My hideous progeny

Nathaniel Mondragon

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MY HIDEOUS PROGENY

by

NATHANIEL MONDRAGON

Under the Direction of Ruth Stanford, MFA/MS

ABSTRACT

*My hideous progeny* is an exhibition of objects and paintings that create a queer Gothic space. The works are autonomous, yet function conceptually as a composite, and are arranged to fully occupy the gallery. In the central pieces, I use the myth of *Frankenstein* as a metaphor for the act of creation and a reference point for discussing homosexual identity and relationships. Throughout my work, I explore different methods of “queering” the art object by altering its skin, surface, or substrate to investigate how identity is worn as a cosmetic exterior. Through a queer visual interpretation of the Gothic, I explore the idea of the monster as the queer Other in order to share a marginalized perspective with the viewer in hopes that he or she might re-evaluate the process of othering.

INDEX WORDS: Queer, Gothic, Frankenstein, Composite, Glamour, Halloween, Mask, Drag queen, Talismans, Magic
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by

NATHANIEL MONDRAGON

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

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MY HIDEOUS PROGENY

by

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this to my mother, who has always been supportive of my queerness and my fascination with the occult. Nearly twenty years ago, she gave me my first deck of tarot cards, which I still use to this day.

In building this body of work, I have reflected often on my childhood. My earliest memory of Halloween is of my mother dressing me up as a pumpkin. She pulled my hair into a little ponytail at the top of my head and dyed it green. She painted my face orange, added black facial features, and dressed me in an orange sweatshirt to complete the look. She laughed the whole time as she played dress-up with me, while I cried. I did not want to be a pumpkin, and I felt like I was being treated like a doll against my will. It was snowing that night, and our rural, southern Colorado town became a Halloween snow globe. My crying continued as my parents drove me and my siblings slowly down the dirt roads from house to house. We would park, get out of the car, and waddle up to the doors clutching our pumpkin pails to collect candy. At each house, I was presented as my mother’s dress-up doll and received laughter for my pouts. This memory has always made me chuckle.
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Secondly, I would like to thank my student peers and cohort for providing a wonderful atmosphere and support through this whole process.
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1 INTRODUCTION

Before graduate school, I worked primarily as a performance artist and photographer. I performed personal rituals where I asserted identity, explored ideas of transformation, and enacted rites of passage. The spectacle of these acts enabled me to embody a queer identity and maneuver through the world as a queer person, as I toyed with notions of gender and sexuality beyond heteronormative and homonormative ideals.

I used photography as a method to freeze time and document my social circles and surroundings. My work focused on fleeting moments and the ephemeral, and my inclusion in exhibitions was limited to the duration of a live performance or the display of a photographic document. After several years of working primarily in this mode, I felt a desire to establish a physical presence in the gallery space beyond those means. I decided to pursue a master’s degree to ground my work and develop a body of tangible objects. I have spent the past three years learning different fabrication methods in order to supplement my ephemeral practice with physical objects.

I make objects that reify concepts and ideas that reference magic, glamour, the aesthetics of Halloween decoration, and the Gothic genre of literature and film. My objects serve two functions: they can be activated in performances, often as talismans, and can be exhibited as physical artifacts that refer back to a performance-based practice. In making these objects, I work primarily through mold making and altering found objects. I use various methods to “queer” the art object, focusing on the relationship between surface and substrate. In my work, “queering” is often a transformational process that occurs on the surface.

My hideous progeny is an exhibition of objects and paintings that reimagine the myth of Victor Frankenstein and his monster as a queer relationship between artist and art object. As a
central theme, I focus on how the queer Other is depicted as a monster. The works build upon this idea, exploring themes of the constructed body, self-care, glamour (as it relates to drag aesthetics), magic, repetition, duality of the self and alternate personas, homosexual relationships, and childhood. In considering the exhibition’s design, the objects and paintings are installed in relation to each other to create associations and bridge meaning. In this way, the exhibition is a composite of the ideas reflected in each discrete piece, a stitched-together Frankenstein monster of its own. The cumulative effect is a Gothic space—a queer space.

In this paper, I will first examine my general philosophy and approaches to artmaking, focusing on the idea of the artist as magician, and how an art object can function as a talisman. I will talk about the role of painting in my work, and its connection to magic as an alternative spiritual practice. I will move on to discuss how I view Halloween as a queer holiday and its influence on my work. In the second half of the paper, I will focus on my thesis exhibition, where I explore the Frankenstein myth as a Gothic queer narrative. I will describe the ideas behind each object in detail, and the overarching concepts behind the body of work.

