Fracture: Failure as a Path to Utopia in Queer Art and Life

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FRACTURE: FAILURE AS A PATH TO UTOPIA IN QUEER ART AND LIFE

By

CHARLES DOUGLAS SNYDER, JR.

Under the Direction of Constance Thalken, MFA

ABSTRACT

Reproductive Futurism is the pervasive structuring of politics and society around securing of the future through fealty to a figurative Child. The primary means of the Child’s proliferation is the normalizing of hetero-reproduction, which privileges heterosexuality with validity and meaning. Fracture represents a body of work that illustrates my personal break with these normalizing structures, and through embracing my queer sexuality a refusal of the figurative Child and the future it represents. The work articulates the role sex played in my failure to adhere to (liberation from) normative relational structures, and proposes potential new configurations of bodies and filial bonds born from that failure. The work also represents a material shift in my work from photographic prints to intermedia/installation. The evolution of my process as an artist was informed by my personal transformation; my vision of the world shifted, so too did my material/aesthetic response to that world.

INDEX WORDS: queer, heteronormativity, failure, utopia, temporality, historicity, reproductive futurism, photography, glass, mirrors, post modernism, conceptual art
FRACTURE:
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FRACTURE:
FAILURE AS A PATH TO UTOPIA IN QUEER ART AND LIFE

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DEDICATION

To my family, both logical and biological, your support and encouragement throughout my life has largely shaped the artist I am today.
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1 INTRODUCTION

On the last day of April, 2013 I ended a 14-year relationship with my first boyfriend/the man to whom I had given my virginity/my “life partner.” While many factors contributed to the slow breakdown of that union, one of the most substantial factors was my realization that I had outgrown the need to structure my sexual/emotional life in accordance to a mimetic heteronormative model. I had become increasingly uncomfortable with the roles that my partner and I had developed within our relationship, the established pantomimes that continually dictated how we responded to the world and each other, and the domestic narrative that seemed to hedge us within its boundaries.

However, my break from the bounds of heteronormativity was not a clean one. Upon leaving the home I shared with my partner I found myself moving into a new home and new relationship that I quickly and unconsciously began to reshape into the same parody of hetero-domesticity. In June of 2013, this relationship also ended. As with most personal narratives endings are bittersweet, but are also the foundation of new beginnings. Fracture is a body of work that addresses these endings.

The perniciousness of heteronormative conditioning has always existed on the periphery of my awareness: the repeated cultural narratives of “man + woman = happiness”; the constant reification of the nuclear family in media, politics, and religion; and the modeling of normativity by my family and community. While aware of the pervasiveness of these messages, I was unaware of how deeply they had embedded themselves into my subconscious. As my graduate research led me down the rabbit hole of queer theory, I began to see more clearly the narratives I had integrated into my
identity. I began to recognize my own internalized homophobia driven by my association of queer sexuality with disease, my acceptance of the validation of love through monogamy, and my attachment to heterosexual temporality.

Fracture seeks to visually articulate the disruption of my own pattern of heteromimesis. Through the use of layered imagery, projection, and materiality the work builds a visual metaphor for the process of breaking down illusions of hetero-domesticity and normative sexual behavior that characterized both of my recent relationships. This is largely accomplished via a shift in materials and means within my artistic practice; formerly a strictly lens-based artist, Fracture manifested as a rejection of traditional photographic production and evolved into transformations of photographic imagery into broken glass sculptures and shattered mirror projections. The work plays with dualities of mastery and failure, and romanticism and realism as a means of juxtaposing the hetero-mimetic and the queer. The work resists a linear narrative that would privilege heterosexual temporality and instead works to construct a queer space/time within which the images can be read as a queer sexual awakening.
2 GLASS HOUSES

January 3rd, 2013, I hurled the first stone at the glass house of my marriage. It was a small stone; a stray comment made while sitting with my husband on the couch I had bought him for his birthday in 2010. The conversation had started innocently enough, a few light jokes at one another’s expense and then a casual observation that landed like a blow, “I’ve only ever slept with six men in my whole life.” The truth of that statement was somewhat more complicated; I had slept with my husband and on five occasions we jointly participated in sexual activities with other men. The truer statement, and the one that initiated the first crack in my glass walls, was that I had only slept with one man by myself, my husband. My lack of sexual experience felt, for the first time, like a loss.

