Augury

Regarding Queerness and the Fantastic

By

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The tarot deck, like other forms of divination, is used by some in an attempt to seek insight into their situation. My paintings similarly involve searching for a deeper understanding of myself, so I began each painting in this body of work in response to a card found within the major arcana suit of a tarot deck. Like painting, divination practices are based on allowing the respective process to reveal something meaningful or resolute to the reader/painter/audience. Interpretations are subjective and depend on the practitioner to make sense of the symbols and imagery revealed to them. I followed the known associations of the tarot card loosely, instead allowing my own interpretation of the archetype to guide what imagery I used. This resulted in a body of works unrecognizable as tarot, but more functional as an anthology of personal icons and mythos that allude to my own feelings and experiences. The produced narratives are greatly influenced by my queer identity. I find it easy to express and empower aspects of my identity through occult themes, as many occult practices such as divination help to build a sense of control in the practitioner.

I use fantastical imagery because I feel a connection to its history of telling queer-coded stories. Many famous stories, classic and contemporary, use fantasy imagery in narratives centered on themes such as transformation, chosen family, and finding one's true self which resonate with the discovery and acceptance of one's queerness.

While the pop cultural staple *The Matrix,* is technically a science fiction film, it uses fantastical imagery to construct a cyberpunk universe which at its apex is a completely sound allegory for the development of trangender identity. It is important to note that while *The Matrix* was written and directed by Lana and Lilly Wachowski, both transgender women, the film priemeried over a decade before either of the sisters publicly came out, and the fact of their transgender identities is still not as widely known as the film itself (VanDerWerff). While it is

overlooked by the general public, *The Matrix* is revealed to be heavily trans coded when it is taken into account that the Wachowski's identities likely affected themes within the movie. "The movie explores the development of the lead character Neo as he struggles with his own identity, controlling images of what society dictates he should be, and ultimately owning his true identity, taking pride in his authentic self." (Currin, Lee, Brown, Hammer) The iconic "red pill/blue pill" scene is a metaphor for the point at which a trans person can embrace their gender queerness and begin to take the steps to live "the truth" of their life as affected by being transgender, or continue to allow "the matrix," a representation of cisnormative society, to control them.

The sister genre of Science Fiction to which *The Matrix* belongs, high fantasy, is notorious for having a large queer demographic. For many queer folk, common tropes and imagery in high fantasy pieces reflect queer expression. Fantasy genre becomes a sandbox for exploring gender expressions that deconstruct cisnormative ideas, under the plausible deniability of "magic" and fictional non-human centered societies. More obvious examples of this include the depictions of elves and dwarves within staple high fantasy works like *Dungeons and Dragons* and *The Lord of the Rings,* both of which were greatly influential to contemporary fantasy media. The image of elves in these works are rather androgynous, depicted with characteristics that modern western society associates with femininity. In the context of the fantasy genre, male elves embodying these "feminine" traits are not made to be emasculated, but empowered through this expression. Conversely, the dwarven species are noted in *Return of the King*, to present nearly identically, regardless of gender. When specifically referring to female dwarves, the appendix states that "[they] are in voice and appearance, and in garb if they must go on a journey, so like to the dwarf-men that the eyes and ears of other peoples cannot tell them

apart." (Tolkien, Appendix A) The abundance of gender nonconformity within the fantasy genre allows queer audience to easily find relatable mirrors of their own lives within the media.

My paintings use fantasy imagery in a familiar language to these known stories through gender expression and allegorical plots, but annunciate on the queerness from its conception instead of relying on a retroactive analysis to bring it to light. In my painting *Hanged Man (f.1),* the reference to queerness within a fantastical situation is more visually heavy handed than some of my other works. In it, I've depicted a figure on their hands and knees. They are kneeling on a seemingly endless blue surface resembling water, with their head hanging below their hands, the only part of their body submerged beneath the surface. Their arms and wrists are bent at a harsh angle, showing the amount of force they are pushing against the "ground", trying to pull their head above water. Their head (their consciousness) disconnects from their body in another environment. This is, in part, functioning as a metaphor for the sensation of a person's gender being separated from how their body is perceived by society. The top the figure wears also indicates gender queerness. While many who've viewed the work have described it as a sports bra or a crop top, those familiar with it will recognize the distinctive shape and seam that runs across the back as a chest binder. Its inclusion implies that the figure is likely transmasculine.