2 THE ARTIST AS MAGICIAN

In my work, I blend the practices of art and magic, and I view the figure of the artist as a magician. In The Necessity of Art, Ernst Fischer writes about the evolution of the human race, and sees a connection between art and magic:

Man takes possession of the natural by transforming it. Work is transformation of the natural. Man also dreams of working magic upon nature, of being able to change objects and give them new form by magic means. … Man is, from the outset, a magician.¹

Fischer asserts that transforming nature is something deeply rooted in the human race. When making art, I want to access something innately human—something deeply rooted in our collective unconscious. To achieve this, I reference art and ideas throughout history, both ancient and contemporary.

Magic and art are both ancient practices. In magical practice, a witch or magician uses natural materials and transforms these elements into a new form in order to set intention out into the world. Similarly, the artist will often start with raw materials, such as paint, wood, or clay, and uses these materials to produce works of art. My work refers to magical practices in a variety of ways. For instance, many of the objects I make function as talismans.

In defining the term talisman in his seminal text *Magick: Liber ABA*, famed occultist Aleister Crowley begins by stating “...every object soever is in a certain sense a talisman.” According to Crowley, the definition of a talisman is, “something upon which an act of Will (that is, of Magick) has been performed in order to fit it for a purpose. Repeated acts of Will in respect of any object consecrate it without further ado.” A magician uses a talismanic object to fulfill a specific goal or purpose—quintessential examples include protection or falling in love.

Crowley’s definition can be applied to art objects. In my case, the first act of Will can be seen as the act of creation, where many of my objects are generally designed with a purpose from the start, ranging from the role of a performance-based prop to a painting with a purely decorative or atmospheric function. Second acts of Will appear in different forms throughout my work. Repetition, duplication through mold making, and activating an object through a performative gesture can be seen as second acts of Will. Through a performative action, the object becomes

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3 Crowley, *Magick: Liber ABA, Book Four, Parts I-IV*, 236.
In Spring of 2017, I attempted to create a talisman in a work titled spellcasting no. 1, but I was not successful until its third iteration spellcasting no. 3. In these works, I took lifecasts of my hand in order to depict myself as Other, thereby queering the art object. The title of the series refers to the witch-like gesture of the hand as well as the nature of the medium. In spellcasting no. 1, a cast of my hand is displayed on a tabletop, pointing upward. The lavender hand bears long white acrylic nails that resemble claws. spellcasting no. 2 illustrates the pose of a witch’s hand with its index finger pointed forward in an act of spellcasting (Figure 1). The cast hand hangs flush against the wall as if a witch is emerging from within the architecture of the space.
The hand has a reddish tone, and its acrylic nails are painted in navy nail polish and covered in dark glitter, borrowing from drag queen aesthetics.

By adding a set of acrylic nails to the plaster casts, I queer the image of my own hand, subverting what would otherwise be a standard exercise in the technique of lifecasting. A definition of queering is provided in *Keywords for American Cultural Studies*:

To “queer” becomes a way to denaturalize categories such as “lesbian” and “gay” (not to mention “straight” and “heterosexual”), revealing them as socially and historically constructed identities that have often worked to establish and police the line between the “normal” and the “abnormal.”

In order to queer these works, I began by creating a self-portrait through lifecasting. I altered the substrate of the object (through the application of acrylic nails). The acrylic nails signify homosexual posturing through drag aesthetics. The nails are gratuitously feminine and inconveniently long, emphasizing their artificiality. The sinister shape of the nails refers to the image of a witch, an archetype that has been portrayed as the Other and suffered persecution throughout history. According to writer Daniel Harris, the costumes of early drag queens were viewed from a distance on a stage and “were designed to sparkle with blinding flashes of light that made the performer herself seem literally radiant, framed in a dazzling halo.”

In adding glitter and nail polish to the nails, I combined the gay icon of the drag queen with the symbol of the witch to order to depict the queer Other. This combination “denaturalizes” the homosexual figure into an otherworldly, symbolic figure that embodies (and performs) the “abnormal.”