Our relationship had been my first in many ways: the first sexual encounter, the first date, the first boyfriend, the first commitment ceremony, the first joint checking account, the first move from home, the first house. Our life together was not perfect, but it was not terrible either. From outside the glass walls, our house seemed not messy but “lived-in.” The weak points in the glass were there, but seemed like minor scratches that could be buffed out given time: we had not been sexually compatible for years, we had dependency issues, we held onto grudges and resentments. After the first stone was cast, however, those cracks seemed to indicate a greater flaw in the structure that would soon shatter around us.

The primary flaw became more apparent as we moved forward. It was not a crack put there by either of us, but a structural flaw that had been present since the beginning. Quite simply, we were living in a glass house built for someone else. The organization of our relationship was constructed around a framework that privileged heterosexuality and
a deeply conservative family-based value system. The framework could not accommodate queer lives or queer values without considerable stress.

2.1 The Normative

Heteronormativity is the alignment of biological sex, sexuality, gender Identity, and gender roles according to a presumptive heterosexual norm. Heteronormativity privileges the organization of sexual and marital relationships around the idea that heterosexuality is the only valid form of sexual expression. This privileging of heterosexuality is oppressive and results in the disempowerment of non-normative individuals.

In concert with the oppressive power of heteronormativity within western culture at large, homonormativity acts similarly within the queer community. Homonormativity is the assimilation of heteronormative values and ideas into homosexual identity. Homonormativity privileges those individuals who conform to normative biological sex, gender identity, and gender roles. This acts as a form of self-policing within the queer community, where non-normative individuals (intersex, trans, bisexual, and genderqueer) are marginalized and rendered invisible.

These dual normalizing impulses bind individuals to a heterosexual temporality, a straight (linear) time that presupposes a historicity and a particular sequencing of life events: birth, marriage, reproduction, and death (Halberstam, In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives, 2005). Hetero-temporality establishes authenticity through an individual’s ability to “keep time.” Individuals that are incapable of following the prescribed order are consequently invalidated and marginalized.
The root of these normative impulses and hetero-temporality is reproductive futurism, which drives the structure of political and social systems to construct themselves in fealty to a figurative child, who represents our collective future (Edelman, 2004). In Edelman’s polemic, No Future, the child represents life and futurity, while homosexuals and other non-normative individuals represent the psycho-analytical death drive. Queer individuals operate outside of the normative impulse, and frequently at a counter-tempo to hetero-temporality. Within the organizing structure of reproductive futurism, queer individuals have no future. For Edelman this is a call to homosexuals to take up the charge of the death drive, and to act on its behalf as counter-cultural agents, moving against the normative with no expectation of benefit and no intent beyond negation.

2.2 The Fractures

In February 2014, my partner and I “opened” our marriage. I proposed the idea to him as a creative opportunity for me. I explained that never having been single, I had missed out on a key aspect of my sexual development, and that I wished to explore my sexuality outside our marriage as a possible topic for my thesis work. After some discussion he agreed that it was a compelling idea, so I began to explore the world of gay hook-up apps as an independent sexual being. It quickly became apparent that he too wished to explore outside our marriage, so we established parameters and boundaries, which we believed necessary to protect our relationship and each other: no sex with others in our house, no sex without protection, no sex with people we already knew as friends. These new rules would initially define our exploration, yet as we moved forward
we found these boundaries shifting and reforming as we gained new experiences. The shattering of the glass house we lived in was slow. It was not the first stone that caused it to fall apart. Instead, it was a gradual building of pressure from within the structure as we both stretched ourselves beyond the original limits we placed on the relationship.

