

THESIS

FORMAL FLUIDITY:

THE BLENDING PERFORMANCE OF GENDER, IDENTITY, AND ART MAKING

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ABSTRACT

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My art, like life, is in a constant state of flux. I bring a personal and unique history to the making process each time I enter the studio. My work is visually autobiographical with written text and expressive mark making. I deal with thoughts of mental health by journaling on the surface of my paintings. I use my body to physically express and work through thoughts of sadness or joy. Throwing materials at the work, gouging the surface with tools, jumping to reach the top edges, or throwing water on top of the painting are all examples of that. I transcend stigmatic social labels of gender norms by hiding and subverting the performance of my actions through layers of work and process, mirroring and recording how I felt in the execution of creation. While working in my studio and critically engaging with the fragility of my process, I am also constrained by my formalist teachings. There is a balance between merging this formal training while engaging in self-reverential work. The blending of these two elements allude to a closer look at myself and how I choose to present myself within the context of a heteronormative society. Subverting gender performativity through nonrepresentational art making while engaging in the process of highlighting my gender identity allows for a performative, fluid process in which I place myself in the world.

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INTRODUCTION

Fluidity, performance, and the physical process of art making are crucial and drive the foundation of my practice. I explore intimate, discarded, and mundane materials to create a new aesthetic dialog for communication within my work. By reclaiming personal and overlooked materials, I can express, capture, and process my place within this world. Through the act of making, I am exposing myself and my psychological experience by building up and pulling back materials on a surface that reflect the fluid ambivalence of my life. As a transgender artist, exploring gender identity and performance are especially important in my work. My work absorbs the weighted social performances demanded by our culture, the vulnerability of exposing myself to others while also allowing my materials to dictate my gendered artistic applications and decisions.

There is a flux between my formal, academic training that is informed by the canon of art history and my unconscious and intuitive process of creating nonrepresentational work. This fluctuation provides a rich dialogue for me to explore the connections between my identity and art history. My studio process is particularly important for me. The result of being in my studio and enacting symbolic masculine and feminine behaviors allows my art to breathe multiple interpretations which are both formal and content based.

I believe that artists can pursue multiple modes of art making to interrogate the cultural constructs of gender. My practice also looks to challenge the gendering of art

movements within the canon with spontaneous performances of art making that reference the fluidity of gender in my work.

SECTION 1: GENDER PERFORMATIVITY WITHIN ART HISTORY

While examining traditional gender roles through spontaneous artistic performance and materials, I can trace contemporary constructions of gender and the role of masculinity in art history. Throughout art history artists have experimented with bending gender for artistic play. While breaking down and experimenting with gender binaries is important, it is not always done in a way that considers the reality of non-binary individuals experiences. For example, artist Marcel Duchamp's female alter ego, Rose Sélavy, was deemed "born" by him in New York in 1920.¹ Although Duchamp took many cultural risks for inventing this female persona, there were few consequences for this nonbinary performance of gender because of his privilege of presenting as male. Performing symbolic feminine and masculine behaviors simultaneously enables me to have an alternative perspective to discuss the constructs of personhood and the expression of life lived. The layers of my work mirror the fluidity of gender by enacting examples of masculine artistic practice through a feminine lens. I do this from the perspective of a painter, exploring various media, mark-making and text on a two-dimensional surface. My artistic practice has been influenced by my own experience as a transgender woman as well as by the writings of feminist and gender theorists such as Judith Butler and Kristen Hatch. Both authors identify ritualized "norms" within a heteronormative society. The repetition of these reinforced normative exercises suggest that identity falls upon sex, as much as gender. Butler is an American gender theorist and philosopher widely recognized for their influence on third-wave feminism, queer theory, and ethics. Throughout their career, feminism shifts from

exploring how femininity is experienced and represented within patriarchy to challenging the “gender norms” of male masculinity and female femininity.² Feminist scholars have long recognized gender as a social construct in which identity is based on reproductive function. This is due to what Butler terms the “heterosexual matrix.”³ This is represented as a natural relationship between gender, sex, and sexuality which reinforces feminine women to seek masculine men and vice-versa.⁴ However, Hatch states:

“Gender, according to Butler, is performative, produced by our behavior rather than causing it. Gender is not “a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow.” Rather, it is “the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being.”⁵

Butler is emphasizing that it is not one’s preexisting masculinity or femininity that causes one to act a certain way, but it is our normalized behaviors and expressions that produce them. Because gender is a product of behavior rather than its cause, it is something we do rather than what defines us.⁶ Assuming gender is not produced through single acts, but instead everyday habits, we can choose to identify ourselves within the context of societies social “norms”.