The first two objects of this series suggest a link between artmaking and spellcasting, whereas this connection is made more explicit in its third iteration. In *spellcasting no. 3*, I take the idea of the drag witch and apply it to the notion of the “artist’s hand.” In making this piece, I

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took a cast of my hand while I held a paintbrush. I left the paintbrush in the mold and then poured the plaster in, encasing the paintbrush in a plaster hand. The resulting piece *spellcasting no. 3* is a cast of my hand holding an actual paintbrush (Figure 2). Through mold making, I froze the image of my own hand to emphasize the role of the artist’s hand in the act of artmaking. In this piece, the hand is romanticized as an historical nod to the art world’s fascination with the “artist’s hand” in the 1950s. The static cast of my hand grasping the brush echoes that of a hand clasping a magic wand.

The first two pieces are primarily inert objects and can therefore almost be considered “proto-talisman.” In comparison, *spellcasting no. 3* can be activated and serves a talismanic

*Figure 2. Nathaniel D. Mondragon, spellcasting no. 3, 2018, plaster cast of artist’s hand with brush, acrylic nails, nail polish, spider nest, 3” x 13” x 3.5”.*
function when in use. I hold the object by clasping the plaster copy with my own hand. I am then able to paint with the brush. Through this action, the image of my hand is echoed. The double is used to produce an uncanny effect, and what could otherwise be perceived as an ordinary act (the act of painting) becomes a queer act of magic.

3 THE ROLE OF PAINTING

In my paintings, I emphasize the artist’s hand through an accumulative act of mark making. Instead of working on traditional canvas or linen, I have stretched other kinds of fabric (generally silks and synthetic materials) over wood stretchers. The fabric is often sheer, which exposes the underlying structure of the paintings and calls attention to the individual components. Through these paintings, I deconstruct and queer the mythologized, masculine tradition of Abstract Expressionism.

In his seminal essay “The American Action Painters,” first published in 1952, Harold Rosenberg writes about the Abstract Expressionists’ approach to painting:

At a certain moment the canvas began to appear to one American painter after another as an arena in which to act—rather than as a space in which to reproduce, re-design, analyze, or “express” an object, actual or imagined. What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event.6

This notion is central to the idea of “action painting,” where the act of painting is recorded on the surface of a canvas as a residual series of gestures or marks.

Concerning the marks themselves, the Abstract Expressionists borrowed the influence of automatic writing from the Surrealists. David and Cecile Shapiro explain:

... they allowed the subconscious to spill over without the intermediary of narrative, forethought, known symbol, formal design, studied concept, or slick finish. Emotion was

to flow from the artist directly onto the canvas, with the artist withholding conscious control and direction—the antithesis of art as artifice. … The artist became, in a sense, only the conduit, the brush by means of which automatic writing transmitted emotion onto an external object, the painting surface.7

These notions find their way into my own practice through the interplay of painting and performance. As a performance artist, my interest in painting lies in this connection between the canvas as an arena and the mark as a residue of action.

In these paintings, my marks are repeated or made symmetrical. The repeating or symmetrical marks cohere into a pattern. I rely on the pattern as an abstraction referring to the divine.

In the past, I have struggled in depicting the divine. I made several attempts at making sculptures of Seraphim, angels of the highest order in Christian theology. Seraphim are traditionally portrayed with six wings—the first set covers their eyes, the second set are used for flight, and the last set cover the lower half of the body, which is sometimes interpreted as the genitals. Unhappy with these attempts, I found my depictions of the seraphim too literal and illustrative, relying on historical depictions of the angels and the imagery of wings. As another mode of investigation, I have turned to abstraction, repetition, and pattern.

I was struck by the depiction of figures on a beach in René Magritte’s 1927 painting The finery of the storm (La parure de l’orage) (Figure 3). In the painting, six figures are illustrated as flat planes, paper cut-out forms. These forms can be produced by folding a piece of paper and cutting into it in order to create symmetrical, repeating shapes. Regarding Magritte’s abstraction of the corporeal body into a flat decorative plane, Silvano Levy writes:

...in a further development Magritte proceeds to remove this final trace of volume. *L’Esprit comique I* (1927) can be seen to make just this transition from the “solid” plane to what is effectively an “insubstantial” plane. This is achieved through the paper cut-out,

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which Magritte described as “papier masqué.” *L'Esprit comique I* (1927) presents the figure as a flimsy blank sheet of paper punched with holes across its entire surface. As such, it could not be more incompatible with the notion of solid form.\(^8\)

I have taken this imagery and applied it as a solution in depicting the divine, removing the volume of the sculptural into a pattern on “insubstantial” sheer fabric. Repeating decorative patterning now takes the place of the repeating sets of wings of the seraphim, creating, instead, an almost hallucinatory effect (Figure 4). The paintings are there but not there, as a physical but transparent presence, much like the spiritual presence they are meant to evoke.