As I gained sexual experience with other men, I realized that part of my dissatisfaction was being forced into a sexual role that I was uncomfortable with. My partner and I had started our sexual relationship as versatile gay men who enjoyed both dominant and submissive roles. Yet, shortly into our relationship my partner became less willing to take a submissive sexual role and became largely unresponsive to my sexual advances. This led to a pattern in which my partner controlled our sexual relationship entirely, dictating the time and nature of our sexual encounters.

I also noticed that my lack of self-confidence and my insecurities surrounding my body changed as I came into my own sexually. I began to see how the years of sexual neglect had affected my sense of self-worth. As I gained confidence and reexamined my own self-image, I stopped seeking my partner’s validation of my worth. I started instead to recognize my own beauty and my own power outside of the narrow space our relationship had dictated for me. Inside our glass house I was cast as the personable, less attractive foil to my partner’s standoffish prettiness. Yet, outside that glass box I could be so much more. The discovery of my own power as a sexual being and finding confidence in my body as an object of desire represented a significant shift in my self-perception.
2.3 A Queer Shattering

While these realizations and moments of growth were profound, they were not necessarily queer. Certainly, heterosexual couples have opened their relationships to allow for sexual freedom; they split up because of sexual incompatibility; and they too, find themselves bristling against the narrow limits of their partner’s expectations and perceptions. What made this a uniquely queer shattering was that as the cracks in our relationship broadened, I began to see the psychological and social underpinnings that had pushed me into that relationship in the first place.

While I considered myself an “out and proud” gay man, I realized the degree to which I had internalized many of the ideas and assumptions that make up the homophobic world-view. In spite of my Liberal values, my years living as an openly gay man, and my commitment to the idea of gay civil rights, I had fallen victim to the same internalized homophobia that plagues so many closeted homosexuals. I understood, as I watched my relationship breaking apart, that I had entered into the entire relationship under a set of pretexts that were deeply damaging to my partner and myself. The main driving forces behind my decision to enter into and to continue the relationship with my husband were rooted in hetero-temporality, homo-normativity, fear, and insecurity.

I had pushed, in early 2000 when we met, for our relationship to move from a casual fling to a traditional and monogamous commitment. At the time, I felt that was the “natural progression.” Yet, in hindsight, I see that natural progression as an aspect of hetero-temporality. The same temporality that left me feeling as though I was behind schedule and out of synch when I was still a virgin at 20, or when at 22 I had not yet
conceived my first child, or at 25 when I had yet to own my first home. I am aware of the arbitrary nature of these markers of life experience, but I see how deeply they impacted my decision making at those points in my life. I forced a relationship out of my first sexual encounter, and I trudged along in pursuit of the validation that comes from maintaining a relationship relatively in synch with hetero-temporality.

Over the course of our relationship we faced obstacles: two cross-country moves dictated largely by his desires, his struggles with infidelity, the joint purchase and subsequent short-sale of our first home. At multiple points in our 14 years I considered leaving, yet I did not. My decisions to stay and work through the tough times were driven by my expectations of what a “real” relationship was supposed to look like, the social rewards of staying in a “real” relationship, and fear of the uncertainty and danger associated with being single and gay.

That fear was born out of two primary influences: the disruption of hetero-temporality created by divorce, and by an unconscious association of gay sex outside of monogamy with disease. This latter influence was a product of the consistent messaging surrounding the AIDS epidemic, and my personal anxiety about STD testing. During the height of AIDS hysteria in the late 80s and early 90s politicians and pundits went to great lengths to link the pathology of AIDS with the identities of its initial victims (homosexual men, intravenous drug users, and prostitutes) (Bersani, 1987). This pervasive messaging was hard to escape as a queer child growing up at that time, and it was deeply damaging. At the age of nine I became convinced of my own inevitable diagnosis because I understood the causal link being espoused by the media; being gay meant having AIDS. There was such paranoia about the spread of HIV/AIDS that even the individuals most at
risk became themselves dangerous. As I became sexually mature, this led to my own unreasonable fear of gay men and their potential as carriers for the disease. In the face of that fear, the only escape was complete monogamy.

