PASSING STRANGERS

By

Michael Caputo

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Fine Arts in Painting in The School of Fine & Performing Arts

The State University of New York at New Paltz

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Michael Caputo

State University of New York at New Paltz

We, the thesis committee for the above candidate for the Master of Fine Arts degree, hereby recommend acceptance of this thesis.

Robin Arnold, Thesis Advisor
Department of Fine and Performing Arts, SUNY New Paltz

Kathy Goodell, Thesis Committee Member
Department of Fine and Performing Arts, SUNY New Paltz

Cheryl Wheat-Schmidt, Thesis Committee Member
Department of Fine and Performing Arts, SUNY New Paltz

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Fine Arts degree in Studio Art at the State University of New York at New Paltz
From the closet to the dancefloor, one step to the next we’ve followed in the footsteps of those coming before us. Intoxicated by the rugged swagger of his hips, the build of his body, and the scent of his masculinity, we embrace our deepest desires. *Passing Strangers* celebrates the desire for the male body and longing for its touch.

Being a gay man, I’m constantly riddled with criticism for being a homosexual, or a *faggot*, as I have been lovingly called by family and strangers alike. Under society’s sometimes narrow-minded spectrum, I am told that I can be too feminine for my own good at times and should act more *butch*. For the longest time, I remember feeling different from other men in my life. When I was a child I wanted to play with things like *My Little Pony* or with Barbie and Ken dolls. However, due to my family’s pressure to conform to heteronormative stereotypes, I was given Tonka trucks and Ninja Turtles to play with instead. They simply did not fit me. I wanted to wear extremely loud colors such as hot pink and turquoise; it was also the tail end of the eighties, so the choice was to be expected. I wanted to put on performances of Madonna and Cyndi Lauper, but I was always stifled in some way. Growing up in this environment my resources were extremely limited. My exposure to gay sex, relationships and culture came from seedy internet chat rooms, the secret lust I had of the men on television and in film, gay porn magazines and VHS tapes that I could get my hands on. This has drawn me to much of the research in my practice of creating art.
My interests lie in the exploration of the desires and experiences of gay men, our sexuality, and the subversion of the heteronormative male gaze. We live in a society that dictates our bodies, thoughts, and what is deemed “appropriate.” Heteronormativity is a term coined by scholars of queer theory and is frequently used to describe the common perspective that heterosexuality is the normal, preferred, and default sexuality of individuals within a society.¹ Heteronormativity is examined under the realm of queer theory and further expands, including a discussion on the ideas of same-sex desires and attraction as well as examinations of masculinity and femininity through our current gender systems.

Both masculinity and femininity are clearly defined in the current heteronormative society. This occurs even before birth, with parents holding gender reveal parties to celebrate the sex of their soon-to-be newborn. Queer people may choose to conform to these ideas or follow through a transgressive approach through expressions of gender fluidity, cross-dressing, drag performance, etc.

*Passing Strangers* was developed out of the interests in the exploration of my own identity. My process is reactionary: I work intuitively and focus on intimate moments of queer life. This attention has been widely verboten as an artistic subject in favor of a more heteronormative representation of intimacy in art. As a queer man, I’m compelled to create work that challenges these

antiquated ideas of gender and sexuality. There is still a major disconnect between heterosexuality and homosexuality. There will always be slight disconnects as that is the nature of life. In my work, I aim to bring the aesthetic beauty and importance of classical paintings to voice queer bodies, sexuality and intimacy, and question how I can represent them in this world. My own relationships and experiences as a queer man inform my work. These can be conversations from a cruising app, a page from a magazine or even a moment from a porn film. Each one is a piece from my life and experience.

The work that I make is seated within the realm of figurative realism and representation. Oil painting and photography are the dominant vehicles in which I create images. Painting is a way for me to explore the nuances of my own sexuality as well as new mediums to represent the male form. Many queer artists also work figuratively and utilize identity in their works, such as TM Davy. Similarly, Davy is also addressing queerness in a way that makes it feel more “everyday.” Painting is a seductive dance; it’s both sensual and vulnerable. Working wet and loosely opens the surface to be built
up. Working thin and monochromatically allows me to easily wipe away and create values, carving away at the image like a sculptor modeling clay. Working in this fashion allows me to apply paint within layers, giving each piece a visceral, flesh-like quality. Utilizing paint lends itself to experimenting with hard and soft edges. It begs to be tweaked and played with. This adds to the sensuality of painting and the image.

My use of photography has been an experiment in becoming more vulnerable. It allows me to document moments in my life that I previously would not have thought about sharing. The use of a Polaroid camera has allowed me to create images instantaneously. I'm intrigued by having the physical object as a record and the ability to hold and share these intimately. The photos that I'm capturing are a dialogue of the intimacy I share with my
partner, revealing the tender relationship we have built together. They act as both our memories and an extension of the desires I hold as a gay man.

