change vastly. My pieces speak to me in a way that guides me to their completion. If something breaks, I use it to my advantage. When clay gets fired it loses its malleability, but this doesn't mean it can't be fluid still. Cracks and breaks that happen during the making process and during the firing process only enhance the history of the art. No human is perfect, and thus no art piece is perfect. This is how I view my piece, Lily. This piece shattered as I lowered her into the kiln, before the initial firing that would have made the clay stronger. The way she broke was beautiful. Her dress form shattered like a flower, the shards of clay surrounding the center like petals. There were sections of the piece that weren't supposed to be seen before that were now unearthed due to the clay breaking in layers. I used this to my advantage, glazing every part of her not to hide her breaks but to amplify them. This, in my opinion, is queer—to see every layer of something for its raw beauty.



Lily, 2022
12 in x 12 in x 15 in
Ceramics



Untitled (Give Me A Name), 2022
 12 in x 24 in x 15 in
 Ceramics

I utilize a cartoonish style of sculpting to add a surface level of “cuteness” to draw the viewer in while holding a deeper, potentially darker meaning within the context of the art itself. My piece Untitled (Give Me a Name) depicts the confusion, fear, and sadness of a young teen protruding out of a single body. This piece encompasses the feeling of wanting to recognize yourself but being overcome with confusion and anxiety, a feeling often hard to put into words. The queer journey is one of all of these emotions until finally reaching a point where one can recognize all the uncertainty was worth it. It is terrifying and beautiful. A constant in my relationship with my identity has always been how I feel about my name. A name can be so personal yet so common at the same time. My name has never felt correct. Hearing it said by others feels foreign. I often wish I could have been given another name. I have explored giving myself different names, and yet again, nothing has ever felt like it fits so I revert back to my birth name, and the cycle of feeling disconnected from myself starts again.

Artists that inspire me include Kathy Ruttenberg, who uses influences from paganism, surrealism, and fauna to tell a visual narrative of femininity and regeneration. I view my work similarly. I think of my exploration of the relationship I have with my femininity and masculinity as a form of rebirth. Many of Ruttenberg's imagery includes humans in relation to animals, and blurring the lines between such things. I have begun to use this abstraction of imagery in my own work, using this metaphor as a means to explore my own identity as a transmasculine individual.



Tree Hugger, Kathy Ruttenberg, 2010



Heat, Kathy Ruttenberg, 2012



Leo, 2022
13 in x 9 in x 28 in
Ceramics

I have started using these folktale imagery to push the cute and playful aspects of my art further, entering a new era of gender abstraction through flora and fauna. The hare is, historically, a symbol of rebirth, and is often alongside women. In paganism, the hare is honored during springtime as a symbol of fertility. In Egyptian myth, the hare is seen as an androgynous creature, representing the moon as it waxes (feminine) and wanes (masculine).

A child playing outside doesn't think about themselves as masculine or feminine. They don't know the complexity of their identity yet, they haven't started exploring it. My piece Leo captures the quiet moment between just existing as a child and starting to think just a bit harder about yourself. These are the moments I wish I had cherished longer when I was a child, where "girl" and "boy" are just empty words with no real meaning. Exploration of the self is a beautiful thing, but being able to sit in that blissful ignorance is wonderful as well. Using the image of the hare or the bunny pushes this childhood innocence narrative in my work.

This is also seen in my piece Thomas, where I use the personification of a deer to tell a similar story. This piece shows similar thoughts from an older perspective. The deer is a sign of intuition and sensitivity. The space around this piece is the thoughts I have laying awake at night, looking at the vast sky through my window. The feeling of wanting to hold yourself, and be kind to yourself. Deer are very gentle creatures, yet always aware of their surroundings. In turn, the stag is seen as a symbol of power and maturity. Giving my deer budding antlers pushes the narrative that he is starting to become confident in his identity. Although he sits in a way where he is protecting himself and keeping himself from getting hurt, he looks upwards to the future. There will always be dark moments in the journey of the self and with these pieces, I want to capture the light ones.



Thomas, 2022
14 in x 12 in x 20 in
Ceramics



Sunburst Blanket, 2021
12 in x 12 in x 4 in
Ceramics

I am learning to love myself through my art. With these recent pieces begins a new chapter in my artistic career, one that I am excited to expand upon. I am going forward in life as myself. My history as an artist and a person is important, and my voice matters. I am queer, I am trans masc. I shouldn't feel the need to keep this crucial part of me hidden. Queerness is beautiful, queerness deserves to be spread.





Boxer Boy, 2021
7 in x 4 in x 4 in
Fabric and ceramics



Slip Cast Flowers, 2021
1 in x 2 in x 1 in
Ceramics



DIY Top Surgery, 2021
14 in x 14 in x 9 in
Fabric and ceramics





Baby Blanket, 2021
6 in x 5 in x 3 in
Ceramics



Slip Cast Flowers, 2021
1 in x 2 in x 1 in
Ceramics



Blue Blanket, 2021
12 in x 15 in x 4 in
Ceramics



Looking At Myself, 2021
9 in x 5 in x 15 in
Fabric and ceramics





Conversation 1, 2022
12 in x 5 in x 7 in
Ceramics





Untitled (Give Me A Name), 2022
12 in x 24 in x 15 in
Ceramics



Marvin, 2022
8 in x 12 in x 12 in
Ceramics and fibers





Slip Cast Flowers, 2020
2 in x 2 in x 3 in
Ceramics



Lily 2, 2022
8 in x 7 in x 20 in
Bronze



Lily, 2022
12 in x 12 in x 15 in
Ceramics





Leo, 2022
13 in x 9 in x 28 in
Ceramics





Growth in Confinement

To be queer is to be fearless