While my initial intent in starting this project was not to shatter my marriage, it quickly became an inevitable conclusion. This was largely because of my new self-awareness surrounding my motivations for staying in the relationship for as long as I had. Realizing that my desire to be coupled was based in fear and insecurity was very distressing. It bothered me because that was not the person I wanted to be, nor was it the person I thought I would be when I was younger. The shattering of my self-image was the first real irreparable damage that was done to the glass house my partner and I had been living in for 14 years.
Exploring the world of gay hook-up apps was initially the intention behind my project. I was fascinated by this new world that I had no experience of and which seemed to be unlike any of the experiences of my more worldly friends. It was a tool for a new generation that seemed both frightening and liberating. I was nearly 35 when I started this project, and I was astounded at the ease young gay men had in connecting with one another. I was honestly jealous, I was a young man prior to the birth of the Internet, and I remember being afraid and disconnected from queer community. I approached my subject matter with the intent to satisfy my curiosity and to better understand what being gay in the 21st century looked like.

The initial project existed within a certain set of conditions, namely that I was still with my husband, that I was seeking to understand sex—not relationships, and that I was a photographer. As those conditions changed, the project changed as well. The loss of my first relationship, and the dissolving of the relationship that followed forced me to reexamine what I was doing both personally and artistically. The initial investigation of hook-up culture became more invested in the shattering of those relationships and the illusions that they represented. This shift in subject matter also required an equally important shift in how the work was created; as I struggled to free myself from the constraints that existed in my relationships, I also struggled to free myself from the constraints that existed in my artistic practice.

The shattering of my personal life paralleled a similar shattering of my artistic practice. As the illusions that surrounded my sexual identity fell away, so too did illusions that surrounded my identity as an artist. I entered my graduate studies believing
myself to be a photographer, deeply invested in the art of lens-based media. As I progressed within the program I found myself struggling to fit within the label I had given myself. This struggle found resolution as the world around me crumbled and I was forced to re-examine my sense of who I was both as a queer man and an artist. Photographic production began to feel too distant from the act of art making. As the work evolved I moved towards a practice of making that was more organic and visceral, that required a shedding of blood and tears similar to the shattering of my personal life.

3.1 Fucking Visuals/Visual Fucking

The first obstacle to the prospect of creating art from hook-up sex was figuring out how to document the activities. Looking through the apps and engaging in the ritual behaviors that are associated with their use, I became aware of a certain class of image making that was prevalent. As an environment based frequently on visual stimulation, Grindr and SCRUFF were rife with visual imagery. The images were often of poor quality: bad lighting, oddly framed and cropped, and blurry. They tended to focus on pieces rather than the whole, isolating those points of libidinal interests: cock, ass, abs, etc… While most failed as photographs, they were successful at articulating desire. Often those images least successful as photographs were most successful at initiating sexual contact. With this visual language already in place within hook-up culture, I chose to match rather than subvert the aesthetic as I went about my documentation. I traded my DSLR for my cell phone, and I traded careful mannered construction of images for impromptu snapshots.
3.2 A Hand Full of Shards

The initial exploration phase lasted from February until April. During that time I slept with and documented 23 separate sexual partners. In late April, I left my partner of 14 years, and moved in with one of the men I met through the project. At that time, I was asked by my new boyfriend to consider returning to monogamy. The emotional turmoil of that transition disrupted my ability to view the project and sent me into a period of regression. I had not intended to end my marriage when I started the project, and without the security that relationship provided I felt unable to continue my work.

In mourning for my previous life and the security it held, I worked exhaustively to try and reform my new relationship into the same mold. I attempted to shove the two of us into a new glass house. During this time I stopped working almost completely, I put nearly all of my energy into reforming the security I had lost. I became a parody of the role I had just rejected, taking up the mantle of homemaker I spent my days cooking and cleaning. I stopped working on my thesis and started helping my new partner with his art projects, in the hope that his happiness and success would be enough. This arrangement was vastly unhealthy, and eventually I realized what I was doing and in early July, I moved out of my new relationship and back home to my parents.

