beastmode: gender, creature, language.

by

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Coded language has always been key to marginalized societies' survival.
Maintaining an active culture during oppression has to be done in discreet and secret ways, and utilizing something inconspicuous and everyday is key. The queer community is no outlier; it reappropriates imagery and vocabulary from the culture which rejects it and transforms it into symbolism to be used as language. In queer communities, reappropriation is encouraged and celebrated- as a way to both poke fun at and participate in the activities of society they would not normally be able to experience.

Hanky code, as an example, operates as a visual language that can only be read and understood by those in the intended audience- queer people. Communicating exactly what is desired and depicted through a clear symbolic code is a unique way of obscuring identities in plain sight. Hiding in the open, what could be more queer? This was one of the inspirations for the werewolf piece, a piece about hiding in plain sight, coded symbolism, and queerness (or in this case specifically, transness).

The werewolf is a coded symbol, appropriated from popular culture, representing the limbo of a transitioning trans-identity when the goal is not binary. It is an uncomfortable hybrid figure, transgressing boundaries of identity (animal or human?) and evoking a sense of both repulsion and curiosity in the viewer, reflecting a cis reaction to a trans body in public. This piece was created for a time when countless anti-trans laws were being put into effect,

with demonizing news segments describing trans-bodies as freakish, unnatural, disturbed, and contagious. The monstrous figure is large, with an imposing presence. Its face is covered, portraying a sense of shame or fear, and obscuring its identity further- creating more unease in the viewer with its ambiguity.

Untitled 1, 2023, expanding foam, cloth, found object, pvc pipes, 4'x4.5'x1'

Currently, the hanky code has dropped in use due to the lifting of anti-gay laws, the rise in legal gay spaces, and the widespread use of the Internet opening up more opportunities for the community. Apps such as Grindr operate in a similar fashion that cruising normally would, utilizing immediate locations to scope out other gay men in the area and giving the option to operate discreetly in anonymity. Contrary to regular cruising, there is less ambiguity- it offers the ability to list exactly what you are looking for in plain language (from a list of pre-made options): your HIV status and last test date, position, as well as what niche gay group they identify with. Flagging still prevails in some ways though, as certain interests can get you banned or in trouble legally. Use of coded visual language by emoji is widespread on Grindr to describe interests in specific drugs, or prostitution. Coded language, in general, is also prevalent on the app to avoid prosecution, as in most online communities that require self-censoring to get around bans.

I think for a future project, I would like to work with some of these newer symbols as well as the architecture of queer (sex) spaces. In the past, I have had a fascination with things that are hidden, blurred representations, and walls/fences as tools that keep things obscured. It is interesting now to look at that interest from the lens of the contradictory spaces used to partake in public sex (something I think my earlier work hinted at, but I was unable to place my source)- walls, corners, fences used to conceal, to lure or beckon, to suss out ambiguity in the false safety of a barrier. I'm interested in the shapes public sex takes, the recognizable silhouettes, and iconography- the language of a closeted thing.

confession booth, 2022, plywood, paint, personal rug, cups, rope, 4'x4.5'x1'

