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The Big Gay: An Intervention into the Visual Culture of Leather Kink Spaces

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The Big Gay: An Intervention into the Visual Culture of Leather Kink Spaces

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS  
in  
DIGITAL ARTS & NEW MEDIA

by  
Jordan Fickel  
June 2024

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## Abstract

# The Big Gay: An Intervention into the Visual Culture of Leather Kink Spaces

By Jordan Fickel

The Big Gay is an ongoing project intended to interrogate and update the visual culture of gay, leather, and queer kink community spaces, specifically bars. The first iteration featured a collaboration and curation with 8 different artists, each expressing their own vision of what erotic masculinity could be on wooden cutouts created at a superhuman scale. I traveled throughout California assisting in the creation of these pieces, the majority of which went on to be featured in my MFA thesis exhibition, Eagle UCSC.

For the exhibition, a small wooden bar was installed in the center of the installation. The pieces were suspended in the air, giving viewers a sense of a space while also allowing them to feel as though the pieces were erotic participants in the communal physical experience. On the bar were physical magazines and flickering projections expressing the history of the visuals in these spaces, as well as a small television displaying documentation of the manufacturing of the pieces around the bar. I placed myself as a bartender in this space, serving drinks but also explaining the purpose of the project, the history of leather spaces, and the manufacturing of the pieces suspended around the viewers.

The first iteration of The Big Gay will be completed once the pieces are installed in queer kink spaces, in dialogue with existing artwork and directly intervening into the historical and rarely updated visual culture of these spaces.

## Dedication and/or Acknowledgments

Thank you to Patrick Stephenson, without whom I would not have gone to graduate school, without whom this project would have never happened, and whose assistance and insight made this as much his project as mine. To Colleen Jennings for your support and assistance with the materials and installation and unwavering support. To the DANM cohort of 2024, Robbie Trocchia, Elliot White, Kris Funk, and Saul Villegas, for supporting me the whole way. To Elizabeth Swensen for her incredible patience while I asked basic questions about grad school repeatedly. To Bennett Williamson for teaching me to scope large projects. To the incredible artists who offered to create large scale pieces to support this vision and often stepped outside their comfort zone: Tim'an Ford, Serge Gay Jr., Drew Green, Grisser, DJ Kirkland, David Maldonado, and Sunny Torres. To William "Taurus" Webster, whose prolific work inspired this project.

This paper is dedicated to all the passionate and creative queers who, unable to find the art of their desires, create it themselves. Hit me up and let's make a big horny cutout version.



# I. Introduction: Buff White Cops On The Walls

Entering a leather bar in 2024 often gives a similar visual experience of the architecture, art and aesthetic to entering a leather bar in 2004, or 1994. One might notice the black walls, the red lights, the various symbols and devices for bondage and fetish purposes - maybe decorative, maybe ready to be used. Also present is the artwork: usually larger than life depictions of men in leather. Often they are adaptations of the work of Tom of Finland - an artist active from 1950 to 1990 who shaped the look of gay culture and its desires in the latter part of the 20th century, and the most influential creator of gay pornographic images (Slade 2001). When these are not adapted from his work they are often adapted from his contemporaries, and nearly indistinguishable from his work. This artwork features images of white, muscled men dressed in iconic leather outfits: hypermasculine exaggerated versions of bikers, cowboys, police, and military.

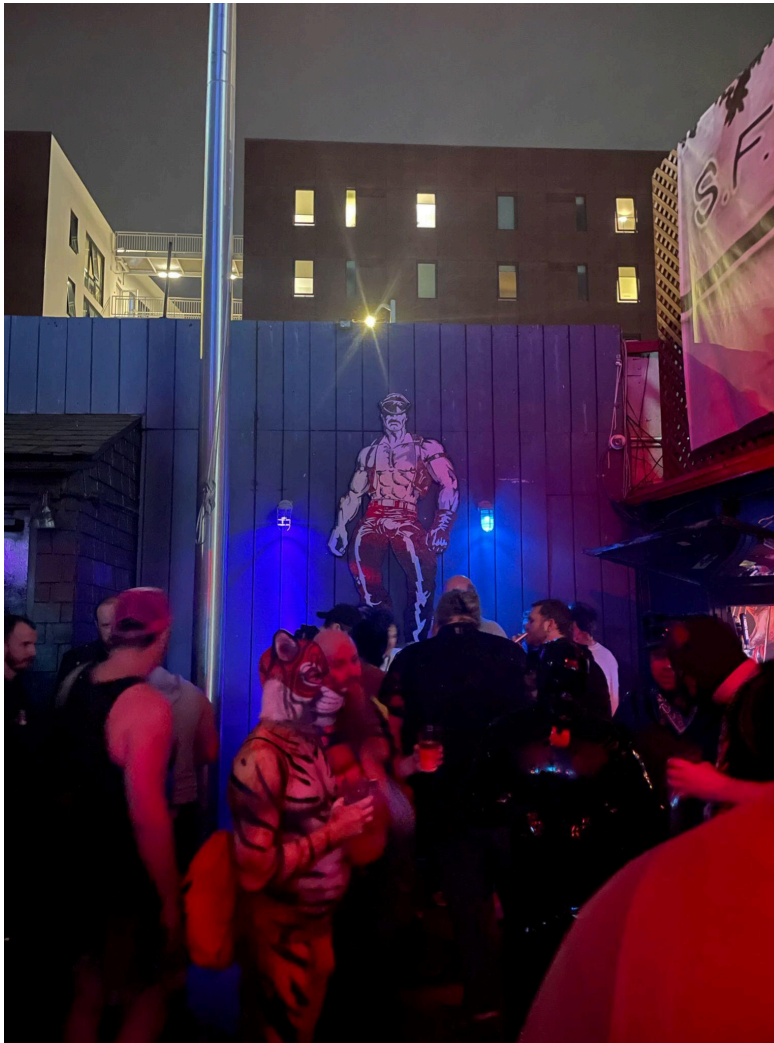


*Figure 1: A photo of patrons at The Precinct in Los Angeles in front of a wooden cutout*

In the past, the communities that these bars served primarily featured men who looked like these icons or were attracted to them (Lahti 2008, 192). The artwork served to validate and celebrate their desires, signaling that in these spaces their nontraditional erotic fantasies were something to be proud of. One interviewee in a documentary of Tom of Finland's work said "Seeing two blue-collar men together enjoying each other made it more acceptable to me. From a blue-collar background, up to this point all associations had been negative with it. It made me more comfortable with the fact that I am gay". Another simply stated, "It wasn't until I saw Tom of Finland's work that I realized it was possible to be gay and positive" (Pohjola 1992). Conversely, his work can uphold hegemonic structures of beauty, sexuality and power. It can "...homogenize and normalize the body. Their images, for all their supposed sexuality and virility, homogenize by demonstrating sameness of race, class, and especially gender." The physical spaces that these artwork exist in can also "...either sanction or discipline ... performances of hyper-masculinity—and sometimes they do both simultaneously" (Childs 2017, 2, 105).

The clientele and function of leather bars has transformed over the years, however. No longer solely a place for cis gay men into kink and fetish to hook up, these spaces have adapted to a new kind of patronage to stay relevant and thriving in their communities. Leather bars host nights for people with newer and alternative kinds of bodies and erotic desires, ones not represented by the artwork on the walls. "Increasingly, cruisy men's bars are all-purpose fetish and kink spaces that blend older and newer practices, and younger queer people increasingly embrace different kinks" (Mattson 2023, 207, 208). The term itself already takes on a variety of meanings. As Gayle Rubin once loosely defined it, "...unique pleasures, particular pitfalls, and endless diversity of what we call, for lack of a better term, 'leather'" (Gayle Rubin 1993, p.5). The amorphous term "leather" still shifts to adapt itself to newer, usually queer kink, and the kinks present in "leather" spaces are changing as well.

The preferences of patrons and their attire have changed significantly from the traditional leatherman aesthetic as well. "Cruisy men's bars have all had to adapt to remain relevant, with competition from new technologies, changing community attitudes, and changing relationships to the clubs and organizations that sustained these bars through difficult times, including multiple pandemics." (Mattson 2023, 211).



***Figure 2: A photo of patrons in various kink and fetish gear at The Eagle in San Francisco in front of a wooden cutout***

The artwork, however, has not changed. The Big Gay is a curatorial, collaborative art project with erotic queer artists. For its first iteration, I assisted in manufacturing

large-scale versions of erotic illustrations on wooden plywood and intend to place them in gay/leather/kink bars as an alternative and updating of the existing visual culture in these spaces. This iteration of the project also featured an installation - Eagle UCSC - that served as a deconstructed leather space featuring the 10 pieces completed by the time of the installation. These pieces were crafted all over the state of California over the course of four months, and will ideally be installed in leather spaces local to the artists.