Gender performativity is a term coined in Butler’s 1990 book *Gender Trouble* and points to the idea that identities are continuously in flux as opposed to a single defining moment in time.⁷ Performativity, by Butler’s definition, is neither play no self-presentation, but a regularized repetition of habits. She claims, “that the body cannot be understood outside culture. It can only be apprehended through ‘constructions’ representing “that “without which” we could not think at all’.”⁸ Butler suggests a body cannot be lived except through reference to societies norms, such as heteronormativity. The body then becomes the medium through which we encounter others.⁹ I agree with

Butler's research that identifies the performative nature of gender. I do not believe that our gender performance is either an essentialized notion that gender is assigned at birth or that is purely a social construct. There is a nuance to consider when categorizing the gender performance of men and women. Our language is limited and binary when considering gender and dictated by history and culture. We are all functioning under a patriarchal construct that informs our programming as individuals.

There are fetishized social constructs into which we are born. These systems dictate what kinds of access we have in a heteronormative society depending on our gender, race, and economic privilege. Gendered social norms cannot continue to dictate our lives without us being actively conditioned to be a part of them. By interrogating these social constructs, change can happen. As a maker, I am operating in a way that can enact, repeat, appropriate, and refuse the norms that decide my social ontology. By interrogating gender performance through art making, I can break down the gendered social constructs that condition my behavior. Butler presents the idea that gendering is a process. She proposes that it is the enactment of masculinity or femininity that constitutes the gendered body and individual.¹⁰ This means there is no gender identity behind expressions of gender. Identity in effect is created by the reiteration of self-identification. Simply put, it exists only in the acts that constitute it.

In the case of Romaine Brooks, an American painter of the early twentieth century, having a female body directly affected her role in the art world. Brooks' *Self Portrait* (Fig. 1) painted in 1923 depicts herself in non-gender-specific attire.¹¹ Dressed in a black equestrian suit intended to loosen her ties to the convention of 'femininity' at the time, Brooks attempts to transcend the shackles of womanhood. The adoption of

equestrian attire specifically points to sexual ambiguity.¹² Her *Self Portrait* reveals Brooks as a bodied subject of identity that had previously been hidden. By mimicking masculine dress, and working in a male-dominant media, Brooks risks her development as an artist at the pinnacle of her career. The recognition of women's work was often undermined during this time due to a male dominated art world. Her self-representation was an attempt towards blurring the boundaries between gender lines as well as sexual orientation within society.¹³

In a 1967 interview, rediscovered in the Smithsonian Archives of American Art and translated in 2014, Brooks recalled studying in Rome and being the only woman in her drawing course.¹⁴ Her male peers harassed her and in one instance, left pornography at her workstation.¹⁵ While this may seem like an indisputable case of harassment that should be dealt with, the fear of retaliation forced Brooks to ultimately leave school. The unjust and violent treatment towards women in the art world was, and often still is, undeniable and dangerous. It becomes a terrifying thought how these same men may have treated individuals who identify outside the binary of our heteronormative culture.

Many of Brooks' paintings hint at deeper themes surrounding sexuality and gender. Her subjects consisted of mostly women, many of whom identified as lesbians.¹⁶ By painting portraits with women in men's clothes and adorning masculine haircuts, it can be tempting to read her work as merely timid depictions of a subject's self-presentation. However, one of Brooks' most famous painting depicts a British painter who went by the name Peyter Gluck (Fig. 2). Through the title *Peter (A Young English Girl)*, Brooks reveals the blurring between gender and the performance of

presenting androgenous. When placing this painting within contemporary discourse, Pulitzer Prize-winning art critic Philip Kennicott asks us to consider an alternative interpretation:

“Imagine, for a moment, that this isn’t a portrait of a woman who calls herself Peter and dresses in men’s clothing, but rather that it is a picture of a boy named Peter who is also “a young English girl.” That mental exercise leads one away from binary gender categories, and gets at the far more interesting, and largely unexplored, territory of gender and sexuality beyond the either/or world of normative heterosexuality.”¹⁷

By using an individual’s chosen name, Brooks contributes directly to Butler’s ideas surrounding the gender performance. The fact that Peter, a traditionally masculine name, is referred to as a young English girl forces us to confront our interpretation of gender and contributes largely to the refusal of heteronormative constructs.

