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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA SAN DIEGO

*AS THE SUN WOUNDS THE SHADOWS*

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements  
for the degree Master of Fine Arts

in

Visual Arts

by

Nathan Storey Freeman

Committee in charge:

Professor Amy Adler, Chair  
Professor Patrick Anderson  
Professor Lorena Mostajo  
Professor Paul Sepuya

2024

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University of California San Diego

2024

## DEDICATION

I would first like to thank my family for their unwavering support of my practice ever since I picked up a disposable camera and a VHS camcorder as a kid. I would also like to express my immense gratitude to Amy Adler for all of her guidance, mentorship, and encouragement over the past three years. Thank you to my committee members, Lorena Mostajo, Paul Sepuya, and Patrick Anderson for always urging me to ask deeper questions. I would also like to thank my professors and peers from New York University, Marlene McCarty, Lyle Ashton Harris, and Nancy Barton, who have all had a lasting impact on my work and development as an artist. A special thank you to Dillon Chapman, Anika Larsen, GenderFail Press, Alexandro Segade, Jordan Crandall, Ricardo Dominguez, and Anya Gallaccio. To my incredible cohort of artists, Deanna Barahona, JAX, Junyi Min, Naomi Nadreau, and Chanell Stone, I am grateful to have shared this time alongside you and your inspiring practices. To Jared, thank you for your immense wisdom, collaboration, and critique.

Finally, to the boy by the bayou, this will always be for you...

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## EPIGRAPH

*“He was whispering behind my closed eyelids. Time had lost its strobic beat and all structures of movements and sensation and taste and sight and sound became fragmented, shifting around like particles in lake water”.*

– David Wojnarowicz, *Close to the Knives*

*“For a while, I kept the image in my bed, beneath the sheet that welcomed my body; I crushed it and heard him whimper. He lived in my dreams. I sewed him into my pillow. Then, after a while, I decided to wear him, directly against my skin, directly against my torso, attaching him with bandages and tape... when I finally undid the bandages and tape, I saw that the limp cardboard was empty, the image blank.... It had stuck to my skin, like a tattoo or decal”.*

– Herve Guibert, *Ghost Image*

*“A scar’s width of warmth on a worn man’s neck.*

*That’s all I wanted to be”.*

– Ocean Vuong, *Notebook Fragments*

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## VITA

2018 Bachelor of Fine Arts, New York University

2024 Master of Fine Arts in Visual Arts, University of California San Diego

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

*AS THE SUN WOUNDS THE SHADOWS*

by

Nathan Storey Freeman

Master of Fine Arts in Visual Arts

University of California San Diego, 2024

Professor Amy Adler, Chair

*AS THE SUN WOUNDS THE SHADOWS* traces the relationship between printed matter and queer memory, history, collectivity, liberation, and loss. The exhibition suggests printed matter as a facilitator, witness, and residue of gay desire. Through various methods of collage, fragmentation, repetition, and assemblage, the work ultimately blurs the juncture at which the personal and collective memory meet – but does not erase the seams. Synthesizing several parallel and intersecting bodies of work, including printmaking, photography, and performance,

the exhibition ruminates on a longing for an interconnectedness to queer histories and pasts, often lingering in the shadows.

***CHAPTER ONE: INK STAINS ON OUR FINGERTIPS***

## *TRACING*

Picture a shoebox under a mattress. Or perhaps nestled in the closet or held in a dresser drawer. Somewhere hidden, tucked away from the eye, but still easily accessible, within arm's reach. Picture this box as a vessel, holding within it fragments of distant memories and desires. The contents of this box are bound to an individual, little bits and pieces of experiences both banal and sacred, field notes, receipts, Polaroids of loved ones, found photographs, letters, and prints.

For two decades, I have cared for printed matter: fingerprint-stained drugstore prints, torn journal entries, dive bar photobooth scraps, and other ephemera. I have carried them with me from one dresser drawer into another, one odd box into another across Texas, Arkansas, New York, Colorado, and California. The prints tend to remain in dust and darkness, under the mattress, in the shadows. But there are days and nights that my fingers are drawn back to these vessels. The prints are unearthed, reencountered, and once again held. Illuminated.

Queerness and printed matter have long been entangled; ephemerality and desire are where they meet. Performance studies suggests that queerness exists in fleeting moments, positing a queer temporality where the ephemeral form is structurally necessary to queerness. Theorist José Esteban Muñoz stitched queerness to ephemerality; “the key to queering evidence, and by that, I mean ways in which we prove queerness and read queerness, is by suturing it to the concept of ephemera. Think of ephemera as a trace, the remains, the things that are left, hanging in the air like a rumor”.<sup>1</sup>

Traces, remains, the things that are left, glimmers, residues, and stains are the windows into queerness. The stain is imbued with not only gay history, but also gay desire. Desire is instilled in the queer methodologies of fixation, compulsion, and eroticism marked in journals, prints, Polaroids, and notes.

What is the work of printed matter? A print or a photograph is an impression; an image or a text is captured, transferred, and impressed into paper or another substrate to be touched, held, and passed around to other hands, or perhaps kept safe, private in a box under a mattress. The pleasures and complexities of print culture are located in their own ephemeral nature; print processes are often grounded in a sense of immediacy and urgency. Over time, ink fades, paper crumples and tears, the oils of our fingertips stain the image.

Printed matter is any material that has been marked – imprinted – by hand or a machine, ranging from documents, fliers, and magazines to posters, xeroxes, print outs, and photographs. The term actually originates from our mailing systems; matter printed by various mechanical processes is eligible for mailing at a cheaper rate. Prints are intrinsically circulatory – from one hand to another or one mailbox to another. Throughout this writing, I will argue that printed matter’s circulatory nature has uniquely and consequentially served the processes of queer documentation and evidence-making.

I will take much time and care to contextualize and situate my practice because it is my belief that my work is foregrounded by and dependent on a greater constellation of gay and queer artists. Much of my own process seeks out a queer lineage and draws connection to gay artists that came long before me. While the (partial and incomplete) recognition of queer rights by the U.S. federal government only began early into my short lifetime, there has long been a rich, prolific, and dynamic history of gay American artists creating queer print culture and homoerotic art.

Growing up in a conservative community in Houston, Texas, I did not encounter any education or discussion of HIV/AIDS, let alone queer culture. In fact, Texas remained a bastion for hyper-conservative anti-sodomy laws throughout my childhood, with the appeal of one Harris County case eventually leading to the landmark queer rights ruling in *Lawrence v. Texas*. It was

not until I moved to New York City for university that I learned of HIV/AIDS. This was an informative and isolating experience. The AIDS crisis, a genocide of societal and governmental neglect, rose in 1981 and swiftly decimated the gay and queer community, leaving an incomprehensible, incalculable, irreversible loss. The moment was met with, and later perpetuated by, adversity, homophobia, discrimination, and state-sponsored death. The artist activist coalition, Gran Fury, asserted that the government had blood on its hands:

Since the beginning of the AIDS crisis, we've been reminded by historians and spiritual leaders that death by plague is the way of nature. But AIDS is not simply an act of nature, a fact of life. It is also the business of government, the media world of infotainment, the propaganda of religion and the industry of science.<sup>2</sup>

This tremendous loss was a moment of rupture, a chasm of lost members of the queer community including elders, lovers, companions, chosen families. By tracing the relationship between printed matter and queer histories, we can see that printed matter emerges as an intrinsically gay and lesbian material. In moments of reckoning and emergency, such as the rise of the AIDS crisis in the 1980's, queer artists have produced and circulated print as a strategy of social organizing and activism.

While the print is crucial to public uprising circulation and consumption, print and ephemera are very much knotted with the personal: desire, longing, and loss. Printed matter has acted as a facilitator, mediator, witness, and residue of gay and queer desire.



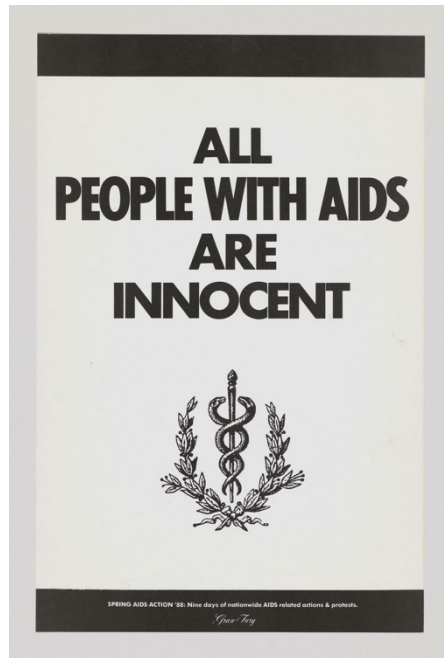


Figure 1: *ALL PEOPLE WITH AIDS ARE INNOCENT*, Gran Fury, 1988.

### ***PRINT, SOCIAL ORGANIZING, AND AIDS: THE PASSION & RAGE OF GRAN FURY***

Throughout history, print media has been instrumental to political resistance and change as it is intrinsically linked to our visibility and liberation as members of the queer community. I would be remiss not to situate the inextricable relationship between queerness and print in the aftermath of the 1969 Stonewall Riots. One year following the riots, a catalyst for the queer liberation movement, thousands of gay, lesbian, and transgender people took to the streets for the first Gay Liberation March in New York City. Among all the bodies gathering were picket signs and banners.

It is no mistake that queer art activists work specifically with print during moments of emergency or crisis. Printed matter is often produced through the use of accessible machines and materials like a xerox, ink, and paper. Print production processes have historically been more available to the public than other fine art processes and have enabled political activists and art world “outsiders” to gain access to the means of artistic production. Copy machines, for example,

have long been available in local libraries and have enabled the production of political pamphlets, zines, and posters for relatively low cost. The egalitarian nature of printed matter underscores its potential to be used as a political tool for the liberation of oppressed groups including and expanding beyond queers. Paul Soulellis, founder of the publishing studio Queer Archive Work, claims, “this is queerness as an underground, alternative way of creating networks of care. Queerness in the scrappy ad hoc, and sometimes homemade designs that were directly related to the urgency of protest and activism and survival”<sup>3</sup>. Print media can blend together aesthetic and educational content, and incorporate, for example, information graphics into a seductive call to political action. But what makes print exceptionally unique in its form is its handheld-ness, its ability to be disseminated. You pass around photographs, hand out flyers, and circulate prints. The connection of print and queer culture also quickly gave rise to the production and circulation of zines, like artist Joey Terrill’s *Homeboy Beautiful*.<sup>4</sup> Zines, posters, and flyers allowed queer people to articulate their desires, sufferings, and calls for public action. In fact, even before Stonewall, one of the earliest federal rulings in favor of queer civil rights was in connection with the attempted censure of ONE magazine, a queer magazine featuring poems about lesbian romance and gay cruising published by a spin-off of the Mattachine Society. Printed matter enables concrete praxis and allows queer artists to form and emerge with an identity and political position.