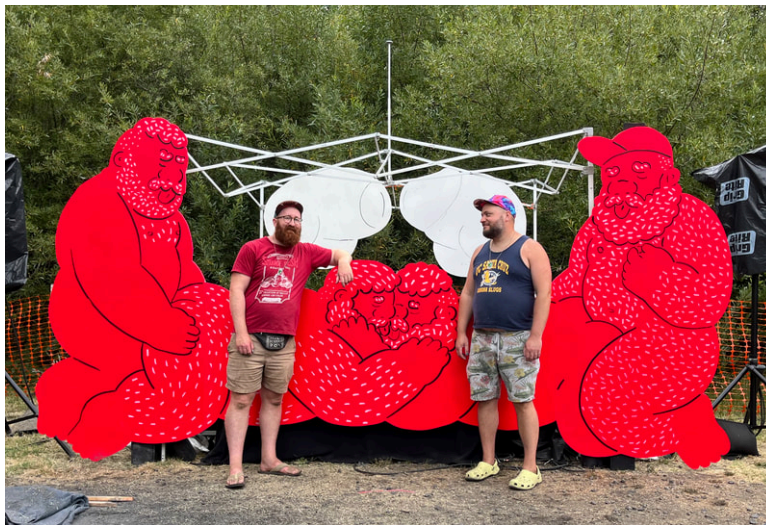
Right now, the existing art in gay and leather bars is not documented or interrogated. The regular patrons of these places see this art every time they enter these spaces, but they don't seem to see the homogeneity of these pieces or the potential for change. These figures are ubiquitous and unexamined. Simultaneously, leather bars around the world are in danger of closing. 70 percent of them closed between 2002 and 2021, a rate over 60 percent faster than gay bars in general (Mattson 2021, 6). Gendered queer spaces are closing at a much more rapid rate than any other kind of queer space, and the leather/kink bars that have adapted and broadened their communities are the ones that are thriving. Art that represents the current communities in these spaces can help these important institutions survive by representing and celebrating the people who currently spend their time there. Through my art practice as a part of the art duo BEARPAD I'm in a unique position to help create these pieces, as adapting digital illustrations to large scale wooden cutouts is a large part of our process and we also regularly frequent these places for professional, artistic, and social reasons. Much of the existing artwork in these bars is in the form of the wooden cutout - as I adapt illustrations into this format I pay homage to the existing artwork and the previous artists who adapted them.

The pieces I'm collaborating on in The Big Gay will better represent current leather communities and make them feel more comfortable with their bodies and their desires,

the way that Tom of Finland's artwork "sought to eliminate gay guilt, to correct injustices, to validate gay men, their desires and their experience..." (Snaith 2003, 77).

## II. History, Practice, Inspiration, Methods

I began a close partnership and romantic relationship with Patrick Stephenson, the artist behind BEARPAD (an art/lifestyle brand focusing on the gay 'bear' community), in early 2020. Over the next year or two, he trained me in parts of his existing art practice, which included manufacturing his illustrations on a large scale as wooden cutouts, changing BEARPAD from a solo project into a collaborative project. The intention behind BEARPAD is to be explicitly fat positive, sex positive, and queer with the bodies presented in the artwork. The idealized version of BEARPAD involved making large works, ones that required more than one person to manufacture and install, and our partnership created new opportunities to create bigger pieces and take the art to new places. The bear community and leather community often mingle in the same places, and the work that we made was often presented in various leather and kink spaces in many different spaces - spaces where I noticed the same kind of art over and over.



***Figure 3: A photo of a BEARPAD installation with myself and Patrick standing in front of it***

The artwork in these spaces were almost always wooden cutouts adapted from the work of Tom of Finland, and signed “Webster.” I began to make a habit of asking bartenders and patrons in these spaces how long the pieces had been there, and who made them, but I was never given a clear answer. Usually I was told that they had just been there for years. The dates on these pieces (when they were dated) place them between 1994 and 2014. I became curious about who Webster was, why and how he had made all these pieces, and what these pieces meant to the people who were in these places frequently. I began documenting the existing pieces when I saw them, as well as other kinds of art in these spaces. I began thinking of ways that we could get more BEARPAD artwork in conversation with these historical pieces.



***Figure 4: a close up of a wooden cut out in a bar, signed 'Webster 2004' and bearing the text 'original image Tom of Finland'***

I began the Digital Arts and New Media program at UC Santa Cruz in the Fall of 2022, with a focus on interactive design and audio processing. As my interests and skills are primarily in interactive installation, game technologies, and sound design, I worked on a series of art projects reflecting those skills. In the Spring of 2023 I saw the work and installations of the students graduating from the program, and was struck by the incredible amount of work each student put into their project compared to the very small amount of people who actually witnessed their work. It was gated at the UCSC campus, miles away from any central meeting space in the town of Santa Cruz. The time came to choose a thesis project, and my project decision was informed by the lack of interest, feedback, and support from faculty, as well as my desire to work on a project that had a direct impact on a community that I cared about, rather than a piece that exists in a campus building for a week then taken down, seen by over 60 people if I'm fortunate. The project would also put me in touch with a number of gay bars and artists working in the field, which could prove advantageous for BEARPAD in the future. It would also involve me traveling and spending time with artists that I admired, which sounded like a much more pleasurable experience than spending weeks programming a sound or game-based interactive installation. Despite this initial intention of the project, I also had the opportunity to create an alternative kind of media installation at UC Santa Cruz, influenced by my experience from years of bartending and event promotion. I could not pass up the opportunity to explore the potential transformation of a gallery space using personal cultural experiences.

In 1990 Rirkrit Tiravanija staged a performance, *Untitled*, where he cooked and served pad thai at the Paula Allen gallery in New York. An early example of the relational aesthetics movement, he described one of the materials of the piece as "a lot of people" (Swanson 2023). This work intervened in a public institutional space, transforming the gallery into a communal meal experience by establishing an experiential psychosocial



environment. He also created a temporary community in a sterile gallery setting by bringing in his own culture in a way that was straightforward to experience and consume. I was interested in generating a similar experience with an installation using my project. Unlike *Untitled*, my installation would not bring in commentary about the art world's capitalistic tendencies by eschewing physical objects as the art (Bhargava 2023), but could instead focus on the creation of a temporary community through the aesthetics and culture of leather bars.

The Big Gay began as an investigation and critique into the works of Tom of Finland and their place in gay culture. BEARPAD was a featured artist at Safe Words comedy show at the Eagle in San Francisco - a show that features primarily women comedians. Seeing women on stage featured, the audience a mixture of body shapes and gender presentations, and then seeing the Tom of Finland artwork on the walls gave me a sense of what one might call ludonarrative dissonance in a video game - a sense that the story being told (in this case by the environment) does not fit the actions of the participants (Hocking, 2007). At a drag show called Fat Slut at The Precinct in Los Angeles I saw a celebration of various gender performances by people of different skin colors while a 16 foot white cop on the wall stared at us all, giving me a similar sense of unease. While it's possible to make the argument that Tom of Finland's work, and by extension popular leather fetishes, are subverting masculine and fascistic ideas of power and pleasure, the intention of the artist himself and those who wear more traditional leather outfits are generally of unreflexive worship of hegemonic masculinity (Snaith 2003). When Touko Laaksonen (Tom of Finland) was asked about his erotic drawings of Nazis, for instance, he reflected, "The whole Nazi philosophy, the racism and all that, is hateful to me, but of course I drew them anyway—they had the sexiest uniforms!" (Rimanelli, Oct. 2015). My personal experience with leather men is similar, they have told me over and over that they wear it because they think it's hot, and they don't often seem to think any further

about it. I found this fascinating, and began researching this more closely. Leathermen often don hypermasculine, stylized attire resembling bikers, cops, cowboys, and military personnel. This choice of wardrobe appears to fetishize an older, American masculinity as the most erotically charged form (Snaith, 2003). However, the pieces on the walls of bars are usually just the police or biker look.

One of the more interesting conversations that I had on this topic was with a straight woman who knew a bit about the history of the artwork, and was convinced that it was popular because it was so subversive. She did not seem to know about its function in the leather community as primarily erotic fetish art that reifies existing power dynamics. "Although Tom's pictures may invoke subversive meanings, this does not prevent these same images from reinscribing and circulating oppressive discourses" (Lahti 2008, 188).