Marcel Duchamp was another artist of the 1920s exploring gender perceptions through strategic contradictions, calling attention to the gendered biases of artistic perception. Rose Sélavy’s first images emerged to Man Ray during their collaborative photoshoot in 1920.¹⁸ Embracing the identity of Sélavy, Duchamp went on to sign documents and personal letters with “MarSélavy.” After becoming the founder of two businesses (fabric dyeing and a fashion boutique), signing over twenty artworks, publishing the *Green Box* (1934), and copyrighting *Fresh Widow* (1920), Sélavy went on to author a book of puns and was offered a marriage proposal by the Surrealist poet Robert Desnos. As Deborah Johnson writes in her article about Duchamp’s alter ego, “To the extent that she constitutes a long-term performance piece of Duchamp in drag, she functioned for him as a paradigm of his most consistent theme, androgyny.”

Initially, Duchamp characterized Sélavy as being born a female in New York with Jewish heritage. However, Johnson quotes from Pierre Cabanne's *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp* (1987):

“Characteristically, he later complicated this otherwise clear delineation by explaining to Pierre Cabanne, "I wanted to change my identity and the first idea that came to me was to take a Jewish name. I was Catholic, and it was a change to go from one religion to another. I did not find a Jewish name that I especially liked, or that tempted me, and suddenly, I had an idea: why not change sex? It was much simpler. . . . Rose was an awful name in 1920.”¹⁹

Taking this into account, the name Rrose Sélavy transcends multiple levels of gender with religious hierarchies. Sélavy's status is tied to Levy which is among the most recognizable Jewish surnames around the world.²⁰ This implies status, which allowed Duchamp to participate in certain rituals ordinarily inaccessible to a woman such as public art exhibitions. By creating a female persona and identity, and enacting a feminine performance, Duchamp is exposing social systems of gender by showing they are not an absolute truth.

The concept of an alias was not a new idea for Duchamp's collaborator Man Ray who had recently changed his name from Emmanuel Radnitsky.²¹ However, Sélavy's implications of invented identity went far beyond a mere alias. The idea of changing sex was very closely tied to homoeroticism at the time. Cross-dressing was commonly found among clubs and street theater.²² The first photo of Sélavy, *Portrait of Rrose Sélavy* (Marcel Duchamp) (1921) (Fig. 3) wears fake jewelry, a cloth coat, and an unfashionable, brimmed feathered hat. The attire is undeniably a costume. Although the photograph displays a commentary on class, Ray intentionally emphasizes Sélavy's masculine features. He chose a fixed spotlight to cast attention on the hard angles of

her face and aging skin. Duchamp presented his insight by stating, “I wanted viewers to experience the delirious pleasures of ambiguity – and to find their own pleasure – rather than to tell them what to see.” Metaphorically changing his persona, Duchamp was performing. He was decidedly not hiding who he was, but instead questioning the male artistic perspective of art. In Ray’s next photographs of Duchamp as *Rose Sélavy* (1921-1923) (Fig. 4) she is presented as confident and sensual. Wearing a fur-trimmed coat with elegant jewelry, she adorns a hat commonly associated with higher class.²³ Johnson explains, “Ray has kept the light and focus soft, thereby shifting attention to the textures of Rose’s accoutrements and away from facial idiosyncrasies. Make-up had only recently achieved legitimacy, and Rose is now more heavily and carefully made-up.”²⁴ Although Duchamp is accredited with ideas of fluidity, and fundamentally unified Sélavy into his life and work, the photographs taken by Ray should be acknowledged for presenting us with a particularly modernist critique on socio-political implications of gender.²⁵ Rather than contribute to the discourse of Brooks’ constraints as a masculine, lesbian woman, Duchamp performed Sélavy to expose the modernist critics who believed their male artistic genius legitimized their readings of art as correct.

By altering their appearance Duchamp successfully achieved subverting traditional gender norms. When considering conventional masculinity, the image of ‘man’ clings to heterogeneous norms of presentation as well. Identity is not established through clothing, but nonetheless provides meaning through gesture, body, and habits.²⁶ In her journal article *Clothes Make the Man*, Amelia Jones examines the relationship between clothing and identity specifically to the western male artist through which masculine identities have been recognized and subverted through artistic dress.

Although male artists were experimenting with the concept of gender blurring, it is important to note that they had the privilege of not only living and identifying as European, heteronormative, and cis (one whose gender identity matches their sex assigned at birth), but they also had social access within the art world to be considered avant-garde for associating their displays of gender as merely artistic performance.