Since the beginnings of the AIDS crisis, queer artists have produced and circulated print as a means of social organizing, political activism, and resistance. Artists like David Wojnarowicz, Keith Haring, and Zoe Leonard confronted the suffering and discrimination of the queer community in the workings of their studio and on the streets. The work of artist Tom of Finland played an important role in the public space, specifically for gay men and gay bar culture. His prints and drawings are emblematic for their depiction of homoerotic sexual fantasies often

involving beautiful, strong, leather men. The work presented men engaging in graphic, carefree sex without any itch of shame. His work can be found in prints and murals at gay bars and clubs like the Eagle all over the country. Following the rise of AIDS, he shifted his prints to involve and emphasize safe sex, illustrating men using condoms. His print *Untitled (Use a Rubber)*, 1987 was distributed to over 700 gay bars and organizations.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, his entire oeuvre shared a sense of strength to the community, representing chiseled, built, powerful men entranced in the joys of fucking.

Activist coalitions such as ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power), General Idea, and The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence emerged on the front lines in the fight to end the AIDS pandemic. A group of artists, including Marlene McCarty, Avram Finkelstein, Tom Kalin, John Lindell, and Donald Moffett, organized the collective Gran Fury, “united in anger and dedicated to exploiting the power of art to end the AIDS crisis”<sup>6</sup>. As artists that understood the power and tools necessary to confront cis-heteronormative and otherwise homophobic culture, they utilized visual guerilla dissemination tactics as their strategy. The collective worked across posters, billboards, and flyers posted in the streets of New York City to demand reforms that changed public policy and saved lives:

Gran Fury's work raised public awareness of AIDS and put pressure on politicians, while sparking debate in sites ranging from the Illinois Senate to the tabloid press of Italy. Bridging the gap between Situationist site-specific art strategies, post-modern appropriation and the Queer activist movement, Gran Fury has been influential to later practitioners. Their work opens up a broader spectrum of understanding about the political and collective art practices that flourished in downtown New York during the Eighties and Nineties.<sup>7</sup>

*ALL PEOPLE WITH AIDS ARE INNOCENT*, the 1988 photocopy that also took other lives such as a cloth banner suspended across Grand Street in New York City, directly addressed the stigmatization and persecution those with AIDS experienced. For centuries, religious and

conservative figures have cast homosexuality as other, as sinful, and ‘against nature’. This homophobic moral posturing only increased during the AIDS crisis as the disease was positioned as a natural punishment. With this declaration, Gran Fury fought back, denouncing any concept that AIDS is deserved or justified. The group also took the erasure of women from the AIDS crisis directly into the streets. As a result of systemic sexism, women were often deemed as solely the caretakers of young men dying from AIDS. *WOMEN DON’T GET AIDS, THEY JUST DIE FROM IT* was a 1991 public poster and billboard appropriating a photograph of women in swimsuits from the Miss USA pageant. Here, the punchline and graphic serve as a confrontation to this erasure, reading, “65% of HIV positive women get sick and die from chronic infections that don’t fit the Centers for Disease Control’s definitions of AIDS”.

Critical to their political project, every artwork by Gran Fury was placed in the public domain – on street corners, billboards, wheat pastes, subway stations, newspapers, and gatherings such as their famous ‘kiss-ins’ – in order to contest the stability of dominant culture. Through direct actions pushing print beyond the printed page and out into the streets, their work educated, changed public policy, and destigmatized living with HIV. “Even if the images didn’t have the power to solve the crisis, they focused attention on it, and acted as a rallying cry, a point of identification for those inside the movement”.<sup>8</sup> Gran Fury’s passion and rage forced the AIDS crisis into the public consciousness, in large part, through printed matter.

“Can art save lives? Not directly. But it can help the rest of us live”.<sup>9</sup> Printed matter helps the rest of us live. At the height of the AIDS crisis, the print served as a tool for queer collectivity and liberation. At the same time, many artists worked across print media in a more private, intimate, process to document their own individual experiences of loss, longing, and desire.

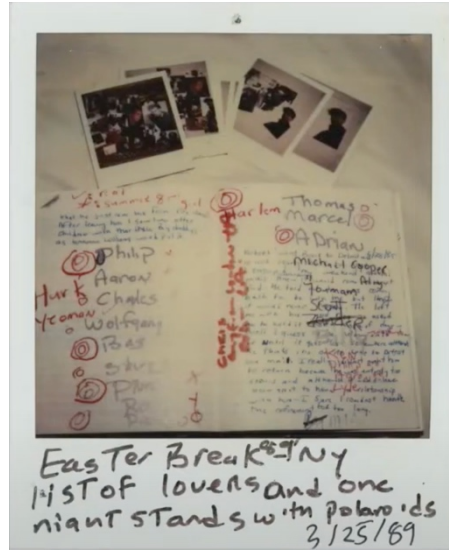


Figure 2. *Easter Break '89*, Lyle Ashton Harris, 1989.

***PRINT, DESIRE, AND AIDS: THE INTIMACY OF LYLE ASHTON HARRIS***

Printed matter acts as a facilitator, a mediator, a witness, and a residue of gay desire.

In holding and looking through prints, one ruminates on the boundless relationship between memory and desire. Roland Barthes noted, “it is true that a photograph is a witness, but *a witness of something that is no more*”.<sup>10</sup> A photograph – a print – may represent someone, something, somewhere lost – *something that is no more*. The seduction of nostalgia begins to emerge to the surface of prints as a longing for the past, a moment that did not belong to us but was nevertheless captured.

Images are inseparable from desire. The *punctum*, the prickling elements of the image, wounds the viewer. When an image is printed, sublimated into material form, it becomes an object of desire. There is an erotic relationship between the eyes and the image, our looking, our cruising, our touching of the print. We become attached to a print, say a Polaroid of a lover, as we may feel it is a residue, a trace, a fact of our desire. Evidence of queer love and desire acts as a revolt against a hegemonic culture that scratches out and eliminates queer existence. Gran Fury’s revolt took

place in the town square, but some artists' revolts occurred in the intimate spaces of their homes and studios.

Visual artist Richard Hawkins suggests that one cannot separate desire and collage, that they are inherently intertwined; "rather than making a world from scratch that reflects your desires, maybe you're finding desires out in the real world and rearranging them like Dr. Frankenstein to make your own kind of fantasy".<sup>11</sup> Collage is a process of looking, seeking, collecting, and subsequently subverting, layering, cutting, and rearranging and constructing a new, fresh, sometimes impossible image – an image that reflects one's desires, fantasies, and potentialities.

Charting another trajectory of desire in and through printed matter, artist Lyle Ashton Harris employs eroticism, fixation, and compulsion as modes of mark-making and trace. Through printing, layering, repeating, overlapping, and collating images, Harris composes prints and installations permeated with rawness, desire, loss, and longing. While the work is intimate in nature and process, dissecting selfhood, sex, and experience, the work binds the personal to the political.

The intimacy of Lyle Ashton Harris is felt most in his unique Polaroids of the artist's notes, ephemera, studios, pictures, journals, and collages. In queer history, the Polaroid acts as private ephemera of sex, depicting nudes and blurring bodies, frequently hidden in dresser drawers or nightstands. Queer artists such as Genesis Breyer P-ORRIDGE and Mark Morrisroe, among others, have used the instant photographic process as an instrument of desire. The process is a rather compulsive one; an artist is compelled to snap a shot and receive instant gratification. But here, Harris photographs the work, his process, his fleeting, momentary thoughts captured in his journal and studio. Harris' Polaroids (1989 – 1995) delineate modes of fixation and compulsion that are imbued within the workings of his studio.

Harris' prints feel so in-progress – instincts, urges, stains – and offer a glimpse of the inner workings and processes of desire and fixation within the artist's methodology. In *Easter Break '89, NY, List of lovers and one-night stands with Polaroids*, Harris captures his journal and a pile of other Polaroids splayed out on a bed or comforter. We see a list of names thrown together in different colored marks, suggesting a period of time, as well as collaged or found prints in the other Polaroids. There is a feeling of immediacy to the print, names are sometimes written over or crossed out. Among the *Journal Entry* Polaroids, Harris captures a scattering of notes, reminders, names, post-it notes, and addresses. One page, in bold large writing, reads “porn in the morning”. There is a banality to the journal entry, an everydayness to the encounter, or haze of momentary desire. The Polaroids, *Silverlake Blvd.* and *Open House from the Whitney Independent Study Program* convey how Harris handles and treats printed matter that illuminates his later large-scale installations and blow-ups. In *Silverlake Blvd.*, we can make out repeating portraits of men's faces, one after another. At the ISP, among piles of pictures and prints, is written perhaps with ink on his fingertips, “His cum and blood, My hair” on the walls.

The scatter and repetition that appear in these Polaroids are emblematic of Harris' larger practice. Layering, emphasizing, and accumulating are strategies of compulsion Harris used to construct constellations that explore eroticism, sex, love, and social networks. This mode of fixation, layering images abjectly (attraction, repulsion), is an inherently queer one, and Harris' own desire is transmitted through the process.

What compels Harris to make a photograph? While the Polaroids do not overtly address the AIDS crisis and the effects the virus would have on Harris' life, the viewer can discern a blurring of the boundary between desire and violence, exposing the proximity between sex and death. With the privacy and intimacy of the Polaroid, a viewer cannot help but ask, to whom is the

work addressed? Is Harris recording these notes and mockups in the studio to remember? What exactly is it he is trying to preserve? In an era of so much loss, disintegration, and dissolution, Harris' Polaroids of the workings of his studio and desires constitute the preservation of the self.