I turned 35 while sitting alone in my childhood bedroom. My life had veered severely off course; I had fallen completely out of synch with hetero-temporality. As I struggled to get out of the depression I was sinking into, I returned to the images from the initial documentation phase. With time and distance, I began to see these images differently. They stopped being objects of sexual curiosity, and began to take on more significant meaning. Those images became important again, as I began to play with how
they worked together and how they functioned as photographs. It was during this period that my process began to evolve beyond the photographic.

### 3.3 Failure Leads to More Breaking

My experiments with deconstructing the images and reconfiguring them led me to abandon them as photographic documents and begin looking at ways to transform them. These initial transformations took the form of layered line drawings on glass (Fig. 3.1-3.2). In layering the images I sought to occlude their representative power and reframe them as visual noise. Thinking, at the time, that their ability to disrupt underlying patterns sourced from the sites of each encounter would mirror the effect these queer experiences had in disrupting the patterns that defined my previously ended relationships. While the effect had significance for me, the loss of readability within the images failed to create an entry for the audience to engage with the narrative of disruption.
Figure 3.1 (un)Domesticated #1 (C&Q), 2014, Mixed Media on Glass, 4x6”
Figure 3.2 (un)Domesticated #'s 1-3, 2014, Mixed Media on Glass, 4x6
While I was working with these layered images, I was also looking at the work of Lucas Samaras. I was interested initially in Samaras’ disruptions of the surface of Polaroid portraits, and how they might be applied to the images (Fig. 3.3). As I was exploring his work, I came across Samaras’ *Reconstructions*, which dealt with the breaking of quilting conventions through the denial of patterns in favor of chaos (Fig. 3.4). I had recently been gifted a collection of antique quilt squares made by members of my family from before the Great Depression. I developed a second small body of work around the quilt squares, and how the images I was recreating in glass could interact with those highly coded and patterned objects (Fig. 3.5-3.6).
Figure 3.3 Lucas Samaras, Photo Transformation, 1973-74, Polaroid, 3x3”
Figure 3.4 Lucas Samaras, Reconstruction #20, 1977, Sewn fabrics, 87x85”
Figure 3.5 Quilt Experiment #1, 2014, Mixed Media on Glass, 12x12”
Figure 3.6 Quilt Experiment #4, 2014, Mixed Media on Glass, 12x12"
Again, I met with failure. The quilt squares were so highly coded and so graphic that they overwhelmed the images in the glass. In these works the images were less of a disruption to the patterns as the patterns were to the images. Yet, out of this failure I stumbled upon a new avenue of exploration. Quite unintentionally I shattered one of the pieces while I was transporting it for critique. In breaking the image literally, I found a means of materially engaging the glass beyond the etched surface. Breaking the glass and reconfiguring it allowed me to take advantage of the danger and tragedy that broken glass evokes.

As I began to move forward with the development of the glass sculptural pieces, I began to think more critically about the types of images that suited that treatment. I began to institute a basic hierarchy of images, those that represented my two monogamous relationships, and those that represented my sexual liberation. As I divided out the images, I noticed the vast difference in how I treated the subjects of each category. The failed images of my sexual partners were fragmented and disjointed, much like my experience of those men and the visual culture of online hook-up apps. The images of my two partners were carefully composed and primarily portraits, illustrating an idealized gaze. The etched glass pieces naturally gravitated towards these idealized images of my previous relationships. The drawn lines, the preciousness and fragility of the glass, and the violence of the shattered edges seemed to fit well with my emotional relationship to those images of broken ideals (Fig. 3.7-3.12).
Figure 3.7 Untitled (C&E, #1), 2014, Mixed Media on Glass
Figure 3.8 Untitled (C&E, #2), 2014, Mixed Media on Glass
Figure 3.9 Untitled (C&E, #3), 2014, Mixed Media on Glass
Figure 3.10 Untitled (C&Q, #1), 2014, Mixed Media on Glass
Figure 3.11 Untitled (C&Q, #2), 2014, Mixed Media on Glass
Figure 3.12 Untitled (C&Q, #3), 2014, Mixed Media on Glass
Having resolved my treatment of the images that represented my hetero-mimetic relationships, I turned back to the sexually explicit images from the early documentation period. Looking at these images I began to consider the impact these images had on my life; they seemed like broken pieces of memories. I’d already gained some considerable distance from the period during which these images had been created, and now with the passage of time, they seemed no less dangerous than when I first started documenting the encounters. I felt strongly that the danger and destructive power these images wielded in my life needed to be addressed in the process of integrating them into the installation. Given that these experiences helped to shatter my self-image, the mirror became an important element in how I translated the visuals into the space.