SECTION 2: STUDIO PROCESS AND MATERIAL CONSIDERATIONS

As agents of perception, the investigation of decoding can easily overshadow the importance of my material decisions. When considering *Understanding Media*, Marshall McLuhan describes the “content” of a medium as a “juicy piece of meat carried by the burglar to distract the watchdog of the mind.”²⁷ People tend to focus on interpretation to provide valuable information, but in the process, miss the connection to materiality in my work. McLuhan begins his chapter *The Medium is the Message* by clarifying:

“In a culture like ours, long accustomed to splitting and dividing all things as a means of control, it is sometimes a bit of a shock to be reminded that, in operational and practical fact, the medium is the message. This is merely to say that the personal and social consequences of any medium - that is, of any extension of ourselves - result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology.”²⁸

Materials provide the viewer with an insight into the personal relationship between myself and my objects.

The material decisions I make are automatic and reactive to the changing patterns and chance encounters of my daily actions. By taking items from my home and bringing them into the studio, I form an extension between my daily life and my artistic practice. These same objects live within my studio and directly contribute to the detritus used in further works. The excavation-like nature of my work is self-referential and points outward to the daily habits and repurposed objects, items, and materials I use as a medium to create paintings. I am critically engaged and solving through making. By dictating space and depth using materials and objects directly from my home I create a visual dialogue between the work and myself.

My current surfaces are composed of Owens Corning Foamular Extruded Polystyrene (XPS) Rigid Foam Insulation. Each large piece fills about a third of my studio. The large sheets of foam insulation allow me the ability to score marks of texture through methods of gouging, carving, and cutting. With confidence in the structural integrity of the painting, layers of paint, paper, and other materials are easily blended, applied, and peeled back through passionate actions. (Fig. 5) I choose large surfaces to paint on because I enjoy the movement and energy it takes to create marks. Using my entire body and psyche makes me feel a part of the entire process. I am 'in it' as opposed to someone outside peering in, stepping back to evaluate from the outside. In my studio, I am always surrounded by a potential contribution of material. The entire studio space operates as the work. The large surfaces provide a targeted space to direct my art making.

I find poetry in appropriating materials that others throw away. In addition to paint, I use plastic, paper, boxes, newspapers, and personal items such as old clothing and shower curtains. (Fig. 6) I attach these items to the surface of my paintings and create outlines of different patterns, shapes, and images. I do not gravitate towards using new artistic materials. Instead of using fresh paper, I would prefer to use a leftover or discarded piece of paper picked up from the floor of my studio. There is something safe and self-referential to using materials I have already used before. I can see evidence of my hand in the material.

The discounted paint, personal journal entries, old sketches, and packaging items bind my work together. They also provide surface layers for me to work on and dig through. This form of art making often makes me think of the poem *I Am for an Art*,

by Claes Oldenburg. Oldenburg highlights the chance encounters of everyday material and eloquently writes that anything we encounter could be made into art. In the poem he states:

"I am for an art that grows up not knowing it is art at all, an art given the chance of having a starting point of zero. I am for an art that embroils itself with the everyday crap & still comes out on top. I am for an art that imitates the human, that is comic, if necessary, or violent, or whatever is necessary. I am for an art that takes its form from the lines of life itself, that twists and extends and accumulates and spits and drips and is heavy and coarse and blunt and sweet and stupid as life itself."²⁹

I resonate with this sentiment of art making and incorporate this philosophy to my practice. Having an awareness of all objects that I encounter is particularly important to me. In my practice objects and materials can provide nuance and a subtle narrative which can be transformed into art. Because we interact with these materials daily, I believe that overlooked and discarded objects can provide a subtle poetry that relates to both the viewer and myself.

The remnants of paper and other dilapidated materials give my large paintings an old wallpaper or billboard likeness comparable to artist Mark Bradford. Similarly, Bradford and I work on multimedia abstract paintings whose laborious surfaces capture the excavation of our emotional biography. By constructing large-scale paintings which highlight layered formal practices, our work resembles abandoned billboards, street posters, and urban detritus. *Rat Catcher of Hamelin III* exemplifies such mark making. (Fig. 7) Bradford's early work utilized methods inspired by his mother's hair salon but later shifted towards paper material sourced from his immediate neighborhood of South-Central Los Angeles.³⁰ Fueled by the pursuit to imbue abstract painting with social policy's surrounding political, gender, race, and sexuality, Bradford's found media

reveals glimpses of their function.³¹ My material collections are chosen differently than Bradford in that they are often random, everyday discarded objects from my own life. I find that using materials one might call mundane is an intimate and expressive way to reference my own interactions in this world. The subtlety of referencing my autonomy through materials gives me a sense of comfort and grounding in my practice.