Figure 3. *After Silence*, Pacifico Silano at Stellar Projects, curated by Nathan Storey, 2018.

### ***THE AIDS CRISIS IS STILL BEGINNING***

Suspended above the entrance to MoMA PS1 in 2021, a yellow and red banner read, “*THE AIDS CRISIS IS STILL BEGINNING*”. Gregg Bordowitz’s exhibition, *I Wanna Be Well* “traces connections between Bordowitz’s intimate depictions of living with AIDS and the continuing global AIDS crisis”<sup>12</sup>. The printed declaration serves to underscore another critical moment: measuring the past through the lens of the present Covid-19 pandemic and envisioning the future. The AIDS crisis is *only beginning*; there is more to be done – de-stigmatization, prevention, a vaccine, a cure. Over the years, Bordowitz’s artistic practice has prompted both direct actions and



longings for intimacy. Ingrained in his work is the so gloriously human desire for both survival and togetherness.

The summer I graduated from New York University, I organized an exhibition by artist Pacifico Silano at Stellar Projects in the Lower East Side. The 2018 exhibition, titled *After Silence*, presented a new series of photographs, which evoked the emotional and physical voids felt as a result of the AIDS pandemic. Through fragmenting, obscuring, layering, reassembling, and finally re-photographing, Silano recontextualized gay erotica from the 1970's pre-AIDS era, such as the Richard Marshall Collection of Gay Pornography at NYU's Fales Library. Images found within the Disco-era magazines such as *Blueboy*, *Honcho*, and *Drummer* were saturated with innocence and naiveté, euphoric colors, and an aura of total liberation. Questions on loss, longing, masculinity, and American identity permeate the pictures. Today, we access this archive with the knowledge of the devastation experienced by an entire generation of the queer community, as well as those of us still living in its wake. *After Silence* was a clear and direct reference to the AIDS activist artist collective Gran Fury and their Pink Triangle SILENCE = DEATH graphic. The show offered quiet meditations on queer ephemera, identity, and our evolving relationship to the archive. Silano's prints were framed, notably without glass, to allow the viewer's eye to get up close to the texture of the photograph and witness the image fall apart into halftones, ink bleeds, and folds. The prints themselves depict gestures of the body, minute details of the scene, and fragments of the photographs from the archive. The shadow of two bodies blending into one. Popping up the hood of a pick-up somewhere way out west. A collection of whips and belts. The prints simultaneously reveal and conceal elements of desire. All these questions, concerns, and moments unearthed in a fragment. *After Silence*, in many ways, demonstrates a greater preoccupation with the relationship of art, specifically printed matter, to AIDS.

Artists of the AIDS crisis worked relentlessly and put their bodies on the line because their community and own lives were at stake. This relentlessness, persistence, and creative production contributed a significant amount of artwork and brought queer visibility, desire, and loss to the centerfold in an unprecedented, historic moment.

Even though I have suggested printed matter as an ephemeral entity, prints sometimes outlast our own lives. The ink may fade, but the prints in our boxes may be unearthed. Over the past few years, we have witnessed a growing preoccupation with the gay and queer archive. But due to our often-invisible history and the AIDS pandemic, this archive is dislocated and dismembered. This incomprehensible loss, this rupture, and this chasm continue to reverberate across the queer community today. Gay history is fragmentary. Printed matter contains vestiges of loss, intimacy, and melancholy. To touch the queer archive, flip through it, handle it, and embrace it is to encounter stains of memory and desire.

***CHAPTER TWO: HAUNTING***



Figure 4. *NOT NOW BUT NOW*, Nathan Storey at Mandeville Art Gallery, 2024.

### ***LOOKING, TOUCHING, LONGING***

An image is a phantom, the lingering impression is burned into the back of the eye. The cornea bends; light rays pass through the round holes of the pupil. The iris contracts itself, regulating the amount of light. The lens transmutes the shape of light into circles to feed the retina. The retina converts the light into electrical impulses. The optic nerve sends these little impulses to the brain to materialize the image. Scarlet, vibrating images. Watery, fluctuating, impossible to grasp. An image is also a shadow. Shifting, flickering, impossible to grasp. The image does not disappear when we stop looking. The image continues.

Prints – vestiges, residues, traces – are evidence of lost desires, memories, histories, and futures. Hauntology, Derrida’s “idea that the present is haunted by the metaphorical ‘ghosts’ of

lost futures”, complicates, distorts, and collapses time, creating a new queer temporality.<sup>13</sup> The lost futures of queerness, our queer elders who marked our paths, bleed into our present. Hauntological objects, like prints, linger as echoes of the AIDS crisis still loom over queer people and queer culture. These ghosts of lost futures dwell in the shadows.

My interdisciplinary studio practice engages with materials from gay archives such as flyers, photographs, zines, prints, notes, postcards, matchboxes, and other ephemera. I simultaneously construct and accumulate my own diaristic archive of gay intimacy, longing, and pain. I hold onto personal and raw materials; taping photographs, snapshots, and pictures to notebooks; throwing notes and letters into shoeboxes kept under my mattress or on the shelf of my closet. Through the accumulation and intermixture of personal experiences, narratives, and longings, I reckon with the greater discourse surrounding gay life and loss, ultimately questioning where the personal and collective memory meet. The work draws connections between private and public queer worldmaking.



Figure 5. Polaroid of my Studio wall, 2021.

My processes involve prolonged acts of looking and touching. In the studio, I use my eyes and fingers. My fingertips trace the glossy surface of the photograph. Prints are meant to be touched, held, and passed. My eyes constellate and map out joints and junctures from piece to piece. Accumulate, layer, overlap.

My research chronicles the period beginning with the expansion of queer liberation movements post-Stonewall, through the AIDS crisis, and the reactionary backlash of queer visibility leading up to 1995, the year of my birth – and the year in which the highest number of AIDS related deaths was reported. I collect and work with gay photographs specifically from this era because it was a potent period of history where the prospects of liberation were met with utter catastrophe. My life and queer being are indelibly marked by the shadow of this period. Unearthing photographs from this time recontextualizes the subjects in the images and attempts to resuscitate the passion, pain, loss, and desire ingrained in the surface of the prints.

My work seeks out, stumbles upon, and creates fragments. Queerness is made up of shattered fragments that have been dislocated and dismembered. Our fragmentation is not only due to longstanding oppression under a dominant heteronormative culture, but the catastrophic rupture of the AIDS crisis. My process stitches disparate queer materials together, not perfectly bound, as a methodology of interrogating gay history as well as problematizing its relationship to the now – our present.

I employ fragmentation as a methodology with my found and personal material. To fragment is to break and separate the bits and shards from the original source. This method has the potential to be transgressive through its ability to both preserve and recontextualize queer desire. I accumulate fragments to add to my collection, my box of pictures, to then build into a series of works or a larger assemblage. My process also involves cropping, rephotographing, and reframing.

This strategy allows me to direct our looking – our cruising of the print – to both moments and non-moments. I create erotic fragments that emerge as a result of my own desire, pull, and drive, but also allow the viewer to look a little closer, a little longer. The viewer can lose themselves in the fragment.

The fragment is essential to gay experience. Vince Aletti’s publication *The Drawer* consists of hundreds of tearsheets, newspaper clippings, gallery announcements, and other ephemera tucked inside his drawer in his East Village apartment. Rev. Robert W. Wood once maintained, “It is common parlance among homosexual circles that “every boy has his picture collection”.<sup>14</sup> *The Drawer* speaks to the variety of our desires and the collision of personal and collective history.<sup>15</sup> Prints and fragments orient, form, and shape the self. Revealing, illuminating, crystalizing fragments.



Figure 6. *The Drawer*, Vince Aletti, 2022.

## ***NO RETURN: AGONY & ECSTASY***

No matter how many images I gather, collect, combine, and produce, no one print could ever fully depict the agony and the ecstasy of gay desire. No matter how many images I gather, collect, combine, and make, no one print could ever fully capture the agony and the ecstasy of longing for the past. But a layered, vibrating, thick constellation, could possibly keep the heat. My work is deeply engaged in the searching for, the accumulation of, and the caretaking for printed matter.

Nan Goldin's seminal work, *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* encapsulates photography's intrinsic relationship to loss: "I used to think that I could never lose anyone if I photographed them enough. In fact, my pictures show me how much I've lost".<sup>16</sup> Goldin's haunting slideshow presents an oeuvre of phantasmal photographs, evidencing what she has lost. Photographs cannot resuscitate their lost subjects, as there can be no true return to the past, but they are able to resurrect the desire, pain, and pleasure captured and entrenched within a moment. The print is an instrument to suck out exactly what is inside of a moment. This resurrection allows for the sublimation of the past into the present.

Despite the true impossibility of return, I yearn for it. I crave it. Queer temporalities shatter the linearity of sequential time, the past, present, and future bleed together. My practice reckons with nostalgia and the impossibility of now through urgent evocations of past – my own and our collective losses.



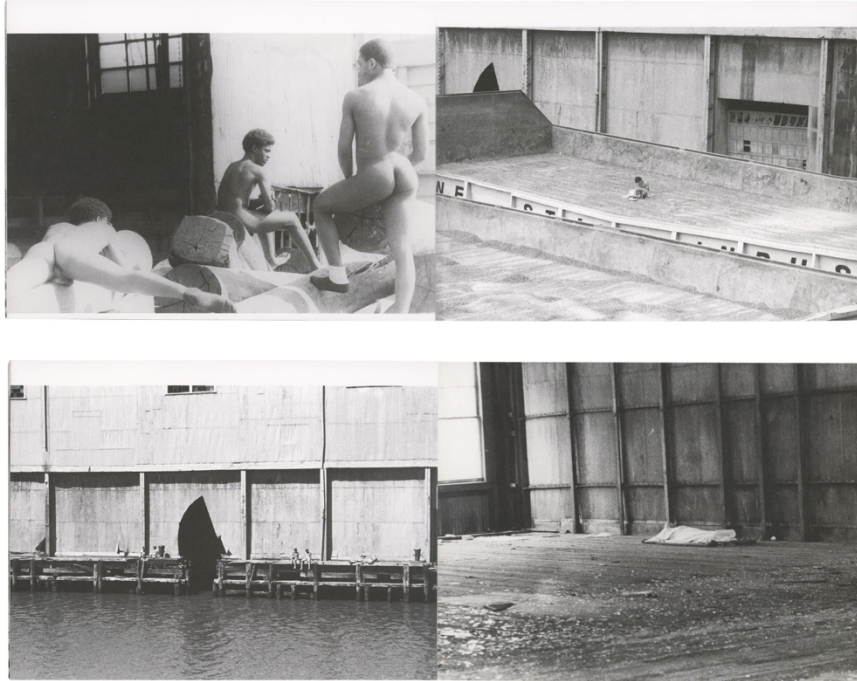


Figure 7. *The Piers*, Alvin Baltrop, 1975 – 1986.