In spellcasting, repetition is a technique to further consecrate your Will. I repeat marks as a meditative practice, a physical act that produces its own rhythm, like a mantra. The process can

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be likened to learning a new language through repetition. As an automatic gesture, I make a mark, and then I repeat. In this process, the first mark is raw and unrehearsed as a potential method for channeling or accessing the subconscious. I then repeat the marks as an exercise, which pulls me into a focused mental state.

Through this process of channeling, similar to the automatic writing of the Surrealists and Abstract Expressionists, I use abstracted forms to depict a divine presence. This practice is influenced by Enochian Magic, a system of magic in which practitioners communicate with angels or spirit guides for magical purposes. As a queer person, I have turned to magical theory as an alternative spiritual space and practice.

*Figure 4.* Nathaniel D. Mondragon, *Mirror painting no. 9 (Exploded view)*, 2018, acrylic and nail polish on iridescent organza over wood stretchers, 14” x 11”.

My paintings rely on sheer fabric and expose the underlying supports, emphasizing a painting’s individual components and its objecthood. I use acrylic paint and add touches of glitter and nail polish, further emasculating the painting surface and the tradition of Abstract Expressionism with details in “feminine” media. The works engage with and negate painting as a purely two-dimensional, image-based portal. Instead, my paintings become a space to project into for the purposes of a queer spirituality.

4 HALLOWEEN AS A QUEER HOLIDAY

I reference or make use of Halloween decoration in my work. In leading up to this exhibition, I created a projection-based piece that transforms a plastic Halloween pumpkin pail into a simple lightshow. The work is pointed at a large section of wall, affecting the overall atmosphere of the gallery space. The piece consists of a commercially made Halloween pumpkin.

Figure 5. Nathaniel D. Mondragon, Pumpkin pail lightshow, 2019, altered pumpkin pail, video projection of spellcasting shadow against wall, dimensions variable.
pail and a video projection. The pumpkin pail is cut in half, preserving the front of the jack-o’-lantern. I have cut out the facial features, and the projector is aimed straight into the back of the hollow face. The projection on the wall takes the shape of the jack-o’-lantern’s cheery grin (Figure 5).

The video being projected falls across the wall in shadowy, black and white abstractions. The subject of the video is my hands as they wave in the air in a theatrical act of spellcasting. In one segment, I use the talismanic object spellcasting no. 3 to paint. The video is intentionally obscured, more visible when viewed across the pumpkin pail than through the shapes being projected on the wall. The movement from the video creates an eerie ambience in the room, and it gives a sense that “something is amiss” in the space.

I am interested in Halloween as an American custom. In fact, the pumpkin is a North American crop, and it is a staple for both Halloween and Thanksgiving in the United States. In October, the pumpkin often takes the shape of the jack-o’-lantern.

Simply put, the jack-o’-lantern is a rudimentary lightshow. In a wood engraving from 1867 titled The Pumpkin Effigy (Figure 6), three children play with a jack-o’-lantern to scare two other children in what Cindy Otto points out is “one of the earliest depictions of a jack-o’-lantern pumpkin.”\textsuperscript{9} Originally published in Harper’s Weekly, illustrator L. W. Atwater depicts the jack-o’-lantern emitting light. He emphasizes this effect with lines streaming out of the jack-o’-lantern’s eyes, evoking a lightshow.\textsuperscript{10}

\textsuperscript{10} Ott, \textit{Pumpkin: The Curious History of an American Icon}, 90.
For ten years, I lived in New England, an area of the United States known for its distinct seasonal changes and its beautiful autumns. Against a quaint New England backdrop, Halloween really shines. In a sense, Halloween is a queer holiday, providing a scenario for the heteronormative world to safely participate in “abnormal” fantasies. Heterosexual males are able to wear make-up, costumes, or even dresses without judgement—actions that would otherwise instigate homophobic ridicule from their peers. The parameters of Halloween deem strange, offensive, and “abnormal” behavior innocuous. Additionally, through Halloween, gruesome imagery rooted in the dark side of human nature is made palatable, comedic, and safe. The humor found in Halloween decoration provides a safe distance from the gruesomeness of the

depictions. The artificiality of a dismembered leg or a wall covered in spider webs does not cause alarm. I make use of the kitsch aesthetics of this holiday as a neutered darkness. The symbols of black cats, Halloween masks, bed sheet-covered ghosts, and pumpkin pails appear throughout my work. They signify something dark, yet they have been made safe and child-friendly. Regardless, the darkness of their references still lies under the surface of these images. There is something queer about the space between the spooky and jocular.