Lucas Samaras’ work again proved influential, as I turned to his *Mirrored Room* (Fig. 3.13). Samaras sought to transfix the viewer within the space of the mirror, infinitely repeated into an unknown distance. In seeing oneself repeated into an infinite field of others, *Mirrored Room* begs the question, “Which one is real?” In examining my own experience of the last year, I was struck by how much more real these fractured sexual memories were than the fantasies of domestic bliss that I left behind. I was struck by the mirror’s potential to reflect and reform these visceral images of sex. In reflecting these images through shattered mirror, I could create a visual field that closely approximated the psychological impact these experiences had on my inner world. (Fig. 3.14-3.19)
Figure 3.13 Lucas Samaras, Room #2 (Mirrored Room), 1966, Wood, Mirror, 8x10x8’
Figure 3.14 Fracture Installation view #1, 2015, Mirror, video projection
Figure 3.15 Fracture Installation view #2, 2015, Mirror, video projection
Figure 3.16 Fracture Installation view #3, 2015, Mirror, video projection
Figure 3.17 Fracture Installation view #4, 2015, Mirror, video projection
Figure 3.18 Fracture Installation view #5, 2015, Mirror, video projection
Figure 3.19 Fracture Installation view #6, 2015, Mirror, video projection
In the end, my thesis project was about the shattering of the normative in my personal life, the shattering of my artistic practice, and the reforming of something new from the broken remains of both. My renewed personal commitments to an art practice and a life lived queerly are directly gleaned from the experience of breaking apart my world and slowly piecing it into something different. The raw power of such an honest approach to art making has forever transformed how I view my role as an artist, and my vision for how my art will manifest in the future.

José Muñoz argues, in *Cruising Utopia*, that while Edelman’s *No Future* offers a great deal to consider regarding the organizational structure of society via reproductive futurism, it fails in providing queer individuals hope. It’s hope that Muñoz sees as the essential need for queer artists to embrace. Where Edelman says queers have no future, Muñoz suggests it is instead our obligation to propose alternative solutions and structures that can work to build a better future for both queer and non-queer alike. I very much connected with Edelman’s polemic during the process of breaking free from the limitations that normativity placed on my relationship, my sexual expression, and my identity as a queer individual. His words filled me with the desire to smash the world around me, to break my camera and to shatter my images. Yet, once I found myself unfettered, Edelman’s *No Future* offered nothing more, no direction, no hope, and (as stated in the title) no future.

Muñoz on the other hand did point me toward a future. Building utopias sounds like a foolhardy and naïve pursuit, but that is because hetero-temporality doesn’t support
endeavors that may lead to failure. Hetero-temporality requires a consistent movement forward toward the future, but Muñoz and others like Jack/Judith Halberstam encourage broken faltering steps that embrace the failures and queer paths that lead to unimagined possibility. It took a great deal of failure to produce *Fracture*, failures that manifested in my personal life and failures within my artistic production. The evolution of my intermedia practice was rife with failures. Failures that built something greater than what had existed before.

That's the role I now wish to take. I hope to propose new structures of meaning in my relationships, offer new ways of relating to the world and myself queerly, and find new paths both personally and artistically. I want to redefine my successes as failing upward, and to take those treasured failures and make them into art for the entire world to see. The last year of working has shown me that I very much have a future, and that within that future I have a purpose; to fail marvelously and to remake my failures into new queer utopias.
Anonymous. Queers Read This. *Queer Manifesto*. Published Anonymously by Queers, New York.