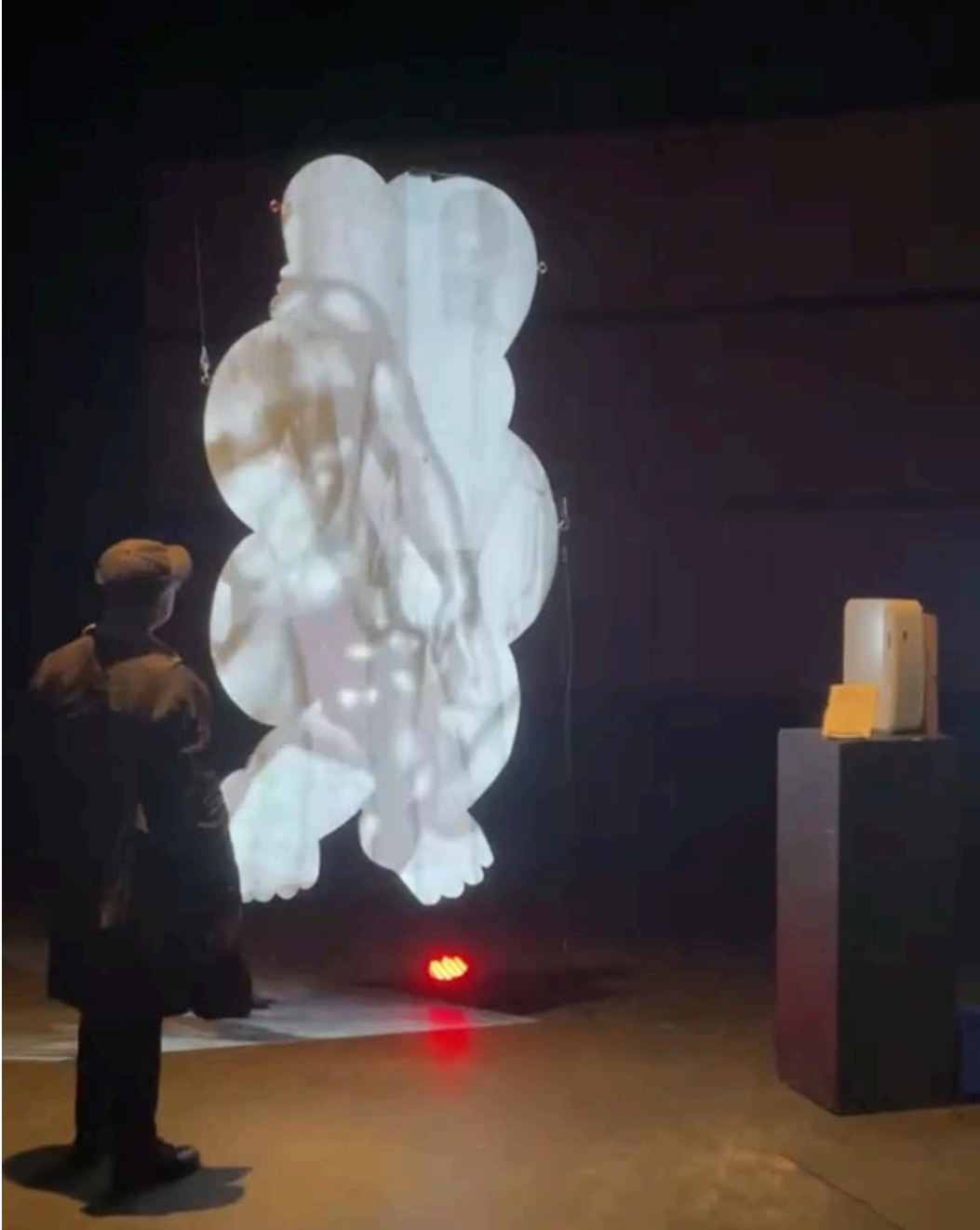
Perhaps the reason that his artwork has gained so much traction outside of gay and leather culture is because of this - people in the art world who don't exist in leather circles only see the subversions of power present in his work and don't understand the erotic upholding of hegemonic power structures. I spoke with a friend who was much more involved in leather culture than I am. He held similar views about representation and the art present in leather spaces, but he still called my thesis proposal 'hysterical' after reading through it, due to its critical take on the works of Tom of Finland and their relationship to leather culture - specifically, to those who idolize and embody this artwork, as many men "...have built their bodies and adapted their behaviors and wardrobes to correspond to those of the muscular men with their leather outfits in Tom's drawings" (Lahti 2008, 187). These men may have difficulty with critique of Tom of Finland's work and its effect on leather culture as the work and its symbolic meaning is so embedded in their own ideas of themselves.

Through many conversations and research on this topic, I came to the conclusion that it's not my place to put any sort of judgment on what gets people off, and if I really wanted to explore this topic in my thesis it would require tangential and extensive research, which is antithetical to the experience I wanted to have creating this work. I wanted to spend my time primarily making big horny artwork with my friends, and have a positive impact on underrepresented people in leather and kink spaces. I changed the way I spoke about *The Big Gay*. It was no longer a critique of the eroticized power of white masculinity, it was now a community project about better reflecting the desires and forms of the existing leather/kink community while helping these spaces survive. The actual project remained almost identical before and after this change, but the shift in presentation allowed me to focus more on the work that I found valuable and suitable for my practice.

I originally intended to heavily feature documentary elements in my installation. I was fascinated by the mystery of who originally made the wooden cutouts that exist in these bars - who was Webster? The internet revealed almost no information, save for a brief mention of an artist named "Taurus Webster" in an article regarding the Tom of Finland Foundation (Meyer, 2020). Searching for Taurus Webster returned no other results. After traveling around and asking people I noticed a plaque at The Barracks (a popular leather bar in Cathedral City with more pieces by him than any other bar I had visited) dedicated to a William Webster. Upon searching for William Webster, I found a video of a local newscast in the early 1990s featuring an 'eccentric' artist in Palm Springs named William Webster, who signed the abstract art pieces in the same way as the leather figures (Grandy, 2009). I located him on Facebook and spoke to him briefly about his work with the cutouts, where I learned (among other things) that the pieces that he made were without the Tom of Finland Foundation's blessing. I was planning on a more formal interview with William Webster about his history with the pieces - I wanted to ask him what his inspiration was, how many he made, where he installed them, and more. When I

contacted him to check his availability, he wasn't able to commit to an interview before the installation due to health reasons. I chose instead to focus on creating the pieces.

### III. Investigation and Intention



*Figure 5: a photo of 'Flat Desires' installed at UCSC*

After choosing a topic of research, my first piece investigating these ideas was Flat Desires, installed at UC Santa Cruz during their arts open studios in the Fall of 2023. The ideas I wanted to interrogate involved the works of Tom of Finland, alternative erotic art of the male body, and the viewer's idea of their bodies in relationship with the artwork. I took an existing piece of BEARPAD artwork - an 8 foot tall wooden cutout in the shape of a chubby man in a pose that could be construed as dancing, or flirty - and painted the back of it white to use as a projection surface. I suspended it in the air with the white side facing the entrance of the installation space. I collected digital erotic works by Tom of Finland; I was able to source the largest and most complete collection of his work from a torrent website that featured gay pornography. I created a video of over 3,500 drawings shown in rapid succession at a length of just over 4 minutes long. The images flashed by too swiftly to absorb details, yet ideally seeped into the viewer's subconscious, akin to evenings spent in bars with his artworks adorning the walls—details fading, but leaving behind an impression of idealized masculinity.

This video was projected onto the blank side of the piece. Mixed in with the flickering images was a live video feed of the viewer, occasionally fading in and out. This gave the viewer the opportunity to see their bodies juxtaposed directly with Tom of Finland's erotic fantasies, as well as the outline of the BEARPAD piece. The other side of the piece had the detail of the illustration, offering an alternative to the bodies presented in the projection. I chose to drop the more vexing aspects of this piece with work moving forward - in this case the interactivity provided with the webcam and live video processing software - but was compelled by the physicality of the piece to continue working on this topic.

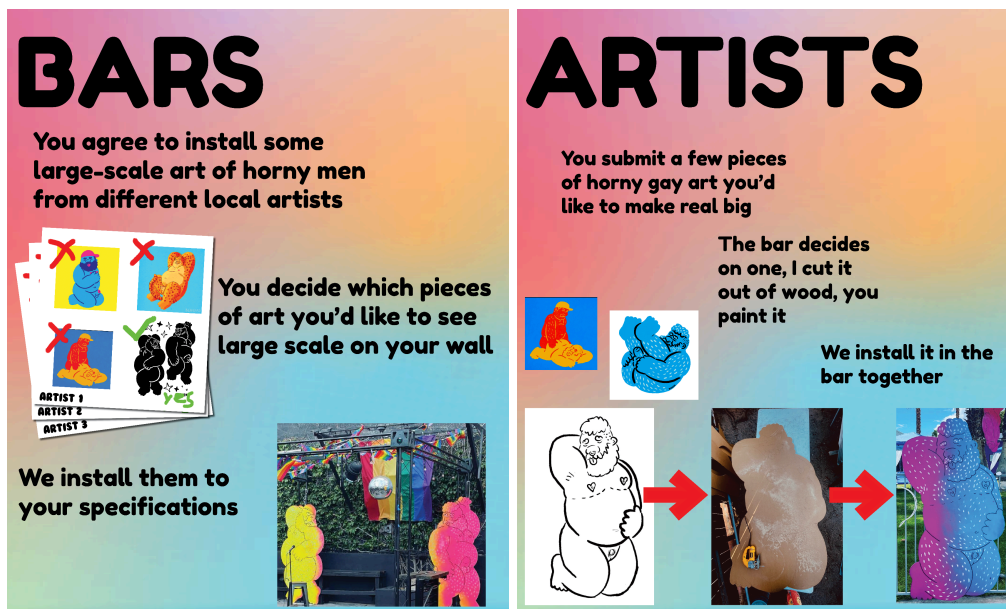
I began the project with the intention of identifying artists that were willing to be a part of the project and collecting illustrations from them. I would then find bars local to the artists

that wanted updated artwork and offer them a large-scale version of an illustration of their choosing. My intention in many stages of this project is to remove my own personal biases from the process, and act primarily as a conduit and collaborator for artistic visions that were not mine.

The ideas behind my work overlap with Marinella Senatore's in that this project involves an educational aspect -- I would be providing the artists with concepts and materials and encouraging them to train themselves and cultivate their own art practices towards a specific goal. Senatore founded *The School of Narrative Dance* in 2013, an ongoing participatory project centered on empowerment, inclusivity, and creativity as social driving forces ("Marinella Senatore, the School of Narrative Dance Malta, 30 June 2022" n.d.). *The School of Narrative Dance* bases its alternative education system on emancipation, inclusion, and self-cultivation ("The School of Narrative Dance," n.d.), much like the ethos and approach to the pedagogical aspects behind my project. Senatore's popup "schools" also similarly often culminate in a show or experience.