The color for each painting is chosen at the time of creation from the select pool of paint I collect and stack on my studio table. Quality and medium are irrelevant to me. I work with inexpensive paint from the hardware store or what I can acquire via donation. This spontaneous and adaptive use of often discarded paint medium is useful to the mercurial nature of my practice. Because my process is fluid, I often find that the chance interactions of these mediums provide serendipity in my work. I mix assorted colors and various kinds of paints indiscriminately relying on my experience and background knowledge of color theory. However, sometimes even this foundation fails. For example, I will combine blues and yellows assuming they will turn green when there are times the blue paint will dominate the yellow and only mute the resulting color slightly. There are times the contents of a bucket will not mix with any material and I do not find until I after attempting to combine them. I try to add various ingredients, but they remain independent even when applied to the surface. These chance reactions between paint body and ground lend a sense of accidental balance and unity.

I oscillate between formal and informal decision making during my studio process, and as a result I do not always end up using the paint mixtures I create. If I dislike the color or I have already used a similar color too much on the work, then I will dispose of it. My choice in color is dependent on what I have on hand in the studio. The

paint brushes are purchased in bulk from discounted art supply companies. I am not concerned with the quality of the brushes but am conscious with the size for mark making and writing. I keep my brushes in a bucket so when I decide to write or mark, I can choose the size appropriate to my message. The large brush is used for marks, spreading areas of color, and applying paint or adhesive to paper and plastic materials in order to stick them to the surface of the painting. I create new art pieces by reusing destroyed, neglected brushes. These reconstructed brushes sit in vases and become sculptural bouquets of flowers. (Fig. 8)

I find myself writing thoughts I deem significant enough to document on the surface of my large paintings. Writing charged words on the surface of my paintings creates psychological vulnerability. I am physically purging myself of those thoughts by casting them out onto the surface. With agency, I decide to leave small portions of my writing visible for me to remember and for the viewer to discern for themselves. It is powerful for me to know that I can cover it up and completely forget about it. Sometimes I layer multiple thoughts onto a surface over a period of time and continue to write within the same sentence, thought, or sentiment. Formally, I choose different spots to write to balance the painting visually. If I write in the top left corner, then the weight is counter balanced in the bottom right corner.

The text and messages vary, not only by their actual scale but by their emotional impact. I write in various sizes with an emotional tone that can vary between joyful and depressed. The expressive nature of the mark, whether quick and aggressive or slow and methodical can convey an emotion that the color association does not reflect. I have also written very joyful thoughts quickly and expressively while also slowly marking

a depressed or upsetting message in arbitrary sizes. There are times when it is easier to repeat the same phrase to the point across. I can then look at the surface with the same message strewn throughout and confront the thought head-on. I am forced to see it everywhere. This can sometimes be a message or word stuck in my head. It can have meaning or express an emotional response. It can also be repetitive marks of lines over and over. The formal elements such as line are mimicking my body and referencing my psyche. These lines are transmitting and distributing information from me onto a surface. I use my materials and the act of mark making as a conduit. Often the lines drawn on the painting are surrogate for self-mutilation.

I rely on my formal training to invoke the art principles of composition, color balance, evaluation of unity and consistency, while making sure messages, text, and marks are hidden enough to allow multiple readings of the work. I reveal and peel back layers while simultaneously adding to them. At times, I will cover the entire painting surface only to go back in and reveal what lies beneath it by cutting, removing, and peeling the surface material. Other times, I will cover the surface of the painting numerous times before peeling anything back. I continue to add text, marks, color, objects, and images between layers. Peeling back the layers can reveal previously applied color or bleed over the edge and leave evidence of process. The paint can also simply work as an adhesive that becomes hidden behind the materials stuck to the surface.

In Susan Canning's article in *Sculpture Magazine*, Sculptor Susan Collis states: "In several paintings, I become a performer, laboriously recording my decisions through automatic writing and extinguishing anxieties, embracing childlike joy, and reflecting on

frustrations.”³² I enact similar creative practices by fully merging myself with the studio. Throughout her work, Collis performs her practice in the studio while examining its purpose. The hand is essential to Collis’ creation as an expressive mark on individual agency.³³ She lingers over the making process by reflecting upon the time, memory, and performance. Each layer constructs elements of time and provides relics of memory passed through different applications and excavations.

