Hole Up

Mark Errol

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by

MARK ERROL

Under the Direction of Christina West

ABSTRACT

Hole Up draws analogies between architectural references in my work and three formative personal romantic relationships. Additionally, the artistic and romantic relationships of artists Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, Dutes Miller and Stan Shellabarger are discussed as a way to compare and contrast the methods and choices of my own creative output.

INDEX WORDS: Domesticity, Homosexuality, Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, Dutes Miller Stan Shellabarger
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INTRODUCTION

The ever-growing acceptance of homosexuality informs my work. My narratives, derived from real life experiences with my partner, highlight the typical and mundane while questioning the stereotypes of gay men.

The working and personal relationships between artists Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns, as well as Dutes Miller and Stan Shellabarger, didactically compare and contrast the differences time has had on the coding and revealing of homosexual relationships in contemporary art. By using these two diverse pairings of artists, I am able to discuss the generational and geographical differences within my own partnership.

The layered imagery on the surfaces of my forms allows me to represent multiple perspectives simultaneously, showing both what the world sees and what the world wants to see. This imagery is carried into people’s homes and integrated into their lives because it exists on functional pottery.

*Hole Up* as the title of my thesis exhibition, was chosen for the ambiguity of its meaning. On one hand, the phrase makes reference to one taking shelter, to finding a place to go to get away or hide. It is a sanctuary from which we need to escape. The term makes me think of a casual conversation occurring amongst friends. I hear it in my head, the voice saying “yeah, this weekend me and so and so are going to hole up in the mountains for a few days.” There is a tone to the term that makes me think of a retreat, the ability to leave behind one aspect of our lives and engage in another for a while.

Homosexually speaking, it brings to mind glory holes. These little cut outs where a man can engage in sexual release through a hole cut in a wall. In this sense, it is a casual yet highly direct gesture of anonymity, a place where action is key and identity is not. Going
another step further, it can be the offering of ones intimate hole, a submissive gesture to be dominated and taken from behind or penetrated. For some, this is the definition of homosexual sexual acts.

In the most personal reference, it is all of these things but also the idea of me forming a home with my partner. Since I was a young boy I have been fascinated with the notion of building my own home. I would spend hours drawing floor plans to dream homes I would one day inhabit with my partner and our dogs. I would imagine myself gardening and making art, creating a life. The home we would create together would be the place where all the most personal elements such as collected artworks and family belongings of my life would occur.

It is through my work that I challenge and present truthful complexities about the daily life of gay men, filtered through my personal experiences in my current and former relationships. I have had three primary relationships in my life that have each contributed to who I am today and the way I chose to communicate via my art.
When I was 19, I discovered the Internet for the first time. I was also beginning to clearly define my sexuality. I had already been asked if I was gay by my step-mother when I was 13, but had kept up a front while going to high school (well at least I thought I had kept up the appearance I was straight). I thought that by participating in team sports and dating girls people would not suspect my sexuality. Once I got to college, the masquerading and delusional desire to pretend I could be straight vanished. The Internet gave me the ability to connect with others who shared my sexuality. I jumped head first into my new self-realization and found a sense of peace I had not experienced before.

In a chat room for guys who identified themselves as Bears, I began to find my niche. These men were more inline with what I was attracted to; they focused on masculinity, being naturally hairy, bearded and blue collar. At the time, I was struggling with the fact that my own image was in contrast to what was being portrayed as gay—the slim, smooth, gym obsessed, flamboyant stereotypes portrayed in Madonna videos and in magazines like OUT and the Advocate. It was in the Bear culture that I could see men with bellies who wore jeans, t-shirts, and boots and were not into what Gucci had put out or at which parties they where going to be seen. Bears represented the type of man I am and the type of men to which I am attracted.

It was in one of these Bear chat rooms that I started talking with an older man named Fred. Fred would be my first true love and partner. He lived four hours away and I would travel to see him often. It was this distance that gave me that sanctuary to safely and honestly become myself. He was thirty plus years older than me and had been around the world. He took me under his wing and began to show me the world. He exposed me to
travel, culture, food and most importantly, my sexuality. Fred created a comfort in exploration that I really needed at the time. No topic was off limits; no desire was pushed aside or made taboo. We would travel, see museums, experience cultures and sometimes even another man, all in the name of me not being able to say I did not like something if I had not tried it first. In hindsight, he gave me my first toolbox with all the basics I would need. He created the foundation for me to become the man I am today. It was Fred who encouraged me to follow my creative desire to be an artist.