Through my research I discovered that successful gay and leather bars serve their communities as they are (Mattson, 2023), and my fantasy was to have local erotic artists - ideally members of these communities - create the artwork that best served their communities, which I would help manufacture. This plan proved too difficult for a number of reasons. Erotic artists primarily work digitally and distribute their work online through a pseudonym, and they rarely have their location listed as it isn't necessary for them to become popular or distribute their work. This makes finding erotic artists in a certain geographical area difficult. The order of operations of this method also worked as a series of checks where the process slowed to a halt while waiting for the response from artists or bar managers - people who were not often quick to respond during this project. The process was also difficult to explain to people. I made what I thought was a simple

infographic describing the process to hopefully make the concept and order of operations clearer, but it still confused some people.



*Figure 6: a 'simple' infographic describing the order of operations for the collaborators involved in The Big Gay*

After realizing my dream for the project (local artists making bar-approved artwork to install in their spaces) wasn't feasible in the time frame for this MFA program, I switched to a new model. I would work with artists I had already contacted making large-scale versions of their illustrations. I would explain the basics of The Big Gay and ask them what they would like to see on the walls of these spaces that would better reflect them and their tastes. I would then work with them to manufacture these pieces. Finally, I would then place them in whatever bar would take them after they were made.

During this time I began messaging the manager of the Precinct bar in Los Angeles. I initially pitched him the idea of choosing an artist and their work, but when the method of production shifted to completed works he was more able to make appropriate decisions for his space. He agreed to have two BEARPAD pieces installed, and is open to taking



more. The owner of the Lone Star Saloon in San Francisco, one of the first bear bars in the world, is also willing to take at least one of the pieces that I collaborated on for this project.

As a lot of erotic artists work in digital only, they don't have experience with physical materials and often don't see the value in creating large-scale physical artwork. One idea for The Big Gay that I was considering early on was to teach artists how to work with a jigsaw to enlarge their work themselves. With more people creating large scale erotic art using these methods, the ideals of the project could spread more quickly. The goal of empowering artists to create these works themselves and educate them on the process still informed a lot of the project, but jigsaw training proved to be too difficult to include.

Another goal of the project was to give university funding to queer erotic artists. Through grants I was able to raise enough money to pay each artist \$400 for their contribution, while the school funded the materials needed to manufacture the pieces

I reached out to a mix of artists - some that I knew personally, while others were individuals I followed online and admired. I initially contacted 9 artists total, 8 of which agreed to be a part of the project. The individual who opted not to participate initially showed interest in the project, but declined due to prior commitments. The number of participants surpassed my initial expectations, which I attribute to the shared enthusiasm for the project's objectives, the interest in working on a large scale, and BEARPAD's known body of work - all of which played a significant role in generating interest. I made an effort to choose artists that did not have the same aesthetics as the classic Tom of Finland illustrations - in their physical bodies or in their work.

As I discovered the objective of this project is to "...employ the varied forms offered by the expanded field of contemporary art as a collaborative, collective, and participatory social

method for bringing about real-world instances of progressive justice, community building, and transformation,” (Sholette 2018), it made sense to put it in the framework of social practice. The project itself began to feel less like an art project and more like I was managing a specialized community project, or curating a show. Compared to the DANM projects I had seen thus far it no longer neatly fit into the idea of a typical solo MFA art exhibition, but there were benefits to referring to it as my art project, as an “...artist today may seek to work with sited communities with the best motives of political engagement and institutional transgression, only in part to have this work recoded by its sponsors as social outreach, economic development, public relations... or art (Marcus 2008, 303). Continuing to code it myself as a social practice art project makes it more legible for funding sources, despite the fact that it lacks the more “explicitly political edge” that social practice generally has (Davis 2013).

## IV. Manufacturing Process

### David “Chasindoodles” Maldonado - “Beckoning Bovine”

I've followed David Maldonado's work for some time on Instagram and had met him a small number of times working at events in San Francisco, where he resides. His handle on Instagram is “chasindoodles,” which is a reference to himself as a ‘chaser’. In the bear community, a chaser is a person who is attracted to bears, but does not fit the assumed body type of the bear community. The ‘bear’ type is generally taller, thicker, and hairier than David. His work is heavily influenced by the classic leather look, but he tends to draw the men thicker and in a distinct style, taking influence from mid-century modern illustrations. When it came time to actually manufacture the pieces, he was the first artist to send me an illustration. He sent me a complete black and white illustration of his piece which he eventually titled “Beckoning Bovine.” The subject of this piece is visually very similar to the classic Tom of Finland illustrations in that it's a shirtless cowboy wearing masculine clothing. “Beckoning Bovine” differs in the shape of the man - thicker, hairier, and without abs, and in the aesthetic delivery - more playful and abstract.



***Figure 7: tracing the outline of a piece in the DANM grad lab***

I traced the pieces primarily in the shared DANM grad lab that serves as a studio and workspace for the program. Initially I mounted an ultra short throw projector to an overhead beam in the studio, about 10 feet up, pointed directly down. I plugged my laptop into the projector and put a piece of MDO plywood on a table directly below, manipulating the image in a VJ software Resolume Arena to make it line up better with the piece of wood. The projector increased the image so rapidly that the area of the surface of the wood was a very low resolution, which worked fine with this piece, as it had an extremely simple outline. I traced the outline and very roughly sketched the interior lines onto the wood.



***Figure 8: cutting the outline of a piece with a jigsaw outside of the Digital Arts Research Center***

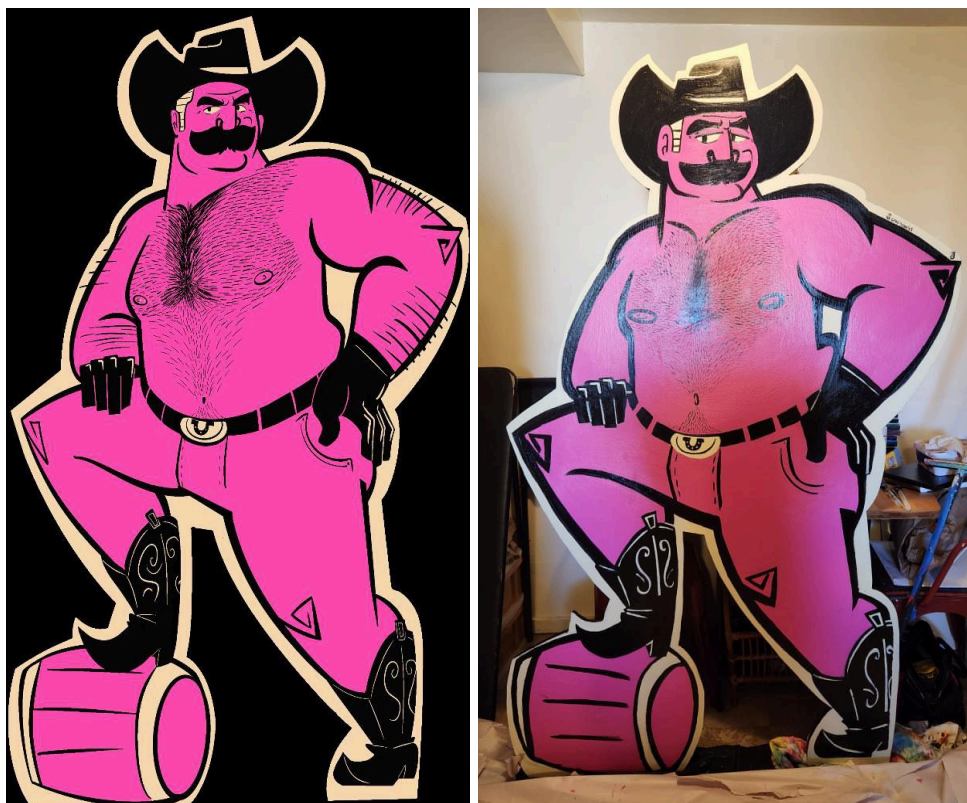
The majority of the cutting for The Big Gay happened in front of the Digital Arts Research Center building at UCSC. Any time I needed to cut something out, I passed a power cord through the window onto a grassy area in front of the building and set up a folding table. I would then put on safety equipment and cut out the pieces with a DeWalt jigsaw, my positioning behaving as a sort of performance of manual labor for any passing students to witness.

For this piece I used a scroll cut blade for the jigsaw. These are smaller and allow for tighter turns without damaging the blade or the wood, and this was the blade I was favoring at the time. Due to its size it also makes it a bit more difficult to cut straighter lines, making the outline of this piece slightly wobbly on close inspection. Due to scheduling I was not able to deliver the piece, but Patrick was able to deliver it to San

Francisco to David's house, along with some pink paint we had left over from a mural and some black paint purchased for the piece. David Maldonado has a large amount of experience working in physical mediums, often painting original pieces on canvas, so he did not seem to have any problems creating this piece, even though my pencil on wood sketched outlines were a bit rough and hard to see.

