Confronting Cultural Immediacy

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I. INTRODUCTION

II. GENDERED AESTHETICS
   a. 1970’s MINIMALISTS: THE MASCULINE AESTHETIC
   b. COLOR: CONTESTING THE ASSOCIATIONS OF PINK AND BLUE
   c. FORM: MASCULINITY AND THE PHALLUS
   d. OBJECT: CLAIMING THE “HOME DEPOT” AESTHETIC AS FEMININE

III. DISCOVERING QUEER THEORY
   a. MINIMALISM: QUEER AND ABSTRACT
   b. THE OVERT AND THE SUBTLE
   c. QUEERING: REMOVING THE STIGMA

IV. CONCLUSION
INTRODUCTION

As a female queer artist living in 2020, I find the topic of identity in contemporary culture to be exceptionally complex. The combination of being female and queer drive the concepts and process of my artwork, therefore, making my identity and the context, in which the work is viewed, one and the same. It is difficult to navigate my personal experience with subject matter because categories like feminism and queer theory come with their own social and artistic translations. Although these socially informed and conditioned cues are fundamental to our contemporary human existence, through this paper and in my visual art practice, I contest and challenge automatic human reactions to aesthetics and concepts of gender.

In my work, I deliberately combine feminist theory, queer theory, art history, and personal experience to challenge and subvert binary ideals that structurally exist within contemporary culture. My course of artistic study started with my attraction to the 1960’s and 1970’s minimalist movement whose aesthetics is characterized by “manufacturing objects with common industrial and commercial materials in a restricted vocabulary of geometric shapes”(Chave).

This era in art history is overtly masculine, thus making feminism and queer theory the antithesis of the content and aesthetics of the minimalists. My aesthetic and conceptual decisions are informed by this juxtaposition. Feminist art “used all of the ‘forbidders’ in art to present the personal and the particular and the local.” It was symbolic and narrative (Willette).


Through the utilization of gendered aesthetics, and feminism, I have a new and expanded understanding of queer theory and queer experience. Queer theory authenticates fluidity between binaries, thus contesting and challenging those structures. Feminism and masculine aesthetics, served as the parameters for my binary thought process. My artwork creates a queer stance by attempting to find a fluid balance between these two established binaries. Contesting binary constructs has been a theme in my work since be beginning of my practice, but only recently has my research led me to queer theory. The discovery of queer theory has been theoretically validating and is providing me with the language that further influences and contextualizes my artwork. In studying queer theory I have found that my personal experience is similar to how other artists are subtly and meticulously illustrating and expressing their queer experiences. Given my perspective and interest in identity, my new body of work aims to recognize the nuances of human identity through a queer lens.
GENDERED AESTHETICS

Defining gender in 2020 is complex; it can be difficult and even frustrating for some. Thus, making the task of defining gendered aesthetics considerably hard. As it pertains to the visual arts, gendered aesthetics is the act of gendering color, shapes and objects through our understanding of binary sexes and cultural influences. This binary sorting of aesthetics occurs either purposefully in attempt to simply assist our understanding of the subject matter, or this sorting mechanism surfaces as habitual reaction, resulting from cultural conditioning.

It is important to note that the contemporary movement of “undoing gender constructs”, counter to its own purpose and logic, relies on the very definitions of gender that it is attempting to nullify. The binary gender structure has to exist in order for queer theory to exist. I do not find this contradiction to be detrimental to the current queer movement because it serves to further validate the importance of gender studies; light is shed on the interesting nuances of identity when gender binaries are challenged. In 2001 Judith Butler wrote the book “Undoing Gender”. Butler writes from a feminist perspective, but her feminist theory can be applied to queer studies today when she writes, “Sexual difference is not a given, not a premise, not a basis on which to build a feminism; it is not that which we have already encountered and come to know; rather, as a question that prompts a feminist inquiry, it is something that cannot quite be stated, that troubles the grammar of the statement, and that remains, more or less permanently, to interrogate.” In this quote Butler hints on the idea that sexuality and identity are complex and

something worth inquiring about because it has not yet been defined. This statement can also be applied to the queer stance on gender and sexuality.