### ***RUINS: PERFORMING QUEER HISTORY***

*The ruin is not in front of us; it is neither a spectacle nor a love object. It is experience itself.*

– Jacques Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind*

The ruin is experience itself. Throughout the 1970s and early 1980s, Manhattan’s Hudson River Piers became a site for queer worldmaking and intimacy in the shadows of the city. The dilapidated, ruin-like piers offered a gathering spot for queer life full of sunbathing, art making, and cruising.

For over a century, the Greenwich Village waterfront along the Hudson River, including the Christopher Street Pier at West 10th and West Streets, has been a destination for the LGBT community that has evolved from a place for cruising and sex for gay men to an important safe haven for a marginalized queer community – mostly queer homeless youth of color. Between 1971 and 1983 the interiors of the piers’ ruin-like terminals featured a diverse range of artistic work, including site-based installations, photography, murals, and performances.<sup>17</sup>

The abandoned landscape played an instrumental role in the outburst of queer culture during this period. By the mid 1980s, in the midst of the AIDS crisis, the city demolished the piers. To encounter Alvin Baltrop's photographs *The Piers (1975 – 1986)* today is to witness the queer placemaking out of ruin through anonymous sex, artmaking, and kinship. Even though the piers carried a history of violence and danger, the queer community forged new intimacies in these spaces of dilapidation.

These queer spaces, when cared for and maintained, provide continuity between the past and present as well as the opportunity for us to engage with the legacy of our ancestors. Gay cruising grounds in isolated landscapes such as The Meat Rack in Fire Island, Provincetown's Dick Dock, and Black's Beach in La Jolla still offer contemporary queers the potential for encounter, discovery, and intimacy. It remains a salient political act, however, not just to maintain, but to create new spaces of queer utopia, challenging what are often complicated, contradictory, and problematic inherited legacies often maintained by an exclusionary white, gay, cis-male logic.

Decades later, Every Ocean Hughes' *Piers (2009 – 23)* captured the demolished and forgotten residue of the piers with her camera. Eerie and haunting, piles of weak legs of the former crumbling piers scattered in the river linger at the shoreline of the city's West Side waterfront. Hughes' work joins two queer perspectives, decades apart, grappling with the relationships between bodies, place, and memory. Here, Hughes performs queer history – returns, reckons, recontextualizes – by collapsing queer temporalities. One foot in the now, and one foot in the past, Hughes memorializes “the marginalized communities and underground cultures that once occupied this unregulated waterfront”.<sup>18</sup>



Figure 8. *The Piers*, Every Ocean Hughes, 2009 – 2023.

Performing another piece of queer history, Dillon Chapman returns to the photographs of influential portrait photographers like Tom Bianchi and Robert Giard, gay artists that made extensive bodies of work on the idealized male nude. In her ongoing series, *fragments of desire (an index more than an archive)*, Chapman takes Polaroids of the photographs on her computer screen, cropping in on the subject's face, forming a hazy and haunting layer through a new image. This body of work is not an archive seeking to preserve the legacy of these earlier photographs, but “functions as an index, a reference point for queer male photography”. Within the process, Chapman inserts her own identity and positionality into the work, negotiating her acute relationship with these images and their legacies. To Asa Mendelsohn, Chapman's Polaroids ask, “how do we imagine and depict intimacy when we, as queers, as transsexuals in search of visual legacies, pick up a camera?”<sup>19</sup>

To perform queer history is to reach backward and grapple with ruin. It is to find material within the rubble. It is to find oneself within the rubble. It is to contend with one's queer legacy. Performing queer history is another attempt to situate my own understandings of selfhood, time, and place. I engage with artists and thinkers of the AIDS crisis such as David Wojnarowicz, Cookie Mueller, Felix Gonzales-Torres, and Herve Guibert, in part, as an act to preserve their legacy, to pick up where they left off, to honor their lost future. In combing through their notebooks, diaries, and journals, all full of life, passion, rage, inquiry, sex, and loss, we can see ourselves reflected inside them. We also bear witness to their unbecoming – their ruin.

### ***ON KEEPING A NOTEBOOK...***

*Why did I write it down? In order to remember, of course, but exactly what was it I wanted to remember? How much of it actually happened? Did any of it? Why do I keep a notebook at all?*

*– Joan Didion, On Keeping a Notebook*

Of course, the notebook is also a residue and a witness. My writing practice stems from my notebook-keeping, stringing together chains of images, longings, observations, whispers, and ruminations. Through re-employing a similar visual strategy of layering and repetition, one image fades into the dark just as quickly as it appeared. The writing flickers.

The notebook is a site akin to the box or the dresser drawer. The notebook holds within it distant memories and desires. My notebook-keeping practice involves both the sketching of my poetry and the caretaking of printed matter. The notebook is where prints are touched, fragmented, torn, layered, taped, photographed, and kept. Fragments of my poetry merge with fragments of other queer artists' writings that I deconstruct and weave together.

Keeping a notebook can be an act of self-preservation, as well as an act of disintegration – both of oneself and one's surroundings. Experiences and desires are broken down to bits and pieces, fragments. The becoming and unbecoming, the doing and undoing of myself. In keeping a

notebook, does one write to remember, or do we write to forget? While I know for certain the notebook is a witness, is it a witness to preservation or disintegration?



Figure 9. Notebooks and Boxes in my Studio, 2024.

*Notebook Fragment 01: A Night Sweat, A Slow Leak (April 2022)*

*A night sweat / A slow leak / Drivin through a forgotten city / This city has changed / Cities are only metaphors for my desires / Take the blue pills every morning / Holy blue pills / No questions asked / Can we leave the body out of it / Dried cum on skin / Dried cum on adidas socks / I see the fat disappear from the muscle / The muscle disappear from the bone / Urges / Impulses / Burns / Buzzcut Budweiser Buffalo Bayou Houston Texas / 7 miles a second Marfa lights / Headlights reflecting / Sun burst / Resisting the urge to look at the image before it develops / Motel room covered in moths / The reflected sun is much closer to our bodies / Show me what you can and can't do with that body / Show me what you can and can't do with that body / The broken sun / Time must be forgotten / Time must be forgotten to be experienced*

Notebook Fragment 02: The Night Was Made Twice As Long (September 2022)

*What more was there to say / Another picture was never made / The sky began to rupture / My ruptured youth / This is how to forget / Stoned at the gas station / Dripping pain / The cicadas whispering just another broken memory / All the party boys forgot about the party / Put out my thumb on that highway that led me straight to New York City / The desire for coffee and a very beautiful man / Watching his body undress and walk to the shore / I understand his movements before they actually occur / 6:21 jerked off a bit and spit and shot a load and gained a bit gained a bit of light clarity avocado salad in the morning / Polaroids hidden between pages / Dresser drawers / Back pockets of wrangler jeans / Sore wrists / The last time I saw him I saved his dried up cum on my pelvis for as long as I could / Lost dreams / Monkey pox vaccine / Service unavailable / My body undulating all over the docks in July / Looking at the light of the sun wishing the night be made twice as long*

Notebook Fragment 03: Limitless (March 2023)

*The inside of his mouth... limitless / A desire for the end of desire / Bite marks on a memory / In the shallows of the lake / A non-moment becoming a moment / I'm looking for a flash / Got his hands on his balls like ya want some of this faggot fucker? / Pain clinics of Florida feeder roads...in pain? Call now / Look Glance Glimpse Gaze Flash Watch See Squint / Lost Black Diamond Necklace / Julius Bar New York City / Peter Hugar's Hudson River / I found the patterns of a city on the crown of his head / At least 5 dead and 25 injured in gunman's rampage at a gay club in Colorado / I can see the shadow of your body move / Shadow of your body move with my eyes closed / There are certain faces I would like to see orgasm just for the pleasure of that decomposition / Decompose yourself / A non-moment becoming a moment / The drip of the drop / The drop of his sweat / From the tip of the shadow of his shoulder / Descending in slow motion down to the floor / I had a flashback of something that never existed / Spellin out his name in my stream of piss / A non-moment becoming a moment / Dissolving desire became bliss*

Notebook Fragment 04: As The Sun Wounds The Shadows (September 2023)

*As the sun wounds the shadows / Watch the line of his shoulder blade slip out of skin / So strange / Watch the soundless river shatter light into thousands of drops / So strange / The shadows are still cruising each other / He was whispering behind my closed eyelids / Blue jeans white wife beater / They remained there lying side by side for what may have been a long time or only moments / His voice shattered / The flash leaves scarlet afterimages / Is another past possible / Texas law on sodomy ruled unconstitutional / Blindly tearing at shirts to open them and feel that skin / It felt like the trees were moving past me / I tasted poison / Pissing on the fire / Coming back to you / I am the sound / Enter the room and wait for your eyes to adjust to the darkness / Scanning eyes that lock for an instant / Haunting / Trailing fingertips of sweat down my body / Rottweiler Teal Lake / The dog doesn't know the harm / Shadows forming in lake water*

***CHAPTER THREE: STAINED (THE ARCHIVE)***

## *IS ANOTHER PAST POSSIBLE?*

My praxis reckons with the archive in order to trace gay and queer desire through time while questioning what is remembered and what is left behind, what is preserved and what has disappeared. In looking, accumulating, and sorting through gay material and ephemera, I seek something unknown (and possibly unknowable) that has been lost. Lost futures? Lost desires? Lost dreams? I am not stitching the fragmentary pieces of the archive perfectly back together, but aggregating, merging, and rearranging its immense belongings. Through this weaving, disparate images, ideas, traces, and stains, are both concealed and revealed. Among all the layers, moments are both illuminated and in the dark. Is another past possible?