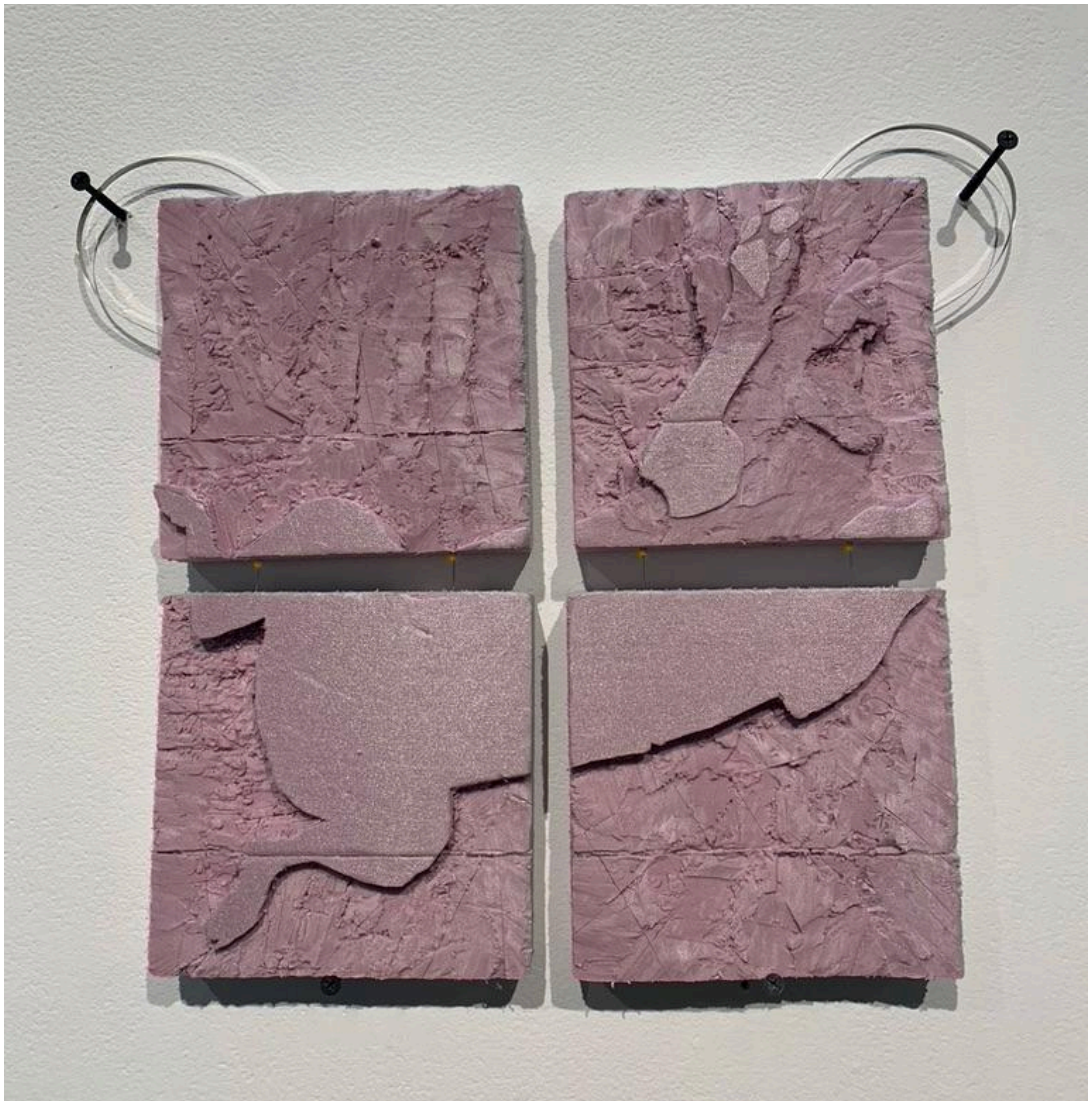
I'm interested in all forms of public sex, which in my opinion is always inherently queer- cruising, BDSM, sexy billboards, furries, bodybuilders. The internet is a plethora of public sex spaces, something many would be reluctant to admit. Internet pornography is public, anonymous chat rooms are public, and the opportunities to voyeur or exhibit- are endless. I'm not so interested in the internet or digital aspect of public sex on the internet (too easy) so much as the similarities and differences that occur in the physical sphere of the same nature. The replication, the comfortable accessibility, the openness and boldness that can

only happen in anonymity- but also the coded language, surveillance, and self-censorship for self-preservation. The secrecy of cruising languages has migrated and translated over to an online platform. 2030 is here, no more homophobic cops, but instead, bots, hanky code and glances replicated to language and emoticons, and public sex is still only ok if you're a celebrity or an advert.