While I relate to Collis’ reflection of time and memory through studio process and reflection, Greer Lankton’s reclamation of materials to make sense of identity is key to my own practice. Lankton’s dolls showcase her unique experience of both sexes and exploration of gender. Blurring the lines between societies norms of differentiating between men and women, Lankton’s art shames the inequity of sex and beauty.³⁴ Through similar means, the materials gathered in my studio come directly from my home and life. They are relics of my everyday performances which label each choice gendered one way or the other. The construction of my choices and revealing of layers provides a mirror or dialogue for my own interpretations and reflections of my day-to-day life.

An important formal and conceptual aspect of my practice are the creation of smaller, recycled works I compose in my studio. I use the term Fragments to refer to the sculptural paintings that are a part of the Formal Fluidity series. The Fragments are deconstructed and reclaimed pieces from my larger paintings. The term fragment is a reference to the literal, aesthetic form of the object coming from a larger whole, and the transitional nature that each piece embodies. While the Fragments can certainly be described as paintings, I also call them painted objects to emphasize their sculptural,

three-dimensionality. The Fragments are a cohesive body of work composed of similar material and formed through the same process as my larger paintings. The shapes and layers are undoubtedly unique to each individual piece. Using brightly colored edges, each fragment explores the queering possibilities of abstraction through various designs and intensity. Because of their ability to stand independently united, the Fragments serve as an experimental and contemplative practice which yields a series of different, singular forms. The fragments do not have squared edges. When creating these works, I find that they reveal their own shapes through the deconstruction process.

SECTION 3: FORMAL FLUIDITY AND IDENTITY

The term “formalism” in art history has been used to refer to the philosophical writings of Clement Greenberg and Clive Bell. In Greenberg’s writings on philosophical aesthetics, formalism is the methodology of analyzing art based purely on its own form.³⁵ This analysis is based on nonrepresentational and abstracted artworks where the message is based solely on the way the artwork looks, not by any symbolic coding within the materials in the art. For the purposes of my paper, I want to draw attention to the problematic methodology of decoding my work through a formalist lens. The philosophical definition of “formalism” assumes a position on the nature of my art which stifles interpretation and limits appreciation of my work as conceptual commentary on gender fluidity. Although the formal applications of nonrepresentational artmaking lend well to my practice, I reject the title of formalist in the philosophical or traditional sense because my work contains coded and fluid content.

Exploring my own identity as a transgender woman has led me to investigate the practices of other transgender artists. While doing research I found that many contemporary queer artists do not gravitate towards abstract and nonrepresentational methods of art making and focus on figural representations of the body. Queer artist Sadie Benning is an exception to this rule. Benning, whose work characteristically addresses gender and feminist concerns takes a similar nonrepresentational approach to their practice as I do.³⁶ Benning addresses the traditional accounts of abstraction, by obscuring the specificity of bodies and identity, where form and content seem to be in total conflict. Queer scholar and art historian Lex Morgan Lancaster defines the term

“queer” as a verb rather than a noun or identity signifier.³⁷ He states, “What I am calling “queer” performs as a disruption of the normative, the expected and the intuitive.”³⁸ He continues, “Within a regime of representation, where what is considered queer has been tied inextricably to the sign of figural content or biographical context, understanding “queer” as a verb allows it to operate in excess of what would seem to be established or legible.” In order to understand how and why abstraction is taken up by contemporary queer and feminist artists, such as Benning, one must look to and challenge the history of abstraction which historically been dominated by “the big bad white boys of the avant-garde”.³⁹ Benning’s work allows us to ask how this aesthetic approach fits within the continued legacy of abstraction and how the term queer can be embodied by action and mark making rather than a representational form.

My intention is not to strip an artist of their self-identification. Rather, I am interested in how identity performs within the realms of politics and aesthetics that are not reducible to biographical interpretation. Within my practice, abstraction is also used as a strategic tool to reject the focus on the singularity of my identity. Like Benning, I attempt to dismantle singular readings in my work by not using overtly representational imagery. My nonrepresentational art-making process combines with subtle markings that reference the fluid and symbolic coding of my identity. This in turn creates an alternative methodology for analyzing my work. The combination of formalism and coded representational text and symbols is formally fluid – a direct reference to the concept of gender fluidity. The use of abstraction in my work “is not established by seeking coded signifiers of the artist’s sexuality or gender, nor is “queer” used as a generalized term to describe all abstract aesthetics. Rather, the tension between

specific identity markers and the potential for a more universalizing gesture is a productive point of departure for considering how abstraction can operate queerly.”⁴⁰ Approaching my work this way is unfamiliar territory for me. By addressing universal and personal themes of fluidity through the lens of abstraction, while performing my unique lived experience in the studio, is my way of conversing with the gendered canon of painting.