I work with jerk off material; touched, decayed, smeared, stained, used, and abused prints and photographs. The material did serve a utilitarian role – to get oneself off. To escape oneself for even a moment. I sit and study the photographs of sexy men full of youth embodying and performing desire, understanding that my relationship with these images is fraught. Do I want to be them, fuck them, or kill them? Is this not a question every gay man asks himself at one point or another?

I visit and draw from both formal and informal archives, ranging from basements of gay bars to carefully collected and sorted LGBTQ materials held behind the doors of universities like NYU's Fales Library and USC's One Archive. I collect zines that were created in order to circulate and share queer desire. I frequent historic and local gay bars such as Julius in New York, Charlie's Country Western Gay Bar in Denver, and the Eagle(s) of most major American cities. The gay bar is a kind of archive itself, holding memories and artifacts within its four walls.



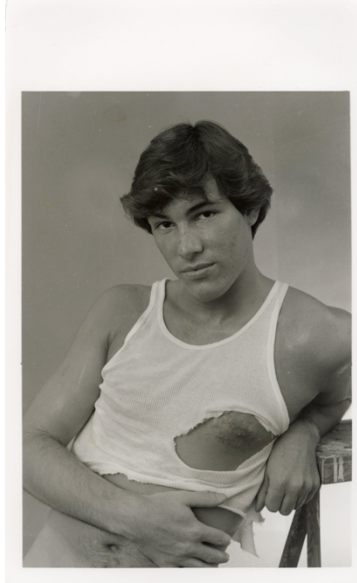


Figure 10. Silver gelatin print by Nick Burger, Date unknown.

This fall, I met a gay photographer, Nick Burger, at the Los Angeles Tom of Finland Fair and flipped through his box of old silver gelatin prints of men, so gloriously youthful, their beauty dripping off their bodies, in Southern California during the 1970's. Burger grew up in Kentucky and moved to Southern California in 1976 to work at a local camera shop in Orange County. His legacy will leave a treasure-trove of studio portraits of primarily young men in their 'prime' leading up to the AIDS crisis. This chance encounter, while as simple as flipping through a box of old photos this older man in front me took all those years ago, struck me as an entry point to a history. The encounter was a window into a history that I recognize and understand is not my own, but still, a history to which I can tether myself. A history that is indelibly a part of me. With every flip of a photograph, a new question arose. How has photography changed since then? How has portraiture? Beauty and desire? How have their bodies changed? Did most of these men die in their twenties? How have the photographs themselves changed over the course of fifty years? I see fingerprints, and what might be a coffee stain. Why has Burger kept these photographs and why is he presenting them now, selling them for a dollar-a-print? What is my attraction to them? Do I see

myself reflected in the subject? Do I see myself reflected in the photographer? Who is performing desire here – the photographs' subjects, Burger, or the viewer?

What compels me to a specific print? What is it that pricks my desire to look closer and hold that print in my hands? This is an inquiry I will continue to work to understand in my practice during the coming years. I look for minute details of prints – potent non-moments – in hope of revealing an idiosyncratic beauty hidden in the shadow. I search for prints that perform or seek to embody desire. I am drawn toward the messiness of collecting prints, placing them next to one another or on top of one another as a method of mark-making, to leave my trace, to draw constellations and to figure out some connection. This messiness, the slipperiness, the burst, the overflow, the scatter, the inability to be contained, I firmly believe is tied to discourses around queer attraction, repulsion, abjection, fixation, and eroticism.

I pursue a range of archival material that is reader-written and driven, that built not only a collective voice, but also a collective memory. What is of most importance to the integrity of the work is the variety of source material intermixed with my personal imagery. The personal images are glimpses into my contemporary worlds of intimacy, including self-portraits, portraits of lovers and friends, daily notes, records of travel, and my own box of pictures.

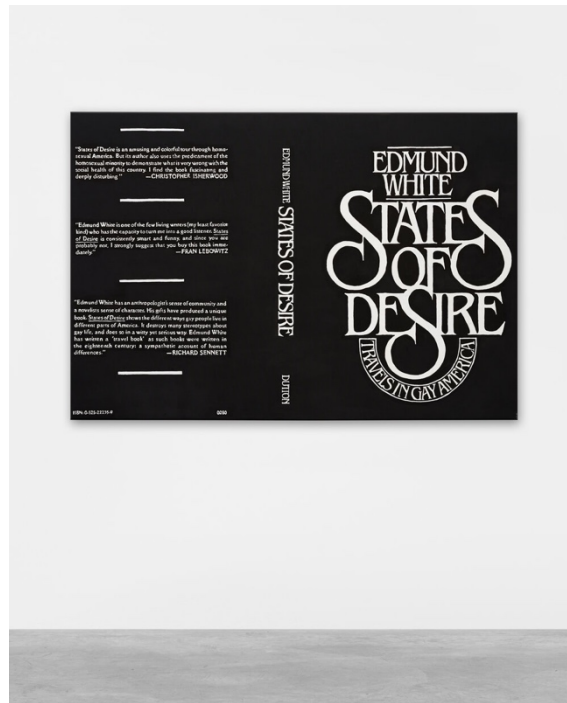


Figure 11. *States of Desire: Travels in Gay America* by Edmund White, 1980, Dean Sameshima, 2017.

## ***STATES OF DESIRE***

For *AS THE SUN WOUNDS THE SHADOWS*, I narrowed my research to the specific states I have lived in America including Texas, Arkansas, New York, Colorado, and California. My work is concerned with the relationship between queer placemaking and different American landscapes. In his 1980 *States of Desire: Travels in Gay America*, Edmund White wandered across the country on an anthropological study of gay men, revealing the different ways gay people lived, acted, gathered, and were seen. In his town-by-town odyssey, White offered his accounts and impressions, from the “butch guys in Houston” to the “leather, fist-fucking and S&M” scene in Denver.<sup>20</sup> In my work, I track the relationships and differences of queer culture in rural spaces like the South and West versus the urban landscapes of cosmopolitan cities like New York and Los Angeles.

Queer culture is often overlooked historically in places like Texas, Arkansas, and Colorado. Somehow, in the more rural spaces, queerness is everywhere and nowhere all at once. In living in these spaces, I know there are whispers of shame in the trees, the reek of sex and sweat in the humidity, a rush in the bayou, longing in the rot, and pleasure in the shadows. The material I find in the South and West are charged with complexity surrounding masculinity, power, Christianity, rural queerness, and the idea that homosexuality is “against nature”.

Growing up between conservative communities of Texas and Arkansas, there wasn’t a visible queer culture I could access in the early 2000’s. I moved to New York for art school, where I was luckily welcomed by queer faculty members and able to enter and identify with a queer network, a constellation. In New York, I studied and traced the gay liberation movements post-Stonewall 1969 to understand the origins of our visibility. In returning to the South, I was able to discover and perceive queerness out in plain sight – in the white wife beater gently tucked into the waist of the blue jeans. I understand now queerness has always been there, flickering right in front of me in plain sight, even as a kid by the bayou. Still, the queer community in the South largely remains in the shadows, often carrying very different lived experiences than urban queers with continuous struggles for liberation.

### ***THE GAY RODEO***

Spinning from the center of Charlie’s Country Western Gay Bar in Denver, a pair of disco cowboy boots throw and refract light all across the dancefloor as bodies move and sweat. Cowboy bartenders keep the beers and booze flowing. The first time I visited Charlie’s in 2016, I was mesmerized by the disco cowboy boots, I stared into their shimmer all night long. For many years, Charlie’s, a country gay man’s favorite haunt, held some of the Gay Rodeo archives in Miller Lite and Corona Extra shipping boxes in their Colfax Avenue basement.<sup>21</sup> Gay Rodeo-goer Cowboy

Frank cared for this archival material including photographs, programs, posters, buckles, ribbons, and magazines. He eventually created, developed, and managed the Gay Rodeo History: A Project of the Gay & Lesbian Rodeo Heritage Foundation.

The Gay Rodeo first took place in Reno, Nevada in 1976 and has traveled across Colorado, California, Arkansas, and Texas. From an early age, I was engrossed by the performances of hypermasculinity at the Houston Rodeo and Livestock Show, the grit, the cowboy's grip, and control over the animal. Bull riding, barrel racing, and tie-down roping all come down to the man's control over the animal. My fragmentary memories recall the sweat and blood of both the men and animals in the arena. The beer, the barbecue, and the cowboy's snakeskin boots. Amongst the crowd and echoes of the hollering, the rodeo also acted as an early stage for my desire. It was of course a spectacle, and I could look at the men's bodies bend, twist, sweat, bleed, and struggle for extended periods of time.

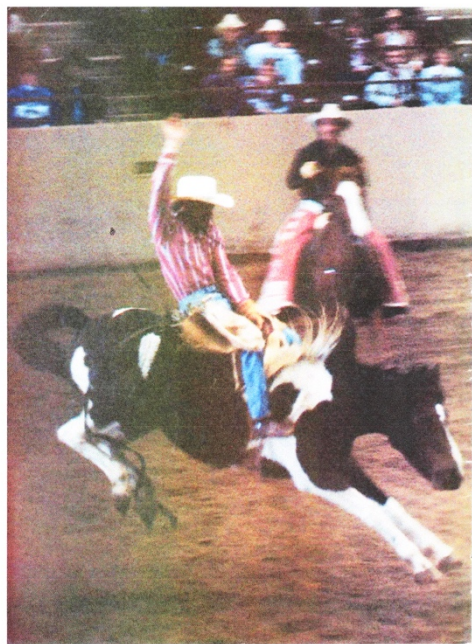


Figure 12. *COWBOY 01*, Nathan Storey, 2024.