In making this body of work I thought of this foundational period of my life as analogous to my use of coded and semi-hidden language in a way that is similar to the practices of Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns. Considered by a large portion of the contemporary art world as two of the most important and influential artists, Rauschenberg and Johns were also lovers and used their works as a way to “speak” to each other. Though not open or even actually confirming their personal romantic relationship ever, there are many references to each other made in the other’s works that are there for those “in the know” to decipher. Rauschenberg’s *Yoicks* (figure 1) from 1954 is an early work that directly references Johns. The painting’s stripes and green polka dots are to many a direct link to Johns painting *Green Target* from 1955 (figure 2), which was being worked on while Rauschenberg was creating his work. The two artists had studios one floor apart from each other in the same building and this has added to the discovery of similarities in their works from this time. Not only were they supposedly romantically linked but also their creative outputs share many similarities or references to each other. The green polka dots are a very similar shade of green to the hue Johns used in *Green Target*. At the bottom of *Yoicks* Rauschenberg used a pencil to create concentric circles around one of his green polka dots.
One cannot escape the likelihood of its reference to his creative and personal relationship to Johns.

While Johns and Rauschenberg made subtle nods to each other in their work, I am able to visually depict my personal relationships as openly as I would like. My image making techniques allow me to present layers of information—some that are more subtle and some that are more direct. I usually begin by inlaying an initial set of imagery into the surfaces of my pots. This imagery becomes the foundation on which I continue decorating and by the time I am complete, this layer may be partially obscured. This method of making creates both visual and metaphoric complexities allowing certain parts of the drawings to be obscured or brought forward. I often draw a domestic environment—a living room, a bedroom or bathroom setting—that I will later add more narrative elements to in other stages of decorating. These inlaid images usually depict more sexually explicit or tender moments with my partner. The various layers of imagery require that viewers explore the work closely and spend time with the pieces in order to fully understand the narratives.

My work has always reflected something personal from my immediate life. Narrative images depicting aspects pulled from real life experiences are combined with more imaginative or playful imagery of humans and animals (specifically bears), to both directly and indirectly convey explicit and metaphoric sexual content. When sexually explicit imagery is used, it is not intended to shock or provoke, but rather to convey honesty for myself about the inherent adult nature of my theme and what being a gay man is. I do not wish to deny the sexual nature of being a gay man, only share with my viewer a moment of reality and sexual honesty.
Rauschenberg and Johns were forced to deal with such content in a way that would not be discovered easily. With an understanding of the 1950's United States culture when they were making these works, it is understandable that Rauschenberg and Johns worried about potential personal and professional persecution for being gay men. It would have been professional suicide at that time to display such matters of the heart for the world to judge. I cannot imagine the confinement that artists in general must have felt during this time in our history, having to guard their true selves in exchange for success or acceptance. Thanks in part to such milestones over the last 40 years, such as the Stonewall Riots of 1969 and current progressions in Federal and State recognition of same sex marriages. I do not censor the content of my work or attempt to hide my sexuality. This is a liberty fought for and won that I do not take lightly. In fact, I find that my desire to showcase my sexuality in any form of making is encouraged; my choice to layer information is more a matter of trying to convey the complexity of my relationships, than from feeling social or cultural restriction.
STRUCTURE

Allan was also an older man, and was a true New Yorker. Importantly, Allan was also an artist and I was very taken by his understanding of where and what I was doing with my own creativity. We talked about art in ways I had yet to explore with a partner. This allowed for a new form of connectivity and this friendship quickly bloomed into a romantic and deeply involved relationship.

Allan decided to retire from his 37 years of teaching English and we moved to Fort Lauderdale in the summer of 2003 because he wanted to move somewhere “warm, wet and gay.” This was the first time I had ever lived with a lover and it came with many challenges. Adjusting to a new place, a new living situation, and sharing everything was difficult for me since I had been living on my own for a while and had grown comfortable with that. But it was also my dream coming true. All those years of drawing homes—filling my head with the ideas of what this would be like—were now coming to fruition and I was living my dream.