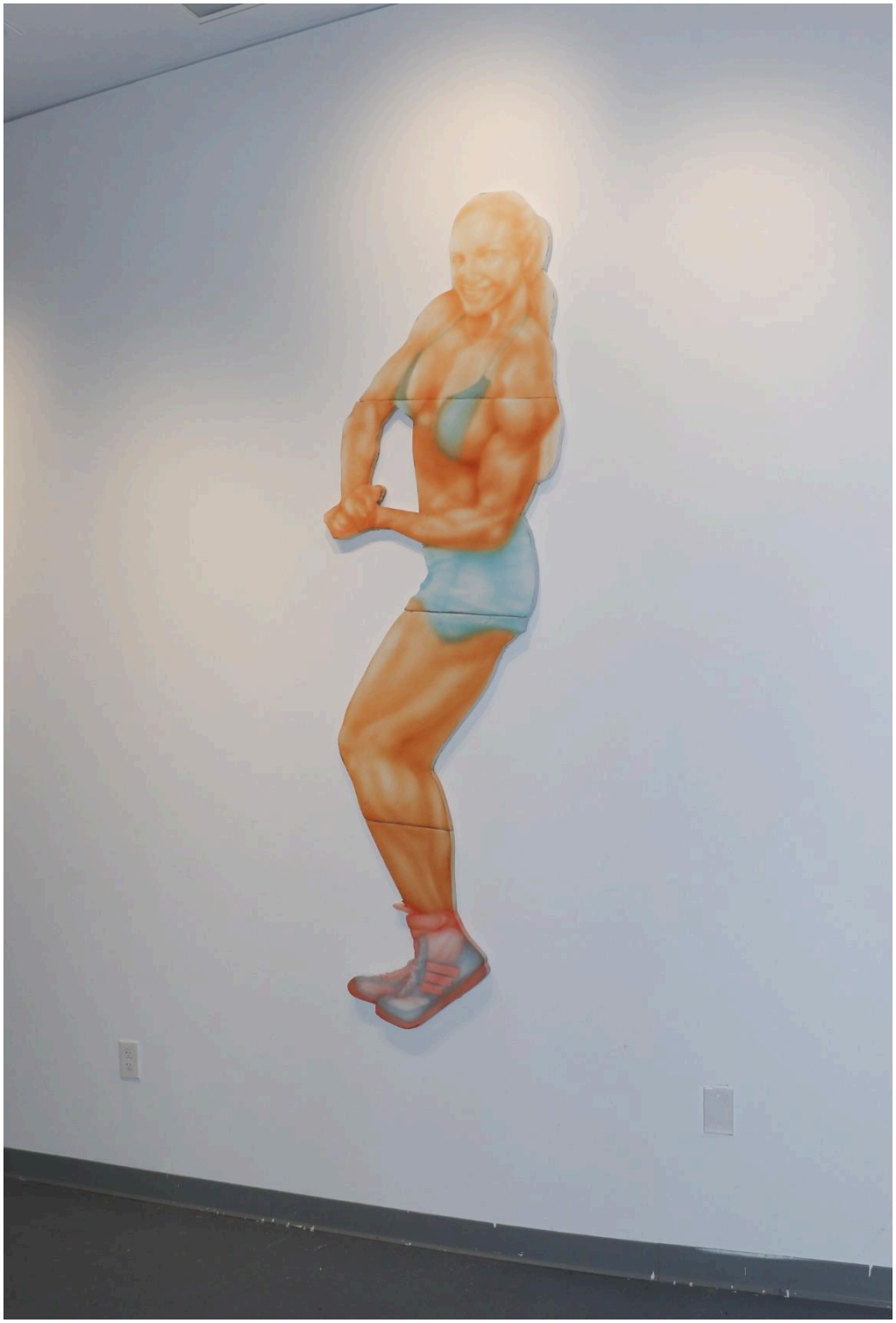
I think part of my interest in bondage imagery is partly on account of my self-struggle with the aspects of my identity I consider less desirable. Shame is contrary to fear, it is no motivator but paralysis-inducing instead. I am not allowed to be messy, imperfect, or experimenting- this is a failure. The materials I use are reflective of this mindset as well just slightly, in that they are highly forgiving and highly disposable, but also are reflective of the reality of knowing that these pieces must be eventually moved and put away or thrown out to fit my small apartment space.

Not to insinuate that I have no personal involvement in this world of S+M, the imagery I use is out of familiarity with it in my personal and professional life. I enjoy fusing contrasting aspects of my identity to make them meet each other. Catholicism, meet BDSM- you guys have some things in common. Similarities in visual language are fun, where certain poses and symbols we reserve for one aspect of life might very well be in use elsewhere: confession booth, a glory hole, praying, kneeling, submission.

adoration, 2023, wood, foam, trash bag, screws, 3’x3’



Pleaser, 2023, insulation foam, sewing pins, metal, screws, 1’2”x1’2”



Barr Bodies, 2024, insulation foam, joint compound, paint, 8x’2”x2.5’

Recently, I have moved on to using airbrushing in my work alongside the foam and insulation material. It is also a soft and forgiving medium, one that carries on the ambiguous visual style I enjoy. With airbrushing, you can add color and detail while still hiding an image. I enjoy how tacky it is, its playfulness and unseriousness. This last semester came at a difficult time, dealing with a confusing breakup with a long-term partner, a hot winter, and the election of a fascist president, amidst a never-ending continuation of racist, genocidal, and anti-transgender legislation. Finding something 'stupid' to occupy my time with was key to continuing to create in a world that felt like it was on fire and nothing mattered. My work doesn't need meaning if the world doesn't, and I can have fun doing it. I dream of power to those who aren't allowed it- I want to explore further and create a world of magical realism where simple things like transgender immigrant power are a part of reality.

Barr bodies is just me thinking about women's bodies in (every facet of life) sports, and how in ensuring the 'protection' of the cis population, cis women too are barred from competing with their peers over just a medical test. Why stop with hormone or Barr body testing, anyway? The dominant US media and conservative discourse paint trans bodies as having power, as being able to 'dominate' or 'overtake' (familiar vocabulary for anyone of a minority group) cis life. I wanted to run with this, harness that magical trans-body power, and create a figure who was imposing, powerful, a spectacle, and yet won't be fucked with. My buff, strong creation will protect me and the ones I love.

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