Tom Bianchi is one of the major influences on my current work. From the period of 1975-1983, Bianchi began to document his life on Fire Island through the use of a Polaroid SX-70. This is the same camera system that I utilize for my photographs. Bianchi’s images are a glimpse into the celebration and freedom of queer sacred spaces off the shores of Long Island. They are memories of a time right before one of the greatest tragedies in global history, the AIDS crisis. I appreciate that these images serve as a history and celebration of lives lost. They remind viewers of a carefree time and celebration of one’s sexuality and identity. I feel that anyone can enjoy and relate to the joy and fun being depicted in these photos. Each photo is an honest and vulnerable reflection of gay life in the 1970’s and 80’s. In his book *Fire Island Pines: Polaroids 1975-1983*, Bianchi states that his work is, “about the days before the epidemic took our innocence and our lives. My pictures are about the wit, the beauty,
the spirit and creative imagination of social pioneers largely lost.”² For a while, it was difficult for Bianchi to look at the photographs because of the reminder of death and destruction caused by the epidemic. Years later, he reopened the boxes of photographs where he “found friends and lovers, playing and smiling, alive again.”³ Much like Bianchi, despite anything that may happen, I hope to cherish the photographs and memories that I have created with my partner for years to come.

Painting and photography have been the predominant source of heterosexual displays of intimacy in art. Engaging through both of these mediums allows me to break down the heteronormative barriers that have denied a more prominent queer existence, a chance to embody the universal. In my thesis works, I explore how images some may consider pornographic might be made to seem “everyday.” My intent is not to sensationalize queerness, but to give it a humanistic voice,

³ Ibid.
making it casual. The works depict intimate moments between men: a kiss, holding of hands, an erotic touch, or a moment of ecstasy.

I source my images from photo archives, both public and personal. I also turn to gay porn sites and magazines for images. When sourcing images from gay porn, I typically spend hours meticulously sifting through various studio video archives. I'm interested in tender moments between actors. When I find the right moment, I pause the video and begin crafting my images. I'm able to work directly from my video screen or manipulate the images digitally in Adobe Photoshop. Once I have the image ready, I begin applying paint to the canvas loosely and then wiping away as I build each layer, engaging in the dance. Thus the image begins its seduction - of the artist and the viewer.

Throughout the process of painting and photography, artists give way to baring their souls for all to see by crafting stories, recounting history, being vulnerable and envisioning a perfect world. Being both gay and an artist, not only am I giving voice and image to queerness, I am paying homage to all of
that which came before: the passing strangers, all of whom paved the way for me and many others to be rightfully queer.
Bibliography


Davy, TM. *Two Lovers*. 2019

Exhibition Statement

Reflecting on the origins of my indoctrination to gay sex, relationships and culture, I revisited my past. Growing up in a deeply heterosexual environment, my resources were slim to none. My exposure came from seedy internet chat rooms, the secret lust of the men on television and film, found magazines, and VHS porn tapes.

*Passing Strangers*, after the iconic 1974 porn film by Arthur J. Bressan Jr., celebrates the desire for the male body and longing for its touch. This body of work is a collection of monochromatic figurative oil paintings, personal Polaroid photographs, and found objects.
Images

Mike Caputo. *The Jock*. 2021
Oil on Panel. 24 x 18 in.
Mike Caputo. *Pool Float Embrace*. 2021
Oil on Canvas. 43 7/8 x 39 7/8 in.
Mike Caputo. *Nighttime Lover*. 2021
Oil on Canvas. 30 x 29 in.
Mike Caputo. *Polaroids (Passing Strangers).* 2020-21
Polaroid. 4.23 x 3.48 in.

Mike Caputo. *Polaroids (Passing Strangers).* 2020
Polaroid. 4.06 x 3.98 in.
Mike Caputo. *Polaroids (Passing Strangers).* 2020-21
Polaroid. 4.23 x 3.48 in.

Mike Caputo. *Polaroids (Passing Strangers).* 2021
Polaroid. 4.23 x 3.48 in.
Mike Caputo. *Polaroids (Passing Strangers)*. 2021
Polaroid. 4.23 x 3.48 in.

Mike Caputo. *Polaroids (Passing Strangers)*. 2020-21
Polaroid. 4.23 x 3.48 in.
Mike Caputo. *First Time Kiss*. 2021
Oil on Canvas. 18 ⅞ x 16 ¾ in.
Mike Caputo. *Plant Daddy*. 2021
Oil on Canvas. 32 x 28 in.
Mike Caputo, *Passion Play*. 2020
Oil on Panel. 12 x 12 in.
Mike Caputo. *Artifacts of Gay Past #1 (Installation View 1).* 2021
Mike Caputo. *Artifacts of Gay Past #1 (Installation View 2)*. 2021
Mike Caputo. Artifacts of Gay Past #1 (Installation View 3). 2021
Mike Caputo. *Artifacts of Gay Past #1 (Installation View 4)*. 2021
Mike Caputo. Artifacts of Gay Past #2 (Installation View 1). 2021
Mike Caputo. Artifacts of Gay Past #2 (Installation View 2). 2021
Mike Caputo. *Artifacts of Gay Past #2 (Installation View 3)*. 2021
Mike Caputo. Artifacts of Gay Past #2 (Installation View 4). 2021
Exhibition Card

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MFA Thesis Exhibition
June 5 - June 13, 2021
Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art
SUNY New Paltz
newpaltz.edu/museum

@mikecaputoartist
mike-caputo.com

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