Our relationship was based on making art, being social and giving each other the space to be us. We had created a home together. Two dogs, two cats, and a bird completed the picture of domestic bliss I had wanted. Within a few years I had grown restless and decided, after much discussion with Allan, that I was going to go to graduate school in Atlanta. Out relationship had evolved to be more of a family dynamic rather than a romantic one and we both felt that it was a good idea to take steps towards creating a more secure future for myself.

In my eyes, Allan has been the structure to the foundation Fred built. Structures to me are the things the public sees; they are the identity we create for all to view. Allan helped me formulate that vision: becoming an educator, growing my beard, becoming heavily tattooed. He
helped me become comfortable in my own skin and accept my sexuality, and to even celebrate it.

I feel now I stand before the world the man the world sees because of him.

In the same way that the hidden and veiled references Rauschenberg and Johns used to communicate to one another informed the foundation of my work, the artists Dutes Miller and Stan Shellabarger have been heavily influential in my desire to be more direct in my work. They are a Chicago based couple whose explicit and decoded works directly address their love, worry of loss of the other, masculinity and domesticity. To me, it is as if they not only invite you into their lives, but demand you be part of it all—sharing with you sex, masculinity, domesticity, fear and love in a very natural and comforting manner. Their beards become a tool to address the obviousness of their gender. Hair from their faces is used as embroidery thread to monogram their initials into a delicate and dainty handkerchief. The title of the work S & M 2013 (figure3) playfully alludes to the practice of sadomasochism while on a literal level representing the last letters to their last names. In Untitled (Crochet) 2003 (figure 4), the two men began a project of crocheting pink yarn in the form of a tube, each adding on to the opposite end. It is a performance pieces that continues to this day. Having reached seventy feet in length, it shows the couple sharing in the creation of something that seems to push them farther apart. The undeniable craft references in their works have helped me see the range of possibility in other mediums and prompted the inclusion of sewing and fabric work into my studio practice.
INTERIOR

In the summer of 2011 I moved to Atlanta to begin my graduate program. It was soon after this move that I met Glenn. As soon as we met, I realized I had just met someone I would know for a very long time. We talked for hours, sharing intimate stories, laughs and food. We could talk about anything. Conversation flowed easily and coffee turned into dinner, which turned into beer on my back porch, which turned to him spending the night, talking. All we did was talk, share and become instantly aware that neither of us had experienced someone like the other before.

Over the course of the last two plus years, Glenn and I have become partners. He represents in the home analogy I am using, as the interior to the foundation and structure that my two previous relationships represent. Glenn embodies life I am now filling that home with. Our discussions show a deep desire for a similar kind of future, both hoping to live back in a rural environment. All those drawings of floor plans that I made as a kid were never meant for some city. We share this.

Glenn is 19 years older than me and could not have been raised any more differently than me. Southern to my Yankee Northern city boy, we make a very didactically diverse pairing. We both have large graying beards and wear jeans and t-shirts because ease and utility is something we share. He is much more aware of technology and embraces it where I am more likely to enjoy time with a pad and pencil. His work as a nurse requires an intense grip on accuracy where, as an artist, my approximations are generally good enough. Though we have many things that generationally, geographically and culturally divide us, we find humor and enjoyment in dealing with those head on, even taking great pleasure in highlighting them as I did in using a mix of our t-shirts for Hole Up Quilt (detail figure 5).
Much like my functional pottery, the quilt conjures a domestic environment. Quilting gave me another surface to decorate in a similar fashion to the way I use the surfaces of my ceramic vessels. Mixing references to his Southern roots with my Northern footing is done with the use of the first t-shirt in the upper left corner of the quilt. It is one of my t-shirts that read REBEL REBEL. The word Rebel clearly has southern connotations but in actuality it is my favorite record store in New York City and makes reference to a David Bowie song of the same name. It is this type of coding—use of visual personal references—that I have chosen to directly address my relationship with Glenn. The other side of Hole Up Quilt (Figure 6) displays a more traditional understanding of what one might expect of a pictorial quilt. Again Dutes Miller and Stan Shellabarger influence my imagery. On the quilt I show two bearded men, sleeping in bed and dreaming of life. Depicted within their dreams are a log cabin, farm animals, a building used for a studio with pottery equipment and pots flowing around it. A white picket fence is used throughout my work to address the idea of the American dream of the home.