The mythic figure of the American cowboy is perhaps the fundamental archetype of white heteronormative masculinity. The cowboy is known for his confidence, his hard-working spirit, and his chivalry. Simultaneously, he is dangerous, he is unpredictable, and he is not bound by convention. The American cowboy is supposed to be our hero, our brave vigilante fighting the barbarous indigenous hordes and colonizing the western landscape in the name of freedom. And he always, *always*, gets the girl. This cowboy is the foundational myth animating American cultural icons ranging from John Wayne to the Marlboro Man. To queer the cowboy complicates his greater mythology and challenges, even threatens, our understanding of sexuality, masculinity, and gender. The queer cowboy encourages us to reconsider and revise the constitutive assumptions that we have inherited from dominant culture by destabilizing one of the fundamental images of heterosexuality and masculinity, opening a new frontier for subject-formation in the American West. To put it in the words of country-singer Ned Sublette: “What did you think all them saddles and boots was about”.<sup>22</sup>

### ***BOULDER GAY LIBERATION COLLECTION***

The state of Colorado has long acted as a beacon of the West. As a kid, I visited the mountains every year, and eventually lived in Colorado during the chaos of the pandemic. In the Rocky Mountains, a certain kind of Cowboy masculinity is performed, and history maintained. My inquiries into rural queerness in the state led me to The Boulder Gay Liberation Collection.

Held in the University of Colorado Boulder’s Special Collections, the archive consists of materials collected by Stanley Hohnholz between 1969 -1995 from the Boulder Gay Liberation Front. Including newspaper clippings from the Boulder/Denver area, pamphlets, fliers and posters from dances, events, and parties held by the Boulder Gay Liberation including dances at Hidden

Valley Ranch, the archive serves as one window into a community on the brink of liberation, often gathering and joining forces in the local gay bars.



Figure 13. *IF YOU ARE GAY WEAR BLUE JEANS ON APRIL 14<sup>TH</sup>*, Nathan Storey, 2024.

In combing through the material, I came to understand liberation not as some stable, finite equilibrium, wholly achieved at once, but rather an ongoing process that needs to be continually defended and fought for, even today. These prints from another, perhaps more radical, time showed me that our liberation is only as unwavering as our support for its maintenance. Though backward-looking, the archive paradoxically gave me a glimpse into queer utopian futures that can resonate with and inspire us today.

# CONTACT YOUR FELLOW RFD READERS

Dear Fellow RFDers,

My name is Fr. Denis and I would enjoy developing a friendship with those male/female who are interested in developing a Independent Catholic Community dedicating itself to 1. Doing all possible good works. 2. To establish a Church presence in its area. 3. To recruit potential clergy and 4. Bring the Gospel and Sacraments to the faithful, sick, naked, hungry, thirsty, stranger, and in prisoned.

My Love and Prayers to all. Who-soever will may come!

In Love,

Fr. Denis Rush  
Community of the Good Samaritan  
6904 5th Ave. #114  
Brooklyn, New York 11209



Hi,

It's spring again out here on the East end of Long Island. Am I the only RFD reader, or are there others who love this North Fork as much as I do?

I'm a long distance runner in my mid-forties, weigh 150, 5'9" or so, have red hair.

I love the outdoors, cars, and boats. It's time to go rowing in the sun and running on the beach. It would be very pleasant to share these things with someone.

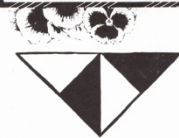
Jim  
P.O. Box 524  
Mt. Sinai, Long Island  
New York 11766

RFD prints contact letters free of charge. We also provide a free forwarding service for readers who wish to remain anonymous. Just give your address as "c/o RFD", and we will forward your mail (also free of charge). Of course, donations are always welcome!

Condense your letter to 200 words or less. Spelling and punctuation will be corrected unless you request that we print your letter "as is". Please be positive in stating your interests and preferences. Saying "no" to any particular trait or human characteristic may unnecessarily offend a brother.

The Brothers Behind Bars pen-pal program is a separate service provided for our readers to make contact with prisoners. You may want to write us for the active BBB pen-pal list before responding to unsolicited prisoner mail.

Send your letter to RFD, Rt. 1, Box 127-E, Bakersville, NC 28705.



Dear Possible Friend,

Might we click?

I live on a small lake just outside Saratoga Springs, a short way north of Albany in the foothills of New York's Adirondacks, near both Vermont and western Massachusetts.

Am hoping to find a sincere guy with a straight lifestyle, age 25-50, for possible 1-1 relationship.

Myself. I've only been out about a year. I'm divorced with two children, in my fifties, trim, 5'10 1/2", about 150 pounds. I presently teach, formerly stage-managed in off-Broadway theater in New York City. Lived in Paris one year-but am essentially a small town, rural person.

Enjoy music, reading, dancing, eating out, travel, walking, beaches, mountains-yet best is always sitting home relaxing with someone special.

I'd like to hear from you.

Might we click?

Sincerely,

Possible Friend  
Box 2174  
Clifton Park, New York 12065



Dear Friends,

I'm an early 40's GWM living in the eastern upstate New York area. I have an old rural home which keeps me busy with all sorts of maintenance and renovation projects. I also enjoy hiking, raising vegetables and fruit, traveling, photography, preserving what I grow, cooking, etc. I also spend lots of time at my Adirondack Mt. Cabin. I'd like to get in contact with compatible new friends 21 to 50 in the eastern NYS area to Canada and Vermont who might enjoy sharing similar interests. Hope you'll drop a line.

D.M.  
c/o RFD  
Route 1, Box 127E  
Bakersville, North Carolina 28705

Figure 14. Contact Letters, RFD Country Journal for Gay Men Everywhere.

## ***RFD: A COUNTRY JOURNAL FOR GAY MEN***

While visiting the Boulder archives, I stumbled upon *RFD*, a reader-written country journal for gay men everywhere, allowing gay men in rural places to connect with one another. Established in 1974, the journal soon became affiliated with the Radical Faerie movement, a 1970s sexual movement among gay, American men challenging commercialization and patriarchy, seeking to redefine the queer consciousness to adopt elements of anarchism and environmentalism. The journal rejected the longstanding notion that homosexuality – difference and deviance are “against nature”.

As the journal is reader-written, the content reflects the experiences of the readers and also includes the “Brothers Behind Bars” section where readers became pen pals with other gay men



who were imprisoned for their homosexuality. Editors thought it particularly important to highlight this risk to their readers who lived in rural areas, stating: "anti-gay laws are most often enforced in small towns and rural areas, away from the group power of organized gayness". In rural spaces, there are no gathering spots like the gay bar, but this printed journal in many ways acted as a facilitator for country men, not bound to the connective tissues of the cosmopolitan city.

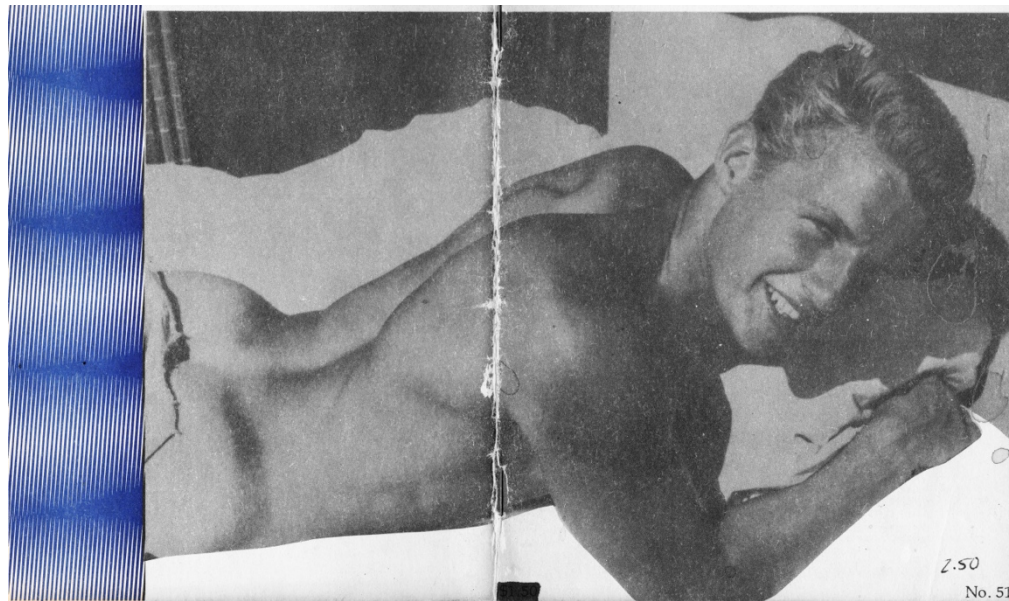


Figure 15. *Blue cover boy*, Straight to Hell, No. 51.

### ***STRAIGHT TO HELL***

*S.T.H. (THE MANHATTAN REVIEW OF UNNATURAL ACTS)*, founded by Boyd McDonald in 1971 and carried on by Billy Miller, published its readers' explicit sex stories as well as amateur photos sent into a New York City P.O. Box 20424. American gay men in the 1970s did not have unlimited outlets and gathering spots to find those of their kin, but they could find zines like *S.T.H.* to share their common experiences and desires. This encountering cultivated a recognition of one another, and in doing so, a recognition of themselves.

A year ago, my boyfriend gave me an issue of *S.T.H.* he found on the internet as a birthday present. The issue was made in the 1980s, yet somehow in reading the stories and looking at the pictures, I felt a part of the whole thing. This was near the beginning of my research for this exhibition, and I absolutely loved it and him for giving it to me.

*S.T.H.* brings together what could be found in your smut drawer. Smut, sexual materials like magazines, books, and pictures, actually derive from the word *smut* – matter that soils, blackens, stains, or taints, specifically like a particle of soot. It is no coincidence that smut is kept in the dresser drawer – a location both easy to access and to hide.



Figure 16. Clit Club NYC New Year's Eve Flyer.

### ***QUEER NIGHT CLUB EPHEMERA***

Prints even facilitate the very architectures of gay desire through flyers and posted bills of gathering spots, gay bars, or queer nightclubs. During the AIDS crisis, Artist Julie Tolentino established Clit Club (1990 – 2002), “a sex-positive mixed party for cis and trans women who self-identified as lesbian, queer, and androgynous, and their friends. These parties opened a larger dialogue in art and politics”.<sup>23</sup> It was the posted bill on a street corner, the nightclub flyer passed

around, that contributed to building a space for queer desire to exist, another act of queer collectivity.