The action of undoing gender in contemporary culture often relies on the manipulation of physical appearance. I want to note that the movement recognizes how visual aesthetics impact gender associations. This might go without saying, but this element helps attach gender progression, to the arts and visual aesthetics. My work attempts to confront the over simplified binary sorting of people, objects, color, and shape, by challenging the viewers’ immediate gender associations.

1970’s MINIMALISTS: THE MASCULINE AESTHETIC

Gendered aesthetics informs decision making throughout the entire process of my work, from the fundamentals of a piece’s content to the final design and visual elements. My obsession with combining art and gender emerged from analyzing the overtly “masculine” 1970’s minimalist era. Male artists like Carl Andre, Dan Flavin, Donald Judd, and Robert Morris were coining styles that utilized large scale, hard edge, raw hardware store materials and “meaningless” content. Historically we have been conditioned to consider these aesthetic attributes and attitudes toward content as overtly masculine. For me, it is hard to comprehend how solidified aesthetic attributes and attitudes are to western society, this is due to the fact that I innately never behaved within the lines of binary gendered interests. However, there is no denying that these absurd pressures exist within contemporary culture. In spite of the absurdity, the 1970’s critics were willing to draw divides between male and female minimalist work. Contemporary scholar and critic James Meyer notes how the influential, modernist critic Clement Greenberg used Anne Truitt to draw masculine and feminine contrasts between her work and other well-known male minimalists. Meyer writes, “Greenberg divided the minimal
field across gender lines, implying that Truitt had developed one kind of minimalism, the male
minimalists another. This assumption informed his assessment of each practice. He valued
Truitt’s work precisely because it avoided the macho antics of “orthodox” minimalism.”
Greenberg was clearly comparing the boys versus the girls, as if this were a grade-school
playground. This assumption is a childlike oversimplification of gender and identity. From the
very beginning of my practice I have intentionally challenged oversimplified gender associations
like the one Greenberg makes about minimalist art in the 1970’s.

The minimalist aesthetic serves as an example of stereotypical masculinity. The male
artists in the 1960’s and 1970’s created artwork that harnessed the aggression men are expected
to display in western culture. Their work was large in scale, dominated spaces, and removed any
remnants of human touch. My recent body of work is large in scale and dominates space like the
1970’s minimalist artist, but it also reintegrates the human body and creates a subtle dialog
around human experience, sexuality, and identity. In doing that, this body of work inseparably
pairs minimalism with the human figure, thus challenging the seemingly solidified attachment of
the minimalist aesthetic to the cold inhumane aesthetic of masculinity. Minimalism will appear
in every section of this paper as thematic punctuation because the foundation of my art practice
attempts to challenge minimalisms’ association with masculinity.

COLOR: CONTESTING THE ASSOCIATIONS OF PINK AND BLUE

In opposition to Greenberg’s gendered comparisons and contrasts, I fabricated a piece
that was intentionally genderless. In *Untitled (Affection)* (Figure 1) I borrowed, contorted and
manipulated the hard edge aesthetics and use of light as a medium that were central to the formal

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qualities of the minimalists. I paired this reductive visual language with more soft and sincere language (both visual and textual through titling) in order to challenge our preconceived gendered associations and to raise content and meaning. At first glance, Untitled (Affection) has hard edge formalities that pose as masculine, although the slow burn poetics of love, affection and human interaction, allows the work to open up and propose meaning, ultimately granting the viewer a feminine and feminist perspective. While I would expect Greenberg to “stick to his guns” and argue that work is successful when it is cohesive to the artists’ gender, I would argue that (as it pertains to gender and identity) artwork is “successful” when the work authentically reflects the experience of the artist as a person, whether masculine or feminine. The authenticity of the work is dependent upon the artists’ ability to align and communicate personal experience, style and content. In fact, cutting identity nuances out of the social equation does an extreme disservice to the complexities of human beings. With that being said, Untitled (Affection) acknowledges our preconceived notions of masculine and feminine; it celebrates both masculine minimalist aesthetics and soft feminine poetics.

Untitled (Affection) served as a catalyst for studying the blend of hard edge aesthetics and feminine content. The overall aesthetic of the piece is referential to hard edge minimalist aesthetics. By contrast, the red and blue light serves to challenge our associations with gender. The color choice is an attempt to balance and counterbalance the meaning of color in a theoretical contemporary interpretation. In this piece the color red is battling blue as the male hue and ultimately neutralizes both colors into gender ambiguity. Hence, illustrating ideas of feminism and queer theory by challenging the binary structure of pink and blue. This piece and others in this body of work emerge from a reaction to general usage of color culturally, both in its simplicity and absurdity. My process importantly begins with pink and blue as the “primary
gender colors” and then I utilize colors that are sub-gendered, like green, yellow, orange and red to balance gender meaning. This color theory can be seen throughout every work subsequent to *Untitled (Affection)*. Comparatively, this theoretical use of color differs from color theory predecessors. This work is not responding to Kandinsky’s ideas of color and spirituality or the fundamentals of Itten’s color wheel, both of which serve as art historical influencers, but my work aims to create commentary on gender constructs through color exploration.

**FORM: MASCULINITY AND THE PHALLUS**

There are obvious cultural examples of color being structurally binary and gendered; gender reveals being the most notorious. Gender color associations are practiced on nearly every financially sound child in the western world; therefore the idea that we culturally sort color by gender is not abstract. Gendered forms, however, are culturally subtler. Historically, man (as in the fundamentally sexist term for the human race) architecturally builds into the sky in order to display a domination of physics, wealth and importance. Comically, the bigger it is, the more successful the man. Skyscrapers are not the only place where men display phallic forms. For example, iconic minimalist Dan Flavin referred to his overtly phallic piece *diagonal of May 25, 1963 (to Robert Rosenblum)*, (Figure 2) as the “diagonal of personal ecstasy.” This single fluorescent tube inclining at a forty-five degree angle from left to right, is the perfect example of a phallic form. Even more, Flavin describes this work as a “searing emotional thrust” and then dedicated the work to Robert Rosenblum, a homosexual man. Flavin describes this piece with precise and explicit language to illustrate sexual content. Theorists and writers have proposed ideas about Flavin and his queer content, but that subject is a Pandora’s box that I cannot begin

to fully investigate in this paper. At any rate, Dan Flavin’s intention with the piece is left unclear, leaving us with questions about the presumed “meaninglessness” of minimalist content. This contradiction poses questions about how far queer theorists should be “reading into” phallic forms, and applying queer theory onto any given piece without the artist explicitly articulating that intent. Even so, the phallic shape is present, and the phallic form has symbolic history, thus allowing writers to speculate its meaning.

Unlike the complications within diagonal of May 25, 1963 (to Robert Rosenblum), my artwork Wee Wee (Figure 3) is a piece fabricated with the critique of male culture in mind. The unapologetic titling is antithetical to Dan Flavin’s esoteric dedication titles. Furthermore, the three eight-foot tall slender towers are painted pale pink and white, and designed to catch and reflect the light of an adjacently installed complement piece, Lips, Clits and Slits (Figure 4). Wee Wee is large in scale, mimicking skyscraper architecture. Ironically, the overtly tall phallic ratio and scale of the towers is the exact thing making the forms vulnerable and precarious to be in the presence of. This detail presents itself in a subtle manner compared to the deliberate choice of pink paint, but both aesthetic elements work cohesively to critique the sturdiness of masculinized history and representation. Wee Wee quietly demands attention and consumes space, embodying architectures’ stillness and masculine iconography. This work capitalizes on the history of the phallic form and critiques it with color and deliberate titling. It goes without saying, that a critique of the phallus is a critique of masculinity, thus drawing us back to the feminist perspective that is essential to my practice.

**OBJECT: CLAIMING THE “HOME DEPOT” AESTHETIC AS FEMININE**

In the early months of 1963 sculptors Anne Truitt, Donald Judd, Dan Flavin and Robert Morris were exhibiting new works within weeks of each other, all creating within the realm of
minimalist aesthetics. Greenberg honed in on Anne Truitt’s work, daringly claiming that “…her box-like pieces in her first show in New York, early 1963 was much like that which Minimal Art aims at” and proceed to argue that Truitt “…was the innovator of the primary object!” To reiterate, a woman (contrary to what the historical canon writes) is the anticipator of minimalism and the inventor of the primary object. Regardless of who came first, the “founding fathers” severely dictate the art historical conversation. My artwork *Lips, Clits & Slits* (Figure 4) aims to reclaim that dialog by its use of explicit, brash feminist language and feminine claim of the hardware store “Home Depot” aesthetic. This aesthetic is not specific to Home Depot as a brand but this hardware super store aesthetic embodies the industrial, “Do It Yourself”, masculine mentality, that my work challenges.

The conversation between *Wee Wee* and *Lips, Clits & Slits*, derived from my feminist perspective. I manipulated the colors, forms, and objects out of their formal minimalist traditions, in attempt to challenge the gendering of aesthetics. My visual language has developed through a combination of my innate feminist perspective and my love for reductive forms. The feministic perspectives in these works are a contemporary contextualization of new wave feminism. New wave feminism consists of young women a who were introduced to feminist perspectives at early developmental points, thus making feminism seem innate and practically instinctual. To me, feminism feels synonymous with being a twenty-year-old female queer artist in 2020 living in America, and my work simply illustrates my environment.

**DISCOVERING QUEER THEORY**

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Gendered aesthetics have been a driving force in fabricating and contextualizing my body of work, while queer theory is a newly introduced idea that further develops and validates my thinking. I will not have time to fully articulate queer theory in its entirety within this synopsis. Nevertheless, I want to follow the evolution of my practice by highlighting how minimalism, abstraction, and subtleties are the framework for my ability to articulate queer experience.

After developing an artistic practice around the ideas of feminism and gendered aesthetics, I began to research other artists who were making similar aesthetic and conceptual decisions. This led me to David Getsy and his writing on queer abstraction. David Getsy is the uncontested forerunner of queer writing. Due to the lack of queer content from other writers, this section will almost exclusively revolve around his ideas on queer theory. Like any art writer, Getsy follows the trends of queer artists. These trends include the overt and political queer art and also the strategic use of abstraction by queer artists. For me, abstraction started as an avoidance of the singularity in being a queer artist and only a queer artist. I acknowledge that claiming to be a queer artist is important to LGBTQ+ visibility, and being queer grants me a unique perspective. However, claiming to be a queer person and a queer artist automatically subjects me to stereotypes, which is unreasonable because being queer does not encompass the entirety of my identity. Identity is much more complex than that, which is why abstraction serves as a tool to present ideas that are not immediate and easy. Getsy writes “Abstraction seems like a ready target for critics who would demand disclosure, familiarity, and their own certainty. If they can’t see it easily, it must not exist. This, we should remember, is also the argument used throughout history to erase and deny the presence and ubiquity of queer lives.” I use abstraction

in my work to contest with the immediate associations of being a queer person. Abstraction is akin to queer experience because queer experience is not easily packaged for anyone to understand due to its complexity. Acceptance of difference requires careful recognition, attention and awareness, and this work attempts to challenge the immediate associations and rejections of anything different or complex.

MINIMALISM: QUEER AND ABSTRACT

Minimalism pressed boundaries on what art was. This seems like an ordinary topic for art and art movements, but minimalism was a rejection of the rules. The “queer stance” is also a fundamental rejection of rules. Getsy articulates best when he asks,

“What could gray polyhedrons and steel and plexi boxes say to queer politics? For me, it was in the tactics they shared: the outright refusal of the rules of convention and medium (“neither painting nor sculpture”), the hyperbolic performance of those rules as a means of critique or parody, and - most of all - the shift of emphasis from maker to user. Even though there seemed to be little queer politics in Minimalism, I realized I could draw queer politics out of Minimalism, according to its own logic.”

This quote synchs the direct thread I needed in my work to fuse minimalist theory and queer theory. Certainly, I was not attracted to minimalism as an introductory sculpture student because I was able to miraculously draw queer theory from minimalist theory. In fact, at the time I did not even know I was queer. However, it is astonishing to discover that I was serendipitously fitting into a larger contemporary queer conversation on my own accord.

Getsy also writes about abstraction and how queer artists are using it in contemporary art. This led me to another aspect of my work and a thread that other queer artists are using. My intuitive practice and process sensibility led me to realize that my use of minimalism, combined

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with subject matter, is in fact abstraction because the object is removed from its literalness and instead is attempting to illustrate an idea. As I developed my understanding of abstraction as a tool, I began to use abstraction to contest the immediacy of categorizing objects, people, forms and color into binary structures. Getsy acknowledges this thread in other queer artists when he writes, “Consequently, queer practices of ‘looking like’ are endemic and sophisticated. It is for these reasons that abstraction has proven an appealing language for some queer messaging. Abstraction, as a mode of visual poiesis, both conjures new visualizations and rebuffs viewers’ impulses to recognize and categorize.”9 For me and other queer artists, abstraction provides the ability to camouflage, while being peculiar enough to continue the dialog around the abnormal and visible.

_Bodies: Squares_ (Figure 5) are an abstraction of the body in order to neutralize human figures that are interacting in intimate matters. Resulting in the viewer challenging their immediate preconceived notions of what bodies look like but more importantly what intimacy looks like and to whom it belongs to. Actions like kissing, embracing, interlocking and even penetrating are genderless, and in this work they have the ability to appear as the normative. They importantly camouflage as the normative, to bridge the gap of understanding that “sex is sex is sex.” Their box shapes are simple and even elementary, to pair with the intended dialog and mock the complex ridicule surrounding queer lives and queer intimacy. Getsy’s commentary on body representation in queer art could be in direct conversation with my work _Bodies: Squares_. “One reason to face abstraction is because it can avoid, circumvent, or delay the visual consumption of the immediately recognizable or readily legible. In figurative art, whenever a

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human body is represented, we rush to classify it—and taxonomies of race, age, ability, gender, class, and appeal are all brought to bear on that image of a person.”10 For me, abstraction is the strategic pairing of minimalism with the insistence of creating figurative forms, thus granting a queer subject matter because the figures are not immediate, recognizable, or easily understood. This statement is not only a feminist challenge to the masculine minimalist movement but also a challenge to the viewers’ immediate cultural assumptions of bodies and queer intimacy.

THE OVERT & THE SUBTLE

Throughout the course of my artistic practice I have been able to draw clear indicators that I am thinking in a binary system in attempt to compare and challenge ideas. My utilization of the overt and the subtle is one of those examples. The LGBTQ+ movement is a great example of a group that utilizes an “in-your-face” tactic. Similar to how the original wave of feminists claimed their existence. For example, Martha Rosler’s Semiotics of the Kitchen literally shouted and demanded the viewers’ attention towards feminist issues. Queer activists have also partaken in an abrupt and brash mode of visibility that I recognize value in, but I am also interested in the subtle narration of the nuances of queer lives and queer experience. Generally, the subtleties within my work exist within its content and concept of the specific piece, while the brash language and eye grabbing aesthetics appear overtly within the work. However, during the creation of the four paintings Bodies: Circles (Figure 6) I broke away from my formulaic process of creating overt aesthetics and subtle content, by methodically displaying visual subtleties of nuanced color manipulation.

My Bachelor of Fine Art Thesis Exhibition *Lover* displays these four paintings *Bodies: Circles*. Their color pallet barley differs from one another, thus forcing a slower more detailed viewing. These paintings are an attempt to aesthetically display the binary juxtaposition of the overt and subtle within my practice. I run the risk of my audience missing the concept of the paintings because of how reductive and minimal the aesthetic is. Yet, again the nature of the work is not easily accessible or readily understood. Part of queer visibility is the cliché of accepting things we do not understand. The use of abstraction within this work is an intentional attempt to embody the complexity, confusion, and accessibility in understanding queer lives. Withholding a clear narrative is not an attempt to be esoteric or ambiguous, but an attempt to be comfortable with the unknown and complex. In my thesis exhibition, I intend to clearly contextualize the abstracted (and at times esoteric and complex) work as an attempt to mirror abstract and complex identity in contemporary culture. This work is not trying to grant the viewer answers as to what life is like as a queer person, but intended to pose questions about the perceived cultural truths of identity.

**QUEERING: REMOVING THE STIGMA**

“The label ‘queer’ was historically used to tyrannize those who loved, desired, or lived differently.” (Getsy) 11 “Love” and “desire” have direct lineage to sexual orientation, but I want to analyze the idea that queer can simply include people who live differently. By turning queer into a verb, “queering” becomes an action independent from sexual orientation. Therefore, “queer” without the association to sexual orientation is open and “free to use” for anyone. It might appear problematic to “let” everyone use the word queer as a verb and strip away the exclusivity of the

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word queer from the LGBTQ+ community, but people have been “queering” things since the beginning of time. Queering simply is the action of doing something different and/or breaking the rules. With this logic, I can list thousands of things that were queered in some way shape or form. As narrated above, minimalisms fundamentals were rooted in a queer stance because they attempted to break the conventional rules by fabricating something unique and different than the art world had already experienced. They were queering the art world. Marcel Duchamp’s *Fountain* is another example of an attempt to queer the art world when he pressed and questioned normalcy and sculpture. These artistic examples contain a queer stance without the label of being queer. I assume this is due to its’ stigmatization but I theorize that this broadened definition and free utilization of the word queer, will challenge the negative associations with the word queer and queer people.

Early in the development of this body of work, I analyzed a common thread within the relationships of my closest loved ones. I discovered that I appreciated people who possessed a balance of both feminine and masculine attributes. Like me, these people subscribed to femininity at times and masculinity in others, regardless of gender or sexual orientation. This is the fluid perspective that I possess, and I would argue that humans naturally and instinctively fall within a fluid queer spectrum prior to being socially conditioned into a binary system. Claiming that everyone is on a queer spectrum poses questions about pushing a queer agenda, but a society that has the ability to acknowledge the nuances of identity seems more likely to me, than a society that sorts human identity into two binary categories. Proposing a utopic queer society is impossible and quite comical, but there is a social capacity to open the utilization of the word queer as a verb separate from its direct ties to sexual orientation. The separation of the word queer from its’ exclusivity to sexual orientation removes the overly simplistic and direct
association with queer people and sex. The separation of sexual orientation and “queering” does
not remove queer people from their experience; in fact it presents the queer perspective as the
ideal lens because it broadens the meaning of what it means to be queer beyond bedroom
preference. If the terms “queered” or “queering” are not perceived as exclusive to queer people
(and anyone can use these terms as a means of describing actions that break rules, and challenge
the normative), then this perspective helps the word queer lose its stigmatism, and retract
alienation, while still recognizing and accepting the unique nuances of being queer.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I attempt to reflect upon the inception and evolution of my art making. I
have come to recognize the significant influences of the contemporary cultures of Feminism, and
Queer movements in my life and in my art practice. My research, scholarship and creative
practice embrace the fluidity of these movements, with respect and anticipation of their
progression. In 2020 westernized culture, the social rules are changing daily and rapidly allowing
young people to construct the future they want to see. These changes reshape culture and are
seemingly impossible to pin down, and rightfully so. Thus, the study of gendered aesthetics is
ephemeral, yet currently relevant. Exploring gendered aesthetics has led me to the larger context
of queer theory and in that I have found interesting nuances of the que
er experience. Queer is
anything and everything that falls under the “other.” This allows queer artwork to appear overtly
or subtly. Queer is also feminine and masculine. Queer can follow gay stereotypes, but queer can
be anything that is pressed beyond normalcy. That is to argue that any person (not only a queer
person) can skew something out of its normality and consider it queered. Culturally, we know
Queer Art to be “in-your-face” and proud. Yet, queer culture and queer art is more than just the
“in-your-face” style and aesthetic. This paper is an exploration of queer art that is subversive,
abstracted, assimilated and methodical, because queer experience incorporates everything that is different, thus making it complex, interesting and nuanced.
Figure 1:
Untitled (Affection)
2018
Mariah Vargas
Figure 2:

diagonal of May 25, 1963 (to Robert Rosenblum)
1963
Dan Flavin
Figure 3:
Wee Wee
2019 Midway Exhibition
Mariah Vargas
Figure 4:
*Lips Clits & Slits*
2019 Midway Exhibition
Mariah Vargas
Figure 5:
Bodies: Squares
2020 Thesis Exhibition
Mariah Vargas
Figure 6:
Bodies: Circles
2020 Thesis Exhibition
Mariah Vargas
BIBLIOGRAHY