Most of the pieces in this project were primarily painted with house paint purchased from large hardware store chains. House paint is a bit more difficult to work with than acrylic, in that it tends to be less viscous, but it is much more durable and dries a lot flatter, which suited our purposes. These pieces may live in a bar (or outside of a bar) for years, making durability a primary concern.

We picked up the completed piece a few weeks later, wrapping the piece in a waterproof tarp to survive the rainy 90 minute drive from San Francisco to UC Santa Cruz. David chose to sign his piece with a stylized version of his signature, but also wrote "@chasindoodles" on the sketch, signaling to the viewer where to follow him on social media.



*Figure 9: the original illustration and completed piece Beckoning Bovine by David Maldonado*

#### **DJ Kirkland - “Burger Boy”**

DJ Kirkland, an artist who lives in Vallejo, California, agreed to work on the project after chatting briefly on Instagram. I was familiar with his work and thought he would be a great fit for the project as he tended to draw fat-positive illustrations of black men, but I had not ever spoken to him before contacting him about The Big Gay. He sent me an image to work with a few days after David Maldonado. He gave me a few different options for illustrations, and I told him I wanted him to choose the illustration, to remove my desires as much as possible from the process. He decided on “Burger Boy,” an illustration of a black man with a large belly and thighs, wearing tight revealing clothing, holding a burger,

appearing to be about to bite into it while looking directly at the viewer with a smile on his face.

I was still using the ultra short throw projector for tracing. This made the image - which used a lot of very thin lines - blurry and difficult to make out the details of. I ended up making a lot of guesses with some of the lines, which made the outline less than exact.

I cut this outline with a different jigsaw blade. The blade was much thicker and a little bit wider, making the line cut out of the wood a bit wider and restricting my turns with the jigsaw. I ended up having to do a lot more cutbacks, but the lines were much less wobbly and more consistent. I abandoned the scroll cut blades and went with this kind of thicker blade for the rest of the project. It took a bit more time but the final product was more precise.

After cutting I primed this one with white spray paint, to make the eventual paint colors more vibrant. I took the cutout back into the lab and projected the image on it again, sketching the details as best I could despite the low-resolution image. I assumed that the artist would know his work best and what it looked like and how to handle details that I could not.

Patrick and I drove the piece the two hour drive to Vallejo and met with DJ to work on the piece. We went to the hardware store and picked out paints to his specifications, then began working on his piece together. He mentioned that he was planning on leaving a lot of the piece the background color, which was the white primer, and needed mostly pink and black for the details. I helped paint fill colors and assisted with some masking. There wasn't enough time to finish the piece, and he said he would finish it soon and let us know so I could pick it up.



About a month later, a couple weeks before the MFA exhibition, he informed me that his schedule had gotten too busy and the piece wouldn't be ready for the exhibition. At this point I had the rest of the pieces ready to display. His piece would have made a great addition, but I was confident I could place it in a bar after the exhibition, which is the ultimate purpose of my project. I learned a lot through working with DJ, specifically about making the experience as simple and streamlined for the artist as possible by making the cutout and tracing more accurate. In future collaborations, I made an effort to be clearer in advance about how a cutout would be delivered and what the work would be like.



**Figure 10: DJ Kirkland working on “Burger Boy” in his backyard in Vallejo, CA**

### **Grisser - “Digsby”**

I knew early on in this project that I wanted furry representation in The Big Gay. I had recently gone to my first furry convention after being casually interested in the community

for years, and found it incredibly inspiring. Grisser is the online handle of a furry artist who has been creating erotic art of anthropomorphic animals for as long as I've been aware of furry art on the internet. I had come across his work almost 20 years ago online and it came to mind immediately as a possibility for this project. I knew he lived in the San Francisco Bay Area and I reached out to him through X (formerly Twitter). I explained the project to him, and he seemed interested but hesitant. When I explained to him that he could make it of any piece of art that he wanted he seemed more confused and less interested. Furry artists often make a large amount of their money through commissions - people in the community have anthropomorphic versions of themselves that they pay artists to see realized in illustrations in the artist's style. I decided to frame it as a commission, and had a friend who had a "fursona" whose character I thought would be easy to place in bars. Digsby, the name of the character, is a large bear who works as a trucker and wears clothing that denotes him as working class. Traditionally in leather spaces, "men with body types that fit stereotypes focused on blue collar labor...have a certain charismatic cache that other men did not" (Childs 2017, 79)

Tom of Finland had an affinity for working class men (Snaith 2003), and truckers have a masculine mystique in American culture. As a bear, the cutout would be easier to place in bear and leather bars, as a large amount of the bear culture often use the literal bear as a signifier of their community through clothing branding and artwork (Hennen 2008, 4). He sent rough drafts of the illustration and we consulted my friend to make sure the details were accurate. Oftentimes furies have specific visions for their fursonas, and getting certain details accurate is important - the details can change from one fursona to the next.

When tracing the previous illustration I was unhappy with the projector's lack of detail, so I swapped the ultra short throw projector with a standard short throw. I realized that the

previous two cutouts may have been a bit skewed due to the projector positioning, so I began projecting a grid onto the surface of the board and measuring the individual squares to ensure that the grid was equal across the entire board, slightly altering the projector's position and using VJ software to skew the image in the laptop to make the projection more accurate. This should ensure that my projection is as close to the same proportions as the original illustration as possible. After receiving a final black and white illustration from Grisser, I traced, cut out, and primed "Digsby". When the primer dried, I placed the cutout under the projector again and traced the details with a pencil. At this point I had the image up on my iPhone and I was referring to it while I was tracing to ensure that I was drawing the details properly. The final illustration looked so striking in black and white; I wanted to see what the cutout would look like with just black detail. I put it under the projector again, and filled in the details with a black Posca paint pen. The image worked so well as just black and white that I was nervous about adding any additional color to it.



***Figure 11: Patrick posing with the black and white “Digsby” before color was added***

I chatted with my friend about using colors, and he had a specific color palette for his fursona Digsby. One purpose of the project is to have the opportunity to spend time with other artists and get them to use physical mediums, so I decided to take the risk and add color. Patrick and I bought the paint that best matched Digsby’s palette, added color to a few places, then drove it about an hour away to San Jose to Grisser’s house.



***Figure 12: painting color on “Digsby” with Grisser***

As members of the furry communities often adopt a new name for the community and exclusively go by it, I never learned or used any other name for Grisser. We met at his house and set up in his backyard under a gazebo, next to his husband’s collection of European kit cars. After getting lunch and chatting about our history and art, we began working on painting the piece. Much of the paint pen work that I had done needed to be painted over partially or completely. We completed most of the painting in a few hours and spent some time getting to know each other in his bed while we let the paint dry. We drove the piece back to UCSC that night, with the linework needing to be redone and some small details unfinished. I was able to redo the lines in black paint pen and finish the details a few weeks later with the MFA showcase looming.



**Figure 13: Original illustration and final version of “Digsby”**

### **Sunny Torres - “Puslar”**

I bartend and help promote a local drag night in Santa Cruz, hosted by Sunny Torres, who performs as Cherry Cola. I knew that Sunny had an art practice that featured the male form, having seen them vend at a few events and following them on Instagram. I asked them to participate in The Big Gay via Instagram, but the project didn't fully click with them until I spoke with them in person about it. I still don't have a completely succinct way to talk about this project via text, which is a detriment to its success. I'm hoping with the documentation of this first iteration it will become clearer. After asking for an illustration of a male form, they gave me a photo of their trans masculine partner, with what looked like a large stroke layer added around the form. I realized they were planning

on tracing the outline of the figure and filling it in, giving me insight into their practice. I projected this outline onto a piece of MDO at a slight angle, making it appear taller than the 8 feet that these pieces are usually restricted to. I traced it, cut it, and spray painted it black to their specifications. They were planning on using a projector for the outline at their studio, which meant I didn't need to trace the outline of the figure for them. They requested paint pens and spray paint in pastel colors, which I was able to provide, purchased by university funding. Patrick was able to deliver the piece to Oakland, where Sunny lives, and pick it up a few weeks later in a completed state. Due to Sunny's existing art practice in a physical medium, they were able to produce the piece by themselves with little assistance, and commented that they appreciated the opportunity to work at a larger scale and expressed interest in collaborating again in the future.



**Figure 14: "Pulsar" installed for Eagle UCSC**

## **Shishibro - "A Beast's Inner Pup"**

I've known Tim'an Ford for almost 5 years and have been a fan of his art since we met. As with other people in furry culture, his chosen name Shishibro is how he is currently credited. When I reached out to artists to see if they would be interested, I wanted to include him as his particular style of furry art is heavily influenced by modern Japanese manga art style and also Japanese folklore. He worked with a friend on developing a new character named Ko, who became the subject of "A Beast's Inner Pup." I was personally really pleased with this illustration when I received it. One intention in The Big Gay is to showcase more modern representations of kink, and this piece features a wolf in the style of furry art with clear inspiration from anime culture, in shibari bondage, wearing a cock cage. None of these things are present at most leather/kink spaces as artwork, and here was a piece that was showcasing so many new ideas simultaneously.