In my practice I specifically reference gender identity by strategically using pastel blues and pinks that convey specific symbolic associations to gender constructs. These colors relate to and reference my identity as a transgender artist. Psychologically, I am drawn to blues, pinks, and various shades of red. In the thesis work, I focused heavily on pastel color combinations. I associate light pastel colors with softness, gentility, and innocence. When I use them to create harsh marks or cover a large area of surface with expressive intuition the message shifts towards a childlike joy or a child’s tantrum while carrying the weight of the previous connotations. It would be a stretch to say I choose blues and pinks because they fall into the transgender flag colors, but I do think it is interesting I am drawn to these colors and find their combination pleasing. I like to think I am using both colors together in a combined layering of (gender) fluidity. The blue and pink colors have the potential to be a post-process reflection of my identity.

CONCLUSION

As a transwoman, I have unique experiences because of my gender identity. I am constantly reminded and confronted with society's judgements over my body. My art practice has allowed me a safe and healthy outlet for dealing with these frustrations. I am also able to celebrate my diversity through visual and expressive means in the studio. I bring my own personal history and story to the making process each time I enter the studio. My work is autobiographical when reflecting my written thoughts and expressive mark making. I deal with thoughts of mental health by journaling and thinking aloud. I use my body to physically express and work through the thoughts of sadness or joy. Aggressively throwing materials at the surface, gouging the surface with tools, jumping to reach the top edges, or throwing water on top of the painting are all examples of that. I can write thoughts I then cover up but am forced to confront visually before I am able to cover them up. Even if I am exaggerating or being dramatic, I allow myself to express those thoughts in a form of permanency. From there, I can move on from those thoughts and continue working. I spend a lot of time thinking of ways to incorporate my thoughts into a physical artwork. The alone time I have while creating is important because I allow myself to feel openly. It is an extremely vulnerable time and process.

I transcend these stigmatic social labels of gender norms by hiding and subverting the performance of my actions through layers of work and process, mirroring and recording how I felt in the execution of creation. Duchamp does an excellent job of enacting gender bending performance to call attention or draw emphasis to social

conformity. However, my work is solely about fluidity and layered gender-tendencies to find identity and purpose within the context of our world. I am not performing gender but subverting it by highlighting each process in the back and forth between masculine and feminine practices of material. By reclaiming the materials and items from my home I am processing a metaphorical way of relating gender and how it is constructed. My art, like life, is in a constant state of flux. There is a lack of permanence to its structural integrity and materials used. Like fluid identity, my artworks present recorded suggestions of performing masculinity and femininity. The whole point is the fluidity of process and performance. By researching artists negotiating the construction of gender I can evaluate the risks Romaine Brooks took at a time when deconstructing social norms was dangerous. While Duchamp's persona of Rose Sélavy achieved more status as play, my art indexes the personal remains of the moment using paint and other media. Not only is fluidity of gender present in my work but also the fluidity of time.

My nonrepresentational art making process has the potential to create a conduit for exploring and embracing formalist notions of artmaking while subverting them by inserting personal content and referencing the symbolic and gendered ideologies that are associated many abstract artistic movements within the canon of art. While working in my studio and critically engaging with the fragility of my process, I am constantly shackled by my training in formalist teachings. There is a balance between merging this formal training while engaging in self-referential work. The blending of these two elements allude to a closer look at myself and how I choose to present myself within the context of a heteronormative society. Subverting gender performativity through

nonrepresentational art making while engaging in the process of highlighting my gender identity allows for a performative, fluid process in which I place myself in the world.

FIGURES



Figure 1, Romaine Brooks, *Self Portrait*, 1923, Oil on canvas, 46 x 26 inches.



Figure 2, Romaine Brooks, *Peter (A Young English Girl)*, 1923, oil on canvas, 36 x 24 inches.



Figure 3, Man Ray, *Portrait of Rose Sélavy (Marcel Duchamp)*, 1921, Gelatin silver print, 4.5 x 3.5 inches.