Hierophant (f.8) uses fantasy to build a more complicated plot albiet without the overt queer imagery I used in *Hanged Man*. The work shows an enormous conglomerate pile of rats of varying sizes that takes up the majority of the composition with a two-headed figure and their two-headed calf companion surrounded by this rodent presence. I first painted this pair of double-headed figures in *Fool, Second Iteration (f.5).* In this piece, a set of hands emerges from the group of rats and appears to address the two headed figures. When I initially sketched the group of rats (the "Rat King"), I had depicted it as a character resembling something closer to an

individual being *(f.10)*. I had given it garb that suggested it was a religious leader. These ideas came together to form the story within *Hierophant*— a meeting between this Rat King, a creature created from the concepts of maladaptive group conformity and group identity, and the two-headed figures, a pair that might commonly be considered freaks. This narrative is an allegory for meeting societal resistance from a group (oftentimes with religious roots) when expressing one's self in a way that contradicts cisheteronormativity.

Within my lifetime there's been an influx in public visibility of the trans and queer population thanks to the acceleration of technology and social media platforms. This is a double edged sword in the fact that queer folk are able to find each other quickly and easily and form community and support for each other, but at the same time are visible to the general public and susceptible to public scrutiny, descrimination, and violence. Collective awareness of gender has increased and is being closely analyzed and deconstructed more thoroughly than ever before. My art is my contribution to the conversation and an expression of my experience with the western gender binary. The way I decide on what a fictional figure looks like has a strictly anti-cis approach. I (often unconsciously) rarely refer to my figures in gender defining terms. What many would refer to as "the female figure/the woman," or "the man/male figure" I refer to as "the feminine presenting" and "the masculine presenting" when applicable in an effort to make the reader or listener inspect their own presumptions in regards to the genders they assign to my figures and how they make them. Nicole Eisenman, in an interview with *The New Yorker* used the phrase "gender agnosticism" to describe both herself and her paintings (Parker). I believe that Eisenman and I approach the painting of gender in similar ways, and this wording in particular deeply resonated with me. When I paint a figure, I am not interested in their gender identity—a painting doesn't have one, and if a viewer genders my figures, that's their prerogative. I'm more

interested in how its expression manipulates our societal understanding of gender expression to imply narratives within the piece. My figure's gender expressions are considered under the same means as their stylization. In my painting, *Fool, Second Iteration (f.4),* the subtly defined shape and build of the figure in the background allows them to be perceived as more masculine, and is combined with their gesture suggesting they're participating in outdoor manual labor. These factors speak to a deeply instilled knowledge of western gender and age roles, and evoke the sense of a patriarchal position. Because I painted the figure holding the calf with more traditionally feminine features, their gender expression combined with their more contemporary feeling stylization evokes the sense of associations made with young women, and when held against the masculine figure, concepts of daughterhood.

The figures in *Fool, Second Iteration (f.4)* are different from the main figure in *House Party (f.9)*, in which a presumably human figure covered in a "ghost costume" (a large sheet with eye holes cut out) stands looking at their phone. In the piece, they are surrounded by other characters with human bodies and animal skulls for heads. I painted them in a bright light blue color, which creates a distinction from the other figures who are all in a red palette. This color choice suggests that the blue figure is the "main character." The bedsheet costume removes any sense of gender expression from their person by covering their entire form. The painter Amir Fallah uses similar ideas of obstructing the figure with fabric draped over them to communicate more about their person without allowing their physical appearance to affect how they are viewed. My intention was to articulate the idea of being different, and using performance (the ghost costume) to try and mask that difference and conform to the group. It was important in the process of isolating that concept to make sure their gender was completely irrelevant and

applicable to anyone, in comparison to *Fool, Second Iteration (f.4)* in which the figures' gender expressions implied a dynamic between the characters.

This body of work utilizes ideas of allegory and fantastical narratives to explore my own experiences centered around my queer identity. I allowed myself to lean into the fact that in all forms of divination, personal interpretation is the most important factor in finding value within a reading. Regardless of whether or not the final works are identifiable as the original archetypes that prompted their creation, they allowed me to explore identity through storytelling. The divergence from the original archetype is important, even. Identity in my work is like the two-headed figure who takes on a complex range of appearances: the connotations made from being a female-presenting, “daughter,” coexist with those of a physical abnormality. There are layers to the appearance of my characters, that in turn create a rich allegory that says I am not someone who can be easily summarized.