This piece was the most complex to trace and cut out. The digital brush that Shishibro uses is similar to a sumi brush, which widens in the center but comes to a very thin point at both ends. This makes my job as a tracer a bit more difficult. The jigsaw doesn't work in variable widths. Should I trace the outside of the line, conserving the overall shape? The inside of the line, conserving the inner shape? Or should I try my best to cut down the middle of the line, preserving the idea of the line, but not the visual of it? This is a problem I came up against in a number of the pieces, but this piece was the most striking. The lines came to such a fine point that the fidelity of the projector lost them sometimes. I chose ultimately to trace the outside of the lines as best I could, but after completing the cutout, if I do a drawing like this again, I'll probably try to trace the center of the line. I began this project thinking that I would just craft as accurate adaptations as possible to the original illustrations, but as I progressed I realized that wasn't possible, and wasn't really desirable either. If I wanted an accurate larger version of their art we



could just go to a print shop and have it enlarged. My work with the jigsaw and projector makes me more knowledgeable about the enlargement process, and my decisions as an artist and collaborator can make the piece even better.

Hair and fur in anime and manga styles tend to stick out in stylized points, and this piece had a large amount of fur, making the outline more complex than any other piece. I took an Adderall and spent longer than I spent on any other piece cutting it out - focusing more intently and spending more time making it as precise as possible. This piece proved to be the most physically dangerous when completed, as the hair coming to a point was hazardous when the piece was being moved. Once it was cut out, I primed it white and placed it under the projector, using a pencil to sketch in the details. When I started *The Big Gay* I was doing my best to trace using a single line, but at this point I was sketching the lines of the pieces using multiple strokes. This took a bit longer, but the final line wasn't as dark and was more accurate to the original drawing.

Shishibro lives near Whittier, California, a suburb in Los Angeles County. Patrick and I had a gig in Cathedral City (manufacturing large-scale wooden cutouts of naked men in Patrick's style for an event) and chose to make the 9 hour drive to Whittier a few days early to work on "A Beast's Inner Pup" with Shishibro. As his living situation wouldn't allow for a large art project, we rented an AirBnB with a private patio outdoor space to work on the piece. He arrived with his boyfriend in the morning, and we went to buy paint. I was recovering from food poisoning that day and spent much of the time in bed, but helped when I could. He mentioned in the past that he didn't have much experience with physical mediums, but in the painting process he was comfortable experimenting with color mixing and drawing parts of the design freehand that didn't match up with the original illustration. Both he and his boyfriend, a muralist, took creative liberties with the design to create a final piece that I wasn't expecting. He added a gray coloration to his

arm that changed subtly in color like a gradient, added color flourishes to the face that gave the appearance of face paint, and added color to the tips of his ears. Both he and his boyfriend's excitement and focus led to them smudging paint in various parts of the piece, but these were not too difficult to clean up afterwards by painting over them.



***Figure 15: Shishibro and his boyfriend working on “A Beast’s Inner Pup” at an Airbnb in Whittier, CA***

We brought the completed piece to our gig in Cathedral City, around 2 hours away from Whittier. The promoter was excited to see it and considered showing it for the event, but when seeing the sharp edges realized it wouldn't function in the spaces, as the pieces were primarily placed along trails and walkways. It ended up living in our room for the week, where many people commented on it positively, usually referring to it as “so hot.”



**Figure 16: “A Beast’s Inner Pup” original illustration and completed piece**

**Drew Green - “Tiny Dancer”**

I had followed Drew Green's work for a long time online, but had not reached out to him prior to this project. He initially agreed to participate, but we had some difficulty confirming a time to work on it. After finishing “A Beast's Inner Pup”, Patrick, Shishibro, and I went to the Eagle in Los Angeles, a local leather bar, to meet with Drew Green. I was excited to meet with him and go over the potential collaboration. The thesis show was a couple weeks away and this would be the last chance to actually produce a piece with him. I also wanted him and Shishibro to meet, as this was a community-based project and I was hoping to have artists meet each other if possible. I told him that the only way it would work would be if he came to Cathedral City next week and worked on the project where we were staying, at a men's only clothing optional resort. He said he'd

think about it. I got a message on my phone on the way to the resort that he was willing to come and make it happen.

He sent me the illustration of "Tiny Dancer" the next day. My partner and I were using the back lot of the resort to manufacture our own art for an event, so we had a makeshift workspace. We didn't have the standard MDO wood that we had been using for the rest of the pieces, so we went to Home Depot and found the closest replacement that we could. This piece of wood was the same thickness,  $\frac{3}{4}$  inches, but was a much lighter plywood with an exterior sheet of something like lauan. The MDO has a flat sheet of MDF on top, which makes it extremely smooth and without texture. It's commonly used in sign-making, and can be difficult to find. The plywood for this piece has a bit of a wood texture which is visible even after painting. I traced it outside in our workspace at night (for maximum projector visibility). Because I was working quickly and in an unfamiliar situation, I had difficulties getting the projector as aligned as possible. The tracing ended up coming out a bit more squat than the original illustration, but not enough to detract from its appeal. When I cut it the thin sheet of wood on top tended to chip off in small chunks. The final design had a thick black line around the figure, which meant that this did not detract from its aesthetic appeal.



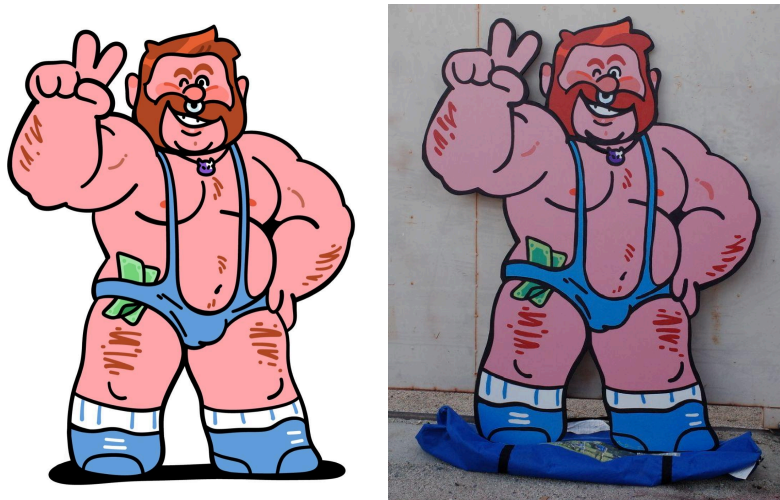
***Figure 17: Tracing the linework for “Tiny Dancer” in a hotel room in an uncomfortable position***

Rather than priming it with white as I had every other piece, I primed it with the skin color of the figure, with the intention of making the actual painting significantly quicker and easier. I had learned from my previous experiences that tracing the lines as exactly as possible made the final painting with the artist a lot easier. I put the figure up in our hotel room with the projector and attempted to square the image with the cutout, which proved extremely difficult due to the shift in location and projection. Tracing this figure was the most difficult out of all of them due to the placement, and it took the longest.



***Figure 18: Painting “Tiny Dancer” in the back lot of a clothing optional men’s resort***

The next day Drew Green arrived with his boyfriend. We picked up paint and paint pens to his color specifications and began painting it in the back lot. It took us the majority of the day to complete it. I was going to suggest to Drew that he draw the final the black lines in the piece, as I saw his linework as integral to his pieces. Before I could mention it he expressed the same sentiment and finished the lines with paint pens.



**Figure 19: "Tiny Dancer" illustration and final piece**

This piece did not present the same physical hazards as Shishibro's piece, so it was installed at the event alongside the pieces that Patrick and I had created.



**Figure 20: Posing with "Tiny Dancer" installed at the event**

### **Serge Gay Jr. - “Leatherman” “Pup”**

Serge Gay Jr. is an accomplished muralist and artist in San Francisco, and I knew that reaching out to him was unlikely to be successful. He was interested in the project, but too busy to create new artwork for it. I had seen his artwork at large parties before - he painted figures and designs on blank wallpaper, installed them on walls at these events, then took them down and rolled them up to reuse them again in the future. At the suggestion of giving up some of these, he provided two large unnamed illustrations, telling me later on I could name them what I wanted. One was of a more classic Tom of Finland style leather man from the chest up, and the other was the head of a man in a pup hood. The facial features of the leather man did not read the way that Tom of Finland's artwork did, however. They seemed to be less European, which I appreciated. I was glad to include the pup hood, as puppy play had become much more popular in leather spaces in the past 15 years, but was not usually represented.

I wanted the pieces in the installation to have a uniform presentation, as wooden cutouts, so I laid the pieces down on a piece of wood and traced around them, the line slightly larger than the piece of wallpaper. “Leatherman” is actually slightly wider than the 4 feet width of the plywood, meaning I had to trace it over two boards. I cut the pieces out and spray painted the edges and sides black, to match the black outline of the pieces. I attached the two pieces for leatherman together with a few spare 2x4s I had and used spray adhesive to secure the wallpaper to the wood for both pieces.





*Figure 20: A selfie taken with “Pup” during the manufacturing process*

**BEARPAD - “PARTY BUB” “DISCO ATLAS” “MOOSE ON MOOSE”**

As half of BEARPAD, it was not as complex or difficult to collaborate on or create these pieces. Two of them were already made and one was a duplicate of a design we had premiered in Cathedral City a few weeks before. The two that were already made were chosen to be included in The Big Gay and the installation Eagle UCSC for specific reasons. “PARTY BUB” was installed almost a year ago at the San Francisco Eagle for a bear-focused comedy show at the end of June 2023, right before Pride. The bar was willing to leave it installed for the weekend, meaning it was visible next to Tom of Finland

adaptations during one of the busiest weekends of the year. It had already begun to do the work that I was trying to accomplish with The Big Gay almost a year prior, and its inclusion in the project and installation seemed appropriate. It was also installed as “Flat Desires”, the interactive piece I had showcased for a previous open studio. “DISCO ATLAS” was created for an installation at Lazy Bear, an event in Guerneville in the summer of 2023. It went on to appear on the streets of San Francisco for the Berrison Street Fair in October. It features a larger trans masculine body holding a disco ball in a pose similar to the Farnese Atlas. Its representation of a trans body and connection to the history of art made it an easy choice.