The gay bar is a kind of archive itself – a site my longing for queer interconnectedness led me to many years ago. The matchbook and the photobooth strip, other forms of printed matter, are beloved and nostalgic artifacts that one could actually put in their pocket to take a piece of the bar home at closing time. The matchbook from the gay bar, while so everyday and used to simply strike a light for a smoke, depict the bar’s logos and their addresses, many of which are now lost to parking garages or office spaces. The photobooth strip, portraits taken behind the illuminated red curtain in the corner of the bar, can be thrown in a drawer or taped to one’s bathroom mirror. These small and cheap printed materials become evidence, fragments of our gay experience.

### ***ON THE LOSS OF THE PRINTED MATTER***

I am drawn backward to these archives of printed materials as I have come of age in the era of the relentlessly digital world. I did not encounter issues of *S.T.H.* when I was living in New York. More pictures exist now as jpegs and files, never actually touched with fingertips. Much of contemporary gay culture and desire is digitized, and I grieve the loss of touching, the loss of holding, the loss of passing prints. This too sparks a longing for the past. Even the act of cruising has increasingly become a lost art in contemporary queer culture – the passing glance or brush of a finger replaced with instant messages on no-stakes apps generating advertising revenue for large publicly-traded companies. The dark room has been traded for the board room through the digitalization of queerness within late capitalism. In this relentlessly disembodied era, my practice aims to produce and construct more material, physical prints to touch, handle, and manipulate in the studio.

***CHAPTER FOUR: AS THE SUN WOUNDS THE SHADOWS***

## *AS THE SUN WOUNDS THE SHADOWS*

First conceptualized in February 2023, the *AS THE SUN WOUNDS THE SHADOWS* exhibition is only the beginning of a larger investigation and research practice of queer print culture. The work here is not yet complete, I will dedicate the coming years to dissecting the immense relationship between print and queerness. My thesis exhibition acts as a beginning and includes selections from seven of my intersecting bodies of work; *THE BOX & THE DRESSER DRAWER*, *STAINS*, *STRAIGHT TO HELL*, *SWEATING*, *PICTURES OF PICTURES*, *LOST IN TIME*, and *TRACES*. I work in seriality, building bodies of work utilizing different yet overlapping strategies of collage, language, and fragmentation. My studio process involves picking at the same inquiries and fixations through various methods of printmaking, photography, and performance. The different works are in dialogue, in response to, and complicate one another. The bodies of work are inextricably tethered to one another. The myriad of methodologies in my studio is a direct reflection of my practice's interdisciplinary nature and impulse.

The title *AS THE SUN WOUNDS THE SHADOWS* was loosely conceived of this past summer, traveling between California and Colorado reading the script of Derek Jarman's film, *Blue* and John Rechy's novel, *Numbers*. Reading other queer artists' and writers' work is a significant part of my research on queer experiences, subjectivities, and legacies. *Blue* ruminates on quotidian life: getting coffee, reading the newspaper, and walking down the sidewalk, as well as meditations on illness and suffering. An overwhelming throughline to the piece is a constant rumination on light, darkness, vision, illumination, revelation. Rechy's *Numbers* follows Johnny Rio on a ten-day sexual hunt in the shaded glens and shadowy alcoves of the rambling Griffith Park in Los Angeles. A reader witnesses Johnny's sexual compulsions, his fixation on the passing of his youth, and obsession with performing his own desirability in the shadows.

I could not stop thinking of the shadow as a site. Constantly in motion and ephemeral, we cannot fully ever grasp the shadows. Ultimately, flickers of sunlight shatter and wound the shadows. The title refers to my preoccupation with ephemerality, darkness, concealment, revelation, light, and illumination. Again, Muñoz claims that queerness is always on the horizon, we can feel its warm illumination. I suggest that we can see it flickering in the shadows. Often, a shadow is thought to be a passive object cast by some central subject - much like the orthodox understanding of queerness in relation to a dominant heteronormativity. A radical rethinking of this relation, however, may offer a utopian potentiality in the shadow – a reversal of subject and object. We live in the shadow of the past, the shadow of the AIDS crisis. We must ask ourselves if we can inject agency into this position without rejecting its status as shadow, if we can see the power of the utopian shadow. This is a crucial question for queer politics today, especially as the question of assimilationism continues to challenge and splinter liberatory movements.

### ***FIRST GAY AMERICANS***

*AS THE SUN WOUNDS THE SHADOWS* is written in Genderfail’s protest typeface, “First Gay Americans”. Drawn from handmade banners from the National March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights in D.C in 1979, the “First Gay Americans” typeface is skinny, painterly, and queer. This sign acts as an entry to point to the exhibition. While not always explicitly overt, my work explores themes of queer joy and liberation, which is predicated upon uprising and protest. There would be no gay archive without these liberatory movements. To begin the show with a typeset drawn from the histories of queer protest, I seek to acknowledge and tether my work to lesbian and gay legacies and constellations.



Figure 17. *THE BOX, THE DRESSER DRAWER*, Nathan Storey, 2024.

### ***THE BOX, THE DRESSER DRAWER***

For *AS THE SUN WOUNDS THE SHADOWS*, I returned to the camera, shooting on medium format for the first time. As the exhibition is deeply invested in the ways that images last, change, slip away, and resurrect, it was necessary that I assume the role of a photographer again. I have located both my research and practice to the shadows, the ruins, the notebook, the box under the mattress, and the dresser drawer.

As you enter the antechamber of the gallery, two black and white photographs begin the exhibition. These photographs, made in my current home in California, depict my hands reaching for personal ephemera from an open box as well as a self-portrait within the mirror of a dresser, the drawers slightly tucked open. The old, worn-out decorative box once belonged to my mother, which I now keep in my bedroom full of personal printed material from over the years. The wooden chest the box sits on, as well as the mirrored dresser in the other photograph, were built by great grandfather and namesake, Nathaniel Freeman, in Beaumont, Texas over a hundred years ago. These objects and furniture, bound to the space of the home and my family history, have become fixtures of my own queerness.

## *STAINS*

The antechamber of the gallery also includes *STAINS*, two oil monotypes made in Colorado with found photographs from *RFD*. This series marks my first experience working on a traditional printing press, applying pressure to imprint, impress, and transfer oil to the paper. I used this opportunity to make my mark, to stain the transferred found photographs with my own hands. Mark-making as methodology is now essential to my practice in my efforts to expose, reveal, and leave marks, residue, stains. Can a stain be more than a mark, residue, or smut? Why is it our instinct to frantically clean up the stain, fix it, render it invisible? What might happen when we embrace our stains – no matter how ugly they may be? To embrace our own ugliness and surrender to our ruin.



Figure 18. *STAIN 01 & STAR (STRAIGHT TO HELL)*, Nathan Storey, 2024.



## ***STRAIGHT TO HELL: STAR, WHISPER, LOOKING***

*STAR (STRAIGHT TO HELL)*, *WHISPER (STRAIGHT TO HELL)* and *LOOKING (STRAIGHT TO HELL)* are re-photographs from *S.T.H.*, enlarged, cropped, and fragmented to the point where the original image falls apart into halftones. The three works selected for this installation include fragmented features of different men's faces. A snippet of the mouth becomes an entire whisper. A glimpse of a tattoo becomes a landscape. Repeated pieces of the eyes become windows.

## ***SWEATING***

The nightclub has long been a stage for queer connection, liberation, and preservation. For *SWEATING*, I collected queer nightclub flyers and bills posted on the streets in New York City and San Francisco in the 1980s such as Clit Club, MEAT, SHINE, and Distortion and re-photographed only a snippet of the poster, creating abstracted, atmospheric, euphoric fragments. With this work, I am very interested in the qualities of the print – how the prints were produced during this era as well as how they survived over time. I am drawn to the half tones, the misprints, the fades, the staples, and the saturation.

## ***LOST IN TIME***

My ongoing series, *LOST IN TIME*, includes text-based works drawn from fragments of my notebook-keeping practice as well as from the works of other queer artists and thinkers. Inspired by signage, especially of queer protest, the letters are fluctuating, flickering, glitched. They are produced through a hybrid process of printing, recapturing, and reprinting. The selected prints for this exhibition, *TIL WE ALMOST DROPPED*, *HE WAS WHISPERING BEHIND MY CLOSED EYELIDS*, and *SHIT STAINS ON SHEETS* serve as quiet murmurs or whispers among

the constellation of images. The text-based works add a crucial layer to the exhibition as text and typography have been so critical to printed matter and the dissemination of information.

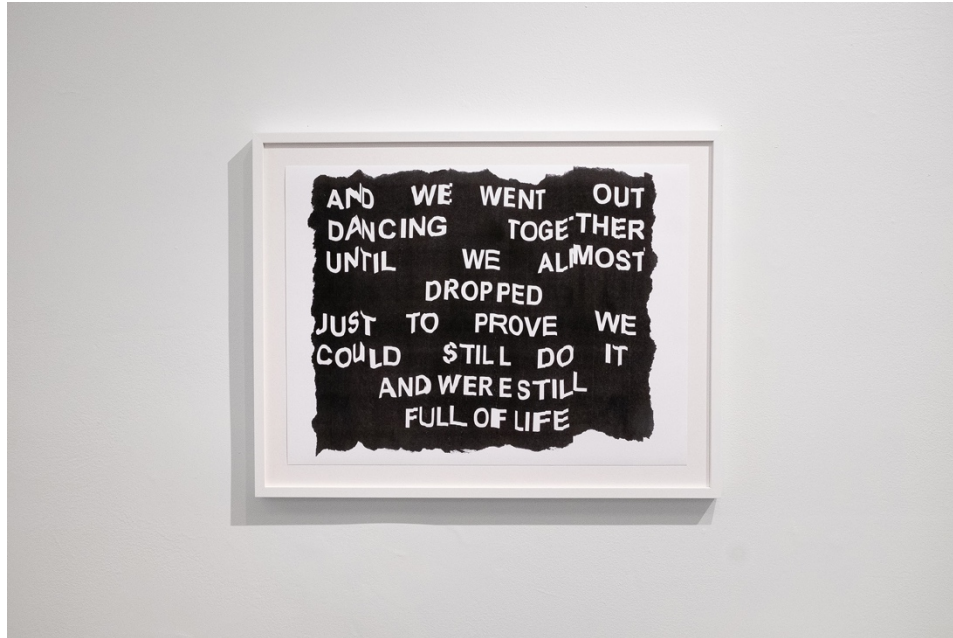


Figure 19. *LOST IN TIME (TIL WE ALMOST DROPPED)*, Nathan Storey, 2024.