5 THE WORKS

The title of the show My hideous progeny comes from Mary Shelley’s introduction to the 1831 edition of her novel Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus. In the introduction, Shelley details the origins of her novel as sparked from a ghost story competition between her circle of fellow authors during a rainy summer in Switzerland. The first images of the story came to her during a restless night as a sort of vision. The vision was the essence of her novel: a scientist creates a man, and rejects and abandons it as a “hideous phantasm”; the phantasm later returns to confront its maker.11

Addressing a wider publication of her novel, she writes: “And now, once again, I bid my hideous progeny go forth and prosper. I have an affection for it, for it was the offspring of happy days, when death and grief were but words, which found no true echo in my heart.”12 Shelley refers her novel as her “hideous progeny,” establishing a relationship between creator and creation. The novel itself is about a maker and his creation—the figure of the monster is Victor Frankenstein’s own “hideous progeny.” But unlike Shelley, Dr. Frankenstein rejects his creation

12 Ibid.
and the novel details the disastrous results of his negligence. As an artist, I am fascinated by the act of creation, the relationship between artist and art object, and the art object as a reification of thoughts and abstractions from the artist’s mind. In my exhibition, I present my works as queer products of my own mind, which can be viewed as monstrosities.

In Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, the Monster is recognizably human in structure, but stands at 8 feet tall. When perceiving the monster, one knows something is “off.” Because of this, theorist Mair Rigby asserts that the Monster is an overtly queer symbol:

The monster ... disrupts Walton’s journey. The “strange sight” of this unnamable unknown moving across the Arctic ice arrests his attention, … and throws into doubt all his preconceptions about what is natural, normal, and possible. The Monster’s appearance is “queer,” undoubtedly, in the *strange* sense of the word, but the queerness of his effect deepens through his capacity to … set in motion “a questioning of the status quo, and … the nature of reality itself.” While Walton cannot identify the creature, he recognises that something important is happening. … I am struck by the fact that this recognition … occurs at the same moment as the text makes it possible for readers to recognise that “something queer” is happening. As it is the sense of perspective-shifting queer arrest which warns us that we are about to embark upon a Gothic journey, perhaps this sense of “queerness,” in the broadest sense of the word, actually makes the text recognisable as “Gothic.”

For Rigby, queerness and the Gothic are invariably linked, and this link is an important theme throughout my work. In my exhibition, I aim to create a Gothic space, a space where “something queer’ is happening.”

The works of *My hideous progeny* are displayed in pairs. In Shelley’s novel, the monster requests that Dr. Frankenstein make him a female monster companion, and Dr. Frankenstein refuses. Theorist Richard O. Block writes: “The monster comes to be the expression of the will that seeks its own completion in a mirroring self-sameness.” The monster desires

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13 Mair Rigby, “‘Do you share my madness?’: *Frankenstein’s* queer Gothic,” in *Queering the Gothic*, ed. William Hughes and Andrew Smith (Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, 2009), 41.
14 Ibid.
companionship with another monster, a being just like him. In my exhibition, all the works are presented as homogeneous pairs, honoring the Monster’s request for companionship. Each set of two creates a different dynamic, illustrating various forms of queer relationships.

5.1 Familiars nightlight

Upon entering the gallery space, the viewer may not notice at first the object closest to the entrance. The object is a small LED nightlight plugged into the wall. The nightlight cycles through a series of colors—red, yellow, green, blue, purple—at a controlled pace. Its small size makes it inconspicuous, and the viewer may only take notice of the piece after he or she has moved through the room and is ready to leave. Upon a closer look, it becomes clear that the top half of the nightlight is made of plexiglass cut into the shape of two cats huddling together. The cats are covered in glitter, and the LED light shines through their bodies, casting a small glow on the wall (Figure 21).

The Brooklyn Museum organized the travelling exhibition “Divine Felines: Cats of Ancient Egypt,” which focused on objects and artifacts depicting felines. In the exhibition catalogue, Yekaterina Barbash writes:

...felines were associated with specific gods because the cats’ characteristic traits were integral to those deities. Felines are, for example, superb hunters. They can stalk their prey with incredible patience, move soundlessly, reach great speed in a chase, and seize their quarry with astonishing precision. Moreover, they can do all this in utter darkness, as if illuminating the surroundings with their glowing eyes. The ancient Egyptians viewed these extraordinary abilities as proof of divine