***Figure 22: “Party Bub” installed at the San Francisco Eagle in 2023***

“MOOSE ON MOOSE” was a piece that I constructed almost entirely by myself for The Big Gay. I took the illustration by Patrick, traced it, cut it out, primed it, and painted one of the figures with a gradient of blues painted with spray paint, adding splatters of other colors for texture. I took the piece back inside and lined it up with the projector, then masked off the body that I had painted. I painted the other body with a gradient of dark purple and neon pink, a color combination I had recently become enamored with due to a

piece we worked on for the event in Cathedral City. I placed the piece under the projector one last time and had Patrick draw the lines.



**Figure 23: “Disco Atlas” installed at Berrison Street Fair in 2023**

As an expression of The Big Gay, the completed pieces were chosen for an installation for my MFA thesis exhibition in the Spring of 2024, Eagle UCSC.

## V. Installation: Eagle UCSC

I knew early on that I wanted a physical bar in the space. I was celebrating and critiquing a bar environment, so it felt appropriate to install a bar at the heart of the space. Sadie Barnett already had successfully intervened in a gallery space with a physical bar that served as a performance space with *The New Eagle Creek Saloon* in 2019. Barnett's piece, a recreation of her father's San Francisco bar (closed since 1993), honors a neglected history of Black resilience while also offering up an ideal model of intergenerational love (Barbagallo 2022). *The New Eagle Creek Saloon* hosts a rotating cast of newer DJs and older drag queens, relating the past and the present of queer artistry. My installation could do the same, with visual art rather than performance and music. Barnett's piece encourages the participants to dwell on the history and legacy of queerness and queer establishments; mine would emphasize and celebrate the potential future of these spaces while embedding elements of queer history for comparison and reflection.

The bar for my installation was sourced on Facebook Marketplace, located about an hour and 20 minutes away from UCSC. The images of the bar online looked appropriate for what I wanted, based on size and material. When Patrick and I arrived to pick up the bar, it had been disassembled, with no clear instructions on how to put it together. We brought it back to UCSC and managed to put it together after a trial and error process. The bar top, solid wood encased in resin, was heavier than the rest of the pieces. We set it up with the intention of fastening the bar top to the rest of the bar, but it was so heavy that it stayed in place without screws.



**Figure 24: Assembling the bar**

The name of the installation came much later in the process. Arriving at a meaningful name proved challenging, but eventually, Eagle UCSC emerged as the most fitting option.

“The Eagle is a name shared over the years by hundreds of gay bars on four continents, all modeled off the original Eagle’s Nest that opened in New York City in 1970. As Maryland’s Baltimore Eagle website described them in 2021, the various Eagles “began opening all over the world not as part of a brand, but as a movement.” These aren’t franchises or brands or centralized in any way, but independent bars that share an aesthetic: leather and kink and masculinity and earnest sleaze. The bars also cater to a wider variety of ages and body types than the average gay bar, making them attractive to folks beyond the leather and kink communities” (Mattson 2023, 221).

Each of them was created from the template of The Eagle’s Nest, but each one different and distinct, catering to its patrons and community differently depending on the location.

The Eagle San Francisco has a large patio used for community events, The Eagle San Diego is much smaller and has more of a dungeon aesthetic, The EAGLE TOKYO BLUE

is more intimate and caters more to a 'bear' crowd than a leather crowd, and so on (Hernandez, 2023). I realized that through creating the installation I was basically just opening an Eagle, so I might as well call it that. This naming felt appropriate, but required more explanations on my part when walking people through the installation.

I had experimented with hanging a piece in a previous open studio for "Flat Desires" and was drawn to this presentation of a wooden cutout. Hanging in the air, suspended by two aircraft cables leading directly upwards to the ceiling, these large pieces of cut plywood give a sense of space, loosely defining what can feel like the presence of a wall to the viewer. My installation was a deconstructed leather bar, so it made sense to me to have the walls and their location loosely defined by these pieces. I also wanted them hanging fairly close to the ground so that viewers could walk around them and have the physicality of their bodies directly compared to the physicality of these pieces. The pieces were placed about 3 feet apart as well, to allow easy movement between them. Their placement provided a 'hallway' to the bar space. They surrounded the bar as well, hanging at various angles, giving the viewer a loose sense of place. I initially chose the location for the pieces, and later chose which pieces should be situated in different places. My intention was to have the viewer see a variety of art styles and body types from any angle. I attached screw eyes directly to the piece for "Flat Desires", screwing them into the side of the plywood. I worried that the wood might weaken eventually, so I chose to drill pieces of 2x3 boards into the back of each piece to attach the screw eyes to. The placement of the screw eyes caused a few of the pieces to tilt forward once they were installed, which was fixed by securing one of the cables higher up on the back of the piece.



**Figure 25: The bar viewed from inside the installation**

“Leatherman” by Serge Gay Jr. ended up being featured prominently behind the bar, as many of the styles were similarly brightly colored and had something of a cartoon aesthetic, which I wanted to offset while paying homage to the style of Tom of Finland in a more direct view. “Pulsar” was placed much higher than the rest of the pieces for the sake of variety, and placed closest to one of the other installations in the same space that I was in. This other installation had a futuristic aesthetic, and the celestial stars of “Pulsar” felt like a natural bridge between these two installations. I also had an opening to the right of the bar to allow a natural walkway between the two installations, which proved appropriate on the opening night.

“A Beast’s Inner Pup” was placed behind the bar close to a wall, as I didn’t want anyone to injure themselves on the spikes of hair sticking out. “DISCO ATLAS” is the only piece that was not hanging from the ceiling, as it was made on much thinner wood. Securing

screw eyes to hang it from proved a logistical challenge, and mounting it to the wall worked as a compromise. The rest of the pieces were placed according to my goals of diversity of style and defining the idea of a physical space. I used “Pup”, “MOOSE ON MOOSE”, and “Tiny Dancer” to define the ‘hallway’ to the bar, and the rest of the pieces surrounding the bar.



**Figure 26: The TV displaying artwork from the walls of Seattle bar The Cuff**

Early in my ideation for Eagle UCSC I included two TVs on the bar, with the intention of playing interview footage on them with a pair of headphones. Even though interviews were no longer part of the installation, I still appreciated the aesthetic of a black and white television from the 1960s on the bar and I wanted the space of the bar to host the history of the art in these spaces. I had created a piece of video art featuring over 3,000 works of Tom of Finland downloaded from a gay pornography torrent tracker (originally used in Flat Desires) and the film *The Wild One* from 1953. The speed of the images changed



from one part of the film to the next, and the blend mode and opacity were automated to slowly shift the visibility of the images versus the film. I chose *The Wild One* due to its history with the leather movement. Marlon Brando's outfit in that film is often credited as the template for the traditional look of the leather man (Snaith 2003, 79).



***Figure 27: A view of the installation from above with projections on the bar, its 'patrons', and myself***

Discussing my installation with a thesis committee member a week before the opening, they suggested that I integrate more of the story of the production of the pieces into the

installation. I spent some time thinking about whether I wanted the installation to be more beautiful or more legible. After some consideration about the nature of the project, I realized that I wanted to prioritize legibility. My goal is to change the visual culture of leather spaces first and foremost. I spent the next day consolidating images of documentation - both of the work that I did on the individual pieces and of pieces that currently exist in leather bars around the world. I swapped The Wild One video art piece out with my documentation, and was immediately disappointed in the change of visuals. The bar no longer felt as much of an artifact of an historical time. I ultimately decided to play my documentation on the screen, despite my misgivings, as it made the work more legible. My early ideation for the installation also included some kind of projection on the bar. I tested The Wild One video art piece projected on the bar, and really liked how it looked, so that piece ended up projected on the bar, the space behind the bar, and whoever happened to be sitting at the bar or standing behind it.

The DANM cohort gave some advice during a last minute walk-through of the installation. Again, they mentioned that the story of the production was a really captivating part of the installation, and it should be part of the installation as well. At their suggestion, I wrote the artist's name, the name of the piece, and the location where the piece was made on the back of each. This placed each piece geographically, giving the viewer an idea of the amount of travel each of these pieces made in order to be in the installation.

I was thinking of the physical bar as representing the past and the history of the leather movement, while the floating art surrounding it represents potential futures. To emphasize this, I acquired 5 issues of the magazine Drummer (a leather lifestyle magazine for gay men) from 1980 and placed them on the bar. They also served as an example of the kind of art and body that was dominant in 1980. I was able to compare the idealized figures

and fetishes from 1980 with the ones that currently adorn bars around the world, showing the viewer the homogeneity of the aesthetic.