### ***PICTURES OF PICTURES***

*THE BOX, THE DRESSER DRAWER* led me to a fixation with pictures of pictures. Images of images. I have always layered image after image after image, but this newer impulse of involving the camera, photographing the pictures allowed for a more rhizomatic potentiality – more possibility, reproducibility, and play. In taking pictures of pictures, I am filtering the pictures through my own subjectivity. Not only am I resurfacing pictures from another era, but I am making photographs of them with my body in the now. A peek into my process is also made utterly visible; the touching, taping, tacking of prints to my studio wall. A viewer can see the details of scattered holes from nails and tacks on my studio wall.

The pictures are constantly in flux, never fixed, and their meanings become slippery. Similar to my studio, throughout the exhibition, some images repeat or show up in another iteration. This is intentional, as it is my belief the pictures live many lives, are reproduced, reprinted, misprinted, misused, and find various forms in different places. They are tucked away, and then resurfaced and repurposed. No picture is really ever final, no picture is really complete.



Figure 20. *TRACE 01 (INK STAINS ON OUR FINGERTIPS)*, Nathan Storey, 2023.

### ***“TRACES”...NOTES ON THE QUEER TRACE***

Throughout this writing, I have argued extensively for the power of mark-making, imprinting, and leaving trace. My ongoing series, *TRACES*, are small- and large-scale wall bound assemblages of different textures, materials, fragments that together, build a constellation – a scatter. I have always been transfixed by the methodology of collage, assemblage, and photographic arrangements. Recently, I have researched a group, or rather a movement, of

intergenerational queer artists working with and around the scatter. From Robert Rauschenberg to Lyle Ashton Harris, Tom Burr, Jack Pierson, A.L. Steiner, and Elle Perez, these queer artists have embraced the layered, investigative, fluid messiness. The scatter is reminiscent of a process map, a detective's evidence board, or even the corner of a teenager's bedroom. I believe there is something inherently queer here in the collage – the layers imbued and dripping with fixation and eroticism.

Throughout the past three years, I have considered *trace* as a methodology. I trace the relationship between printed matter and queerness. To trace is not only to find or discover by investigation, but also to *copy* (a drawing, map, or anything really) by drawing over its lines on a superimposed piece of transparent paper. The trace is a mark or other indication of the existence of or the passing of something. But the something is no longer there, the trace acts as its only evidence. The trace is at times visible in plain sight but can also be hidden in the shadows. It is my conviction that queer people can identify with the trace; can see themselves or something about our collective refracted within the mark and residue.



Figure 21. *TRACE 06 (NOT NOW BUT NOW)*, Nathan Storey, 2024.

## ***NOTEBOOK FRAGMENTS PERFORMANCE***

On the evening of April 12, as a closing to the exhibition, I hosted *NOTEBOOK FRAGMENTS PERFORMANCE*. The performance was a reading of fragmented excerpts from my notebook-keeping practice, including layered and intimate longings, ruminations, and questions on memory, desire, pain, loss, and the passing of time. The reading was set to the ticking of a clock and track composed by Jared Rosamilia.

## ***THE CONTEMPORARY LANDSCAPE***

As an artist, curator, writer, and facilitator, I seek dialogue and connection to many other contemporary, emerging artists and thinkers. Dillon Chapman explores hauntology and how it relates to trans/gender expansive histories through her Polaroids of prominent gay photographers. I am drawn to Jessica Buie's methods of mark-making as well as her recontextualization of found images and lesbian material. Ksenia M. Soboleva, a New York based writer and art historian specializing in queer art and culture, researched the role and work of lesbian artists during the AIDS crisis in her dissertation, *Fragments: Art, AIDS, and Lesbian Identity in the United States*. The work of Texas-based artist, RF. Alvarez creates incandescent images of queer joy such as two-steppers embracing at the honky tonk, countering the historical erasure of the queer American West. Robert Martin seeks to demonstrate a reality of queerness in rural America in their paintings of Midwestern dive bars, skinny dips in the lakes, and wildlife. Additionally, I am drawn to artist-run print presses that advocate for queer publishing and typography. Genderfail by Be Oakley and Raw Meat Collective by Kyle Quinn support and produce LGBTQIA+ artists and their print projects. While my work is certainly tethered to and referential of artists of another era, this group of contemporary artists and friends inspire my practice. Our production of queer art not only reckons with collective legacies, but also leaves our own imprint for the future generations.

*INSTALLATION IMAGES*



Figure 22. *AS THE SUN WOUNDS THE SHADOWS 01*, Nathan Storey, 2024.



Figure 23. *AS THE SUN WOUNDS THE SHADOWS 02*, Nathan Storey, 2024.



Figure 24. *AS THE SUN WOUNDS THE SHADOWS 03*, Nathan Storey, 2024.





Figure 25. *AS THE SUN WOUNDS THE SHADOWS 04*, Nathan Storey, 2024.



Figure 26. *AS THE SUN WOUNDS THE SHADOWS 05*, Nathan Storey, 2024.



Figure 27. *AS THE SUN WOUNDS THE SHADOWS 06*, Nathan Storey, 2024.



Figure 28. *AS THE SUN WOUNDS THE SHADOWS 07*, Nathan Storey, 2024.



Figure 29. *AS THE SUN WOUNDS THE SHADOWS 08*, Nathan Storey, 2024.

***CHAPTER FIVE: UNDERTOW EDITIONS***

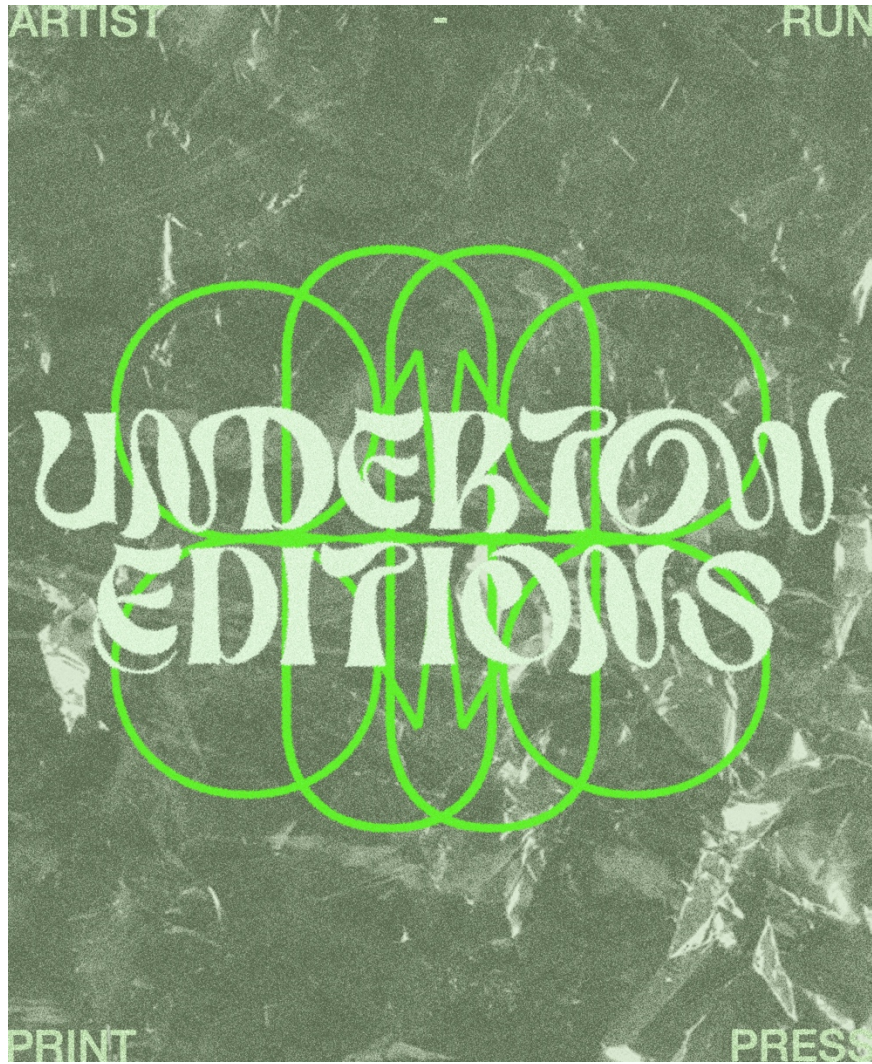


Figure 30. *UNDERTOW EDITIONS*, Nathan Storey, 2024.

### ***MANIFESTO***

UNDERTOW EDITIONS is an artist-run press supporting queer artists' printed matter and ephemera. Collaborating with emerging, mid-career, and established artists, UNDERTOW produces books, zines, editions, and other ephemera such as posters, postcards, and matchboxes. Established in the summer of 2024 by Nathan Storey, UNDERTOW is a platform for historically underrepresented visual artists who explore and cultivate queer print culture.

Gay zines, chapbooks, porn, and journals remained clandestine until the 1970s, often passed around and carried in brown bags. Nevertheless, the relationship between print and queer culture flourished, perhaps because of print's potential for non-heteronormative self-understanding. Queer zine-making dates back to a time when queer consciousness was first evolving. Strikingly personal and raw, queer prints and zines continue to be so critical because they serve to create and foster community.<sup>24</sup>

An UNDERTOW is the underlying current, at odds with the water's direction, pulling our bodies back inward to the sea as the waves break near the shore. bell hooks proposes the notion of being "queer as being about the self that is at odds with everything around it and has to invent and create and find a place to speak and to thrive and to live".<sup>25</sup> Queer artists, throughout history and in this contemporary moment, invent and create prints to ensure our survival, liberation, and legacy.



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