Figure 1. “Hanged Man” 30” x 24” Acrylic on Canvas

Figure 2. “Hermit” 18” x 12” Gouache on Paper

Figure 3. “Fool” 36” x 20” Acrylic on Canvas

Figure 4. “Devil” 35” x 30” Acrylic on Canvas

Figure 5. “Fool, Second Iteration” 36” x 36” Acrylic on Canvas

Figure 6. “Fool Study” 14”x 11” Acrylic on Canvas

Figure 7. “Strength” 30” x 24” Graphite on Paper

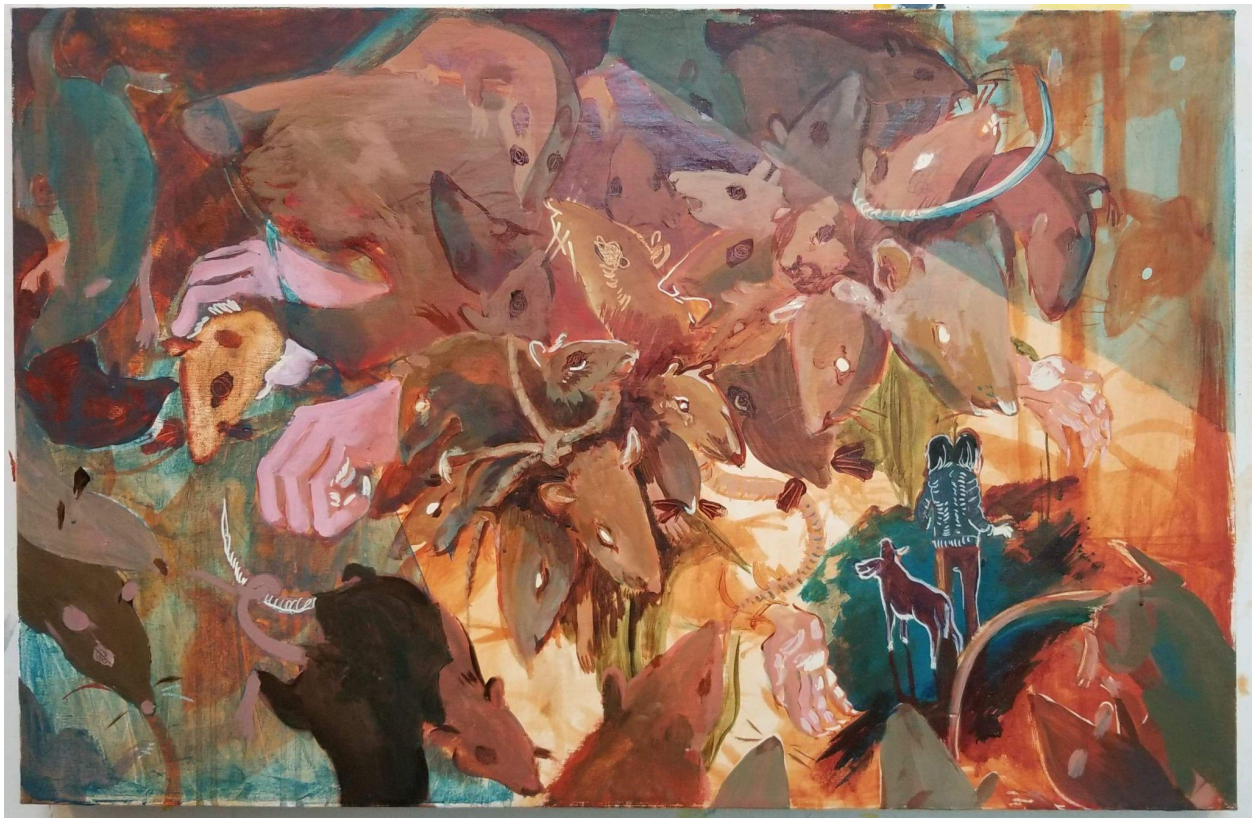

Figure 8. “Hierophant” 24” x 36” Acrylic on Canvas

Figure 9. “House Party” 17” x 11” Gouache on Paper

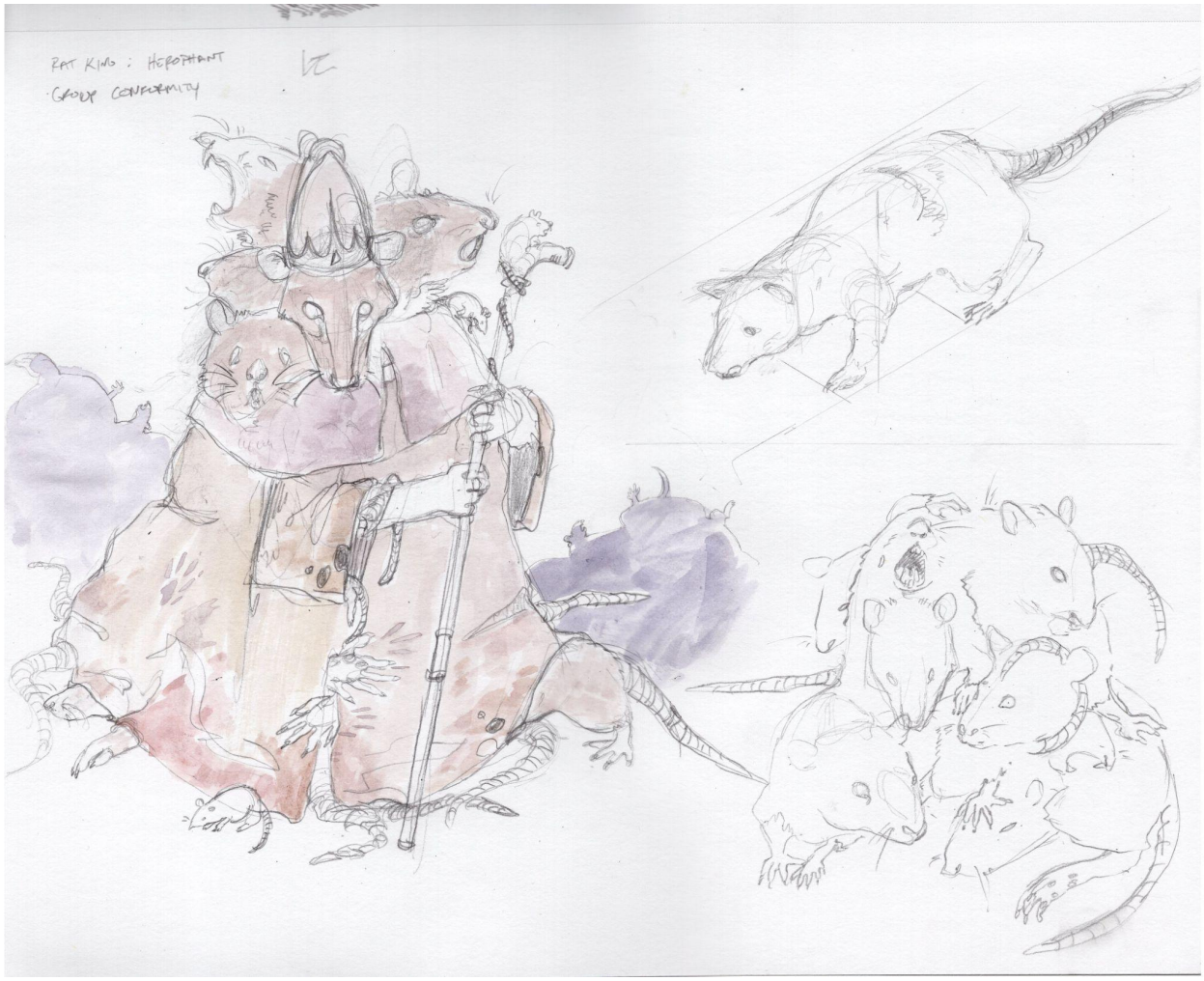

Figure 10. “Hierophant Concept” 11” x 14” Graphite and Watercolor on Paper

Figure 11. “Dog Walk” 36” x 72” Acrylic on Canvas

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