I wanted the color choices of the pieces to be celebrated, but I ultimately decided to light the space red, losing a lot of color detail in the pieces. The template for the classic leather bar is lit with red lights, and I wanted the viewer to see the pieces as they might in a bar setting. "DISCO ATLAS" features mirrored acrylic pieces cut into rounded shapes to give the impression of a disco ball, and one red light was pointed directly at it, bouncing a textured light pattern onto "Leatherman" and "Digsby".

### **The opening**

The opening of the show featured two performances by me. For both performances, I wore a bright pink neoprene harness. The harness is a piece of fetish gear usually worn by gay men across their chest and over their shoulders. Gay men have been wearing them in leather bars since the 1970s, and they are traditionally made of leather. The neoprene material that I wore can signal a connection to the 'pup' scene - a kink where one or more participants in a scene takes on their perceived personality of a dog - as the rest of a pup outfit is traditionally neoprene. The bright pink also signals a departure from the original leather aesthetic of exclusively solid black coloration.



***Figure 28: A photo of my first performance in front of the exhibition space***

My first performance involved cutting a new design out of wood in front of the Digital Arts Research Center, where Eagle UCSC was displayed. I cut the piece in front of the entrance to the space rather than off to the side in the grass, where I had cut the majority of the pieces. After I completed cutting it out, I left the piece on the folding table with the jigsaw and safety equipment on top of it. I took the 8 foot tall wood scraps from either side of the figure and placed them on the sides of the doors entering Eagle UCSC. The piece in front, cut but unpainted, materials in view, indicate that the work is still in process and the project is not complete. The pieces of wood framing the entrance form an outline of these wooden boards for the viewer to walk through, putting their body in direct relation to the wood used to manufacture the pieces and the outline of an idealized figure.

My second performance was serving as a literal bartender for the last hour or so of the opening. I acquired beer and wine after being informed that this would best suit the event.

I considered making a cocktail menu based on the individual pieces, or framing the bar as having a 'beer bust' (a popular fundraising method in leather and gay bars where one kind of beer is on discount for a set time). After considering my intention behind the piece, I chose a drink menu to appeal to the event rather than tie it meaningfully into the installation, similar to my decision to put documentation on the TV rather than an art piece, mirroring Rirkrit Tiravanija's *Untitled* (1990) where he adopted a Westernized recipe for a pad thai recipe including ketchup to suit the purpose of his service performance (Swanson 2023).



**Figure 29: A photo of my performance as a bartender in the installation. Photo by Swandive Media.**

I have worked for over a decade at an actual bar, and serving drinks while making connections with individuals was a fairly comfortable experience for this performance. This was my first time bartending at a gay bar, however. I stood beneath the flickering video art, the lines drawn by Tom of Finland bouncing off of the physical bar and my torso as I explained my piece to viewers, drawing a parallel between my physical body and his body of work. I found, unsurprisingly, that gay men who had spent time in leather bars

required very little explanation. They realized that the Tom of Finland style artwork that exists in gay bars are ubiquitous and yet lacking the relevancy that they once had, and saw what I was doing as a positive. When the viewers were not gay men, however, I found that it usually took longer to reach this level of understanding. I often had to explain who Tom of Finland was, the history of his art with the leather scene, how common it was to see his art in gay spaces, and how the communities who gather in these spaces are not represented, things understood by most people who frequent gay and leather bars. Also the title of my installation, Eagle UCSC, was something that was instantly understood by gay male patrons and was not immediately clear to most everyone else. I joked a handful of times that this was the only time that they would be able to go to an Eagle in Santa Cruz, a city with no gay bars and a lack of a queer scene at the time of this writing. Even before I began explaining the works and the process behind them, explaining the history that they were interrogating was not quickly done. Despite this, the casual yet intimate nature of the bar setting helped with informing the viewers of the history and reasoning behind The Big Gay, as well as Eagle UCSC.

A member of the DANM cohort, Robbie Trocchia, set up an installation directly across from Eagle UCSC. He had a performance scheduled near the end of the opening as a demonstration of his installation. At the conclusion of the performance, I was surprised to see the crowd of about 40 people come back to the bar and use my installation as a social space to discuss Robbie's performance and connect with each other. Creating a successful bar as a meeting place was not one of my intentions for the installation. I had approached my installation in a fairly literal manner, so perhaps it should not have been a surprise that it functioned well as a literal bar.

I was able to have an extended discussion with a member of the queer community in Santa Cruz who was planning on opening a queer social space in Santa Cruz, the first in

over a decade. They expressed interest in taking some of the art and the physical bar itself, which came as a relief, as it is an unwieldy object. I had another conversation with an older man who was deeply involved in the leather community and had been for years. I was extremely curious how he would take the installation, as it is suggesting a change to a culture in which he is deeply embedded. When I explained my reasoning, he agreed with my assessment that the existing art no longer represents the community, saying that he can't even walk down the famously gay Castro street in leather without people gawking at him, something that would have been a common sight 30 years ago. Unlike the other people who focused on the current culture, he seemed disappointed that the culture had shifted away from what brought him a sense of self.

### **The run of the show**

The show remained open for two weekends. I spent some of that time in the installation, explaining it to people who were interested. I had a variety of responses to the work. One viewer was excited at the prospect of seeing male genitalia represented, shouting "DICK" loudly while taking pictures of the pieces. Another viewer had a combative ignorant conversational method, and told me to "repent and read the gospel" as he left. Many people really seemed to understand the installation clearly after my explanation.

The documentation video, displaying my work, and the Drummer magazines, illustrating the leather aesthetic, were both effective tools for explaining the project.

One purpose of the art is to have people's bodies and their desires represented, specifically people who don't often see them celebrated. This can give a viewer a freeing erotic charge, and I was able to witness this firsthand with three separate longtime friends when they visited the space.

## VI. Conclusion

I initiated The Big Gay as an opportunity to transform visual culture in important historical queer social spaces, which is not a small task. The project is ongoing, but Eagle UCSC was an important step in visualizing potential and educating people about the project. It also provided me with multiple opportunities to inform people about it, enabling me to verbally explain the project quickly and effectively to those who were unfamiliar with it. The connections that I've made with artists and bars and the documentation of the work will serve as a template for repeated iterations of this project. My evolving collaborative art practice will ideally make future pieces quicker and easier to produce.

The project initially faltered due to complicated set up. My intention to have the bars pick the artists and pieces in advance fit more neatly into the research I had done, but was ultimately not simple enough for both the bar owners and artists. It also framed the interaction as a commission, making the role of the bar owner closer to that of a client. Having the artist create the piece first based on their desires gave their art value and specificity to their art practice that it would not have had otherwise. In the future I will most likely pursue this method, or a mix of the two methods if the opportunity arises. I'm excited at the preliminary interest from bar managers as an indicator of the future of this project. I'm certain I'll get pushback in a lot of locations, but as I continue with new iterations of this project, installing new pieces will hopefully become commonplace.

The tracing and collaborative work with the artists evolved over the course of the project. I still don't have an effective way to ensure correct proportions using a projector in unusual circumstances; I hope to develop a method that will make it more accurate.

I received comments at Eagle UCSC about the effectiveness of the pieces as an installation, and their potential in a gallery setting. Future iterations of this project may



include a gallery setting before they are installed in bars. This could give the pieces a sense of value and gravitas that could make bars more eager to install them permanently on their walls.

I offered to collaborate with every artist again after their piece was completed, and every artist agreed to do it if the opportunity arose. Ideally they will see the value in their work as physical, large-scale objects that exist in a more permanent state rather than exclusively digital; it should become more obvious when the pieces are placed queer community hubs. I hope to collaborate with these artists again, and ideally have them advocate for these types of pieces in the spaces around them.

I was told by one of my thesis committee members that the backs of the pieces, just bare wood at the moment, would be an interesting place to put the history of how the pieces were made. After they were installed in a bar, the history would be hidden until the pieces were moved. I plan on bringing this up with the artists in the future, to see if there's anything they want to add to the back of the pieces, as a hidden history of them could be compelling.

This project was not an inexpensive project. The MDO boards were fairly expensive, I insisted on paying each artist for their work, and getting to each artist required a bit of travel. As gay bars are a mix of community space and a for-profit business (Mattson 2023, 47) it may be difficult to write grants for funding the project in the future. There is an expectation for gay bars to pay for new art and decorations, so perhaps the next iteration could be a combination of grant money and funding directly from the bars.

A local friend of mine was so inspired by the installation that he drew his first erotic pin-up, and we are planning on creating a wooden cutout of it in less than a month. I also

posted about this project on the internet and made a connection with an artist in New York who already has a local bar ready to install whatever piece we make together.

The current communities who frequent these spaces deserve to have their bodies and desires represented and celebrated the way that the patrons of the past have had theirs celebrated. The visual culture of the artwork in these spaces can and should be adapted to suit the communities that these leather bars serve today. I envision a future where there is a reflexive understanding that leather bars and gay bars are decorated by local artists. Where large-scale physical erotic art in a variety of styles in queer spaces is commonplace. These valuable spaces will seek out artists that represent their community and its desires. Artists will understand that there is value in having their artwork at a large scale and develop artistic practices that include public-facing erotic artwork at a super human scale. When the community sees that the artwork no longer serves them, they don't hesitate to replace it. UCSC Eagle is the first step in shifting the visual culture of leather and gay bars. It has the potential to start a movement that spreads around the world.

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