Figure 4, Man Ray, *Marcel Duchamp as Rose Sélavy*, 1920-1921, Gelatin silver print, 8.5 x 6 inches.

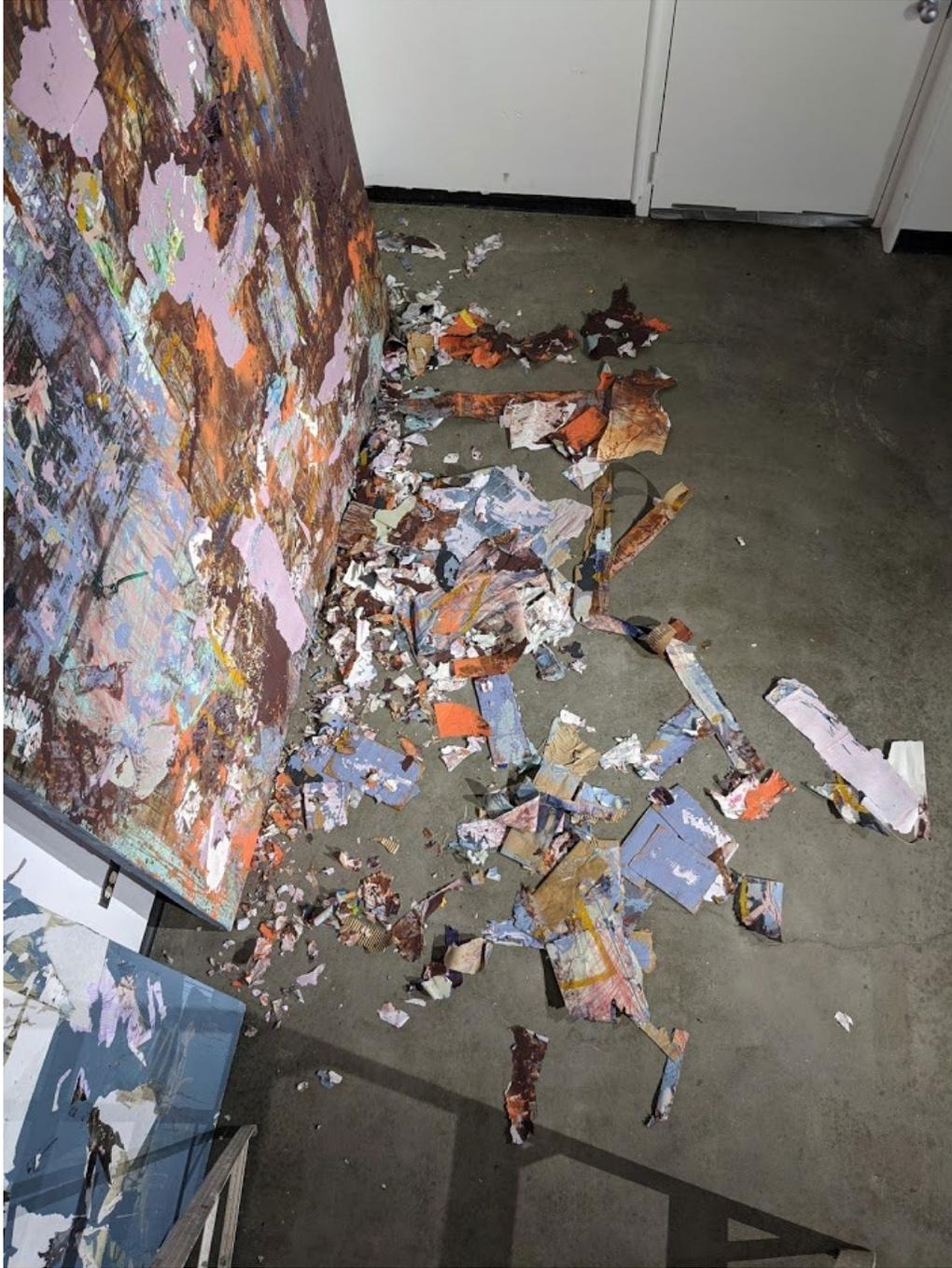


Figure 5, Spencer Gillespie, *Process*, 2021, Mixed media painting, 12 x 10 feet.



Figure 6, Spencer Gillespie, *Process #2*, 2021, Studio materials.



Figure 8, Spencer Gillespie, *Bouquet of Flowers*, 2020, Repurposed studio tools in vase, 12 x

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