Glenn and I very much want the white picket fence all American dream of a home—nice green lawn, flowers in the garden kind of life. We are just like everyone else in that sense. My imagery shows the viewer that the fact we are two men does not change that.

For Hole Up-Wingback Supper, (Figure 7) I have used two distinctly different styles of wingback chairs, one with a traditional fabric and the other has a crushed velvet and brocade 1970’s design to discuss the way in which Glenn and I eat our meals when I am at his house. Though his chairs are matching and traditional in design, I wanted to use this as another opportunity to depict our differences while drawing the viewer to two ceramic place settings I made. These settings are on a plain wooden table and are at first glance a
very traditional set of dishes one would use to eat his meal. Upon further investigation, each setting reveals more specific imagery related to each of us. Roses and apples are used to decorate the salad plate for what you find out to be my setting because they are the state flower and fruit to my home state of New York. Peaches and Cherokee roses are used on the same plate in Glenn’s setting to reflect his Georgia heritage. Each piece of the settings also reveals the more direct nature of our sexual relationship on the bottoms. Once again I have created two sides to the story that is only discovered when the viewers engage beyond their initial viewing of the material.

My relationship with Glenn has affected my work in two ways: first, it has awakened my need to showcase my desire to be domestic, to show the world the life I live with this man—bearded and masculine and normal. This relationship also has affected the way I present my desires. Specifically, I want to reflect the ways that Glenn’s views of sexuality differ from mine. To Glenn, being homosexual is not for public knowledge; it is not something he feels comfortable displaying openly. He was raised to think it is deplorable to love another man and lives in a town where homosexuality has been met with violence and fear. I will be living with him in this town, but I was raised and live my life very differently. Though I am not one to draw attention to my sexuality, I do not hide it in any way. The foundation and structure that I owe to Fred and Allan has only been reinforced by growing up in a time of great social and political changes for homosexuality in this country. And I revel in it. It is this type of tension of our differences that I address by layering imagery and hiding sexuality in places not easily viewed until further investigations are made.
CONCLUSION

I have chosen to be a potter because it is a way for me to create many surfaces to decorate and share my personal stories in a manner that puts me in direct contact with my customers. They have made a choice to purchase my work and display it, most likely in their homes. Making work that is about the home for the home has always been important to me as a maker, but so has been being honest about what my message is. The fact that two men are cuddling on a sofa on a cookie jar or that you lift a coffee cup decorated with bold colors and patterns to find an image of a man having his ass played with by another man, reinforces that I am fully engaging in a dialogue about our changing social and cultural climate of acceptance. That acceptance is not everywhere and is not universal, but it is ever evolving and thanks to the media, political and social activism, I am optimistic that those who come behind me will only grow in their understanding and preservation of the great strides that have been made.

The package I present to the world as Mark Errol, as a gay man and artist, is never without thought. Though I do not filter myself much, I do not choose to live with a Rainbow flag on my house, nor do I wish to be invisible. I am aware that my personal presentation is also an opportunity to engage with others about expectations of what and who I am. I have a very long beard, I wear very bright colors and patterns (often multiple patterns clashing at once), I am heavily tattooed (even with images that cause second glances), but I never take for granted the ability to be private and only share what I want. My work does the same thing and just like me, one must go past the obvious to get to the heart of what I am and what my work ultimately wishes to convey. It is open to interpretation, but is not vague enough to be misleading. I think it is best summed up by an encounter I had this past
winter here in Atlanta in Woodruff Park. Quietly walking through the park, one of the park officers monitoring the park for riff raff, stopped me and informed me that I represented to him the word Man. He told me emphatically over and over that I was to him the definition of Man because I had grown this beard, the truest symbol of masculinity. “You are the ideal Man, your long and thick beard could only be attached to a real Man, a True Man, a man that is not into any of that Man on Man shit.” I wanted to reward his declaration with an equally emphatic response—a kiss to his lips and simply walk away—but I did not. I walked way letting him know that he was never likely to become a detective, chuckled to myself and went about my business. It is this type of interaction that I have, that Glenn and I have often with people, that drives my fascination about what we think we see and what is actual. What is on the surface might not always been the truest meaning of the presentation. When we take the time to dig deeper, both physically and mentally, to peel away the layers, often we are rewarded beyond our initial thoughts and truly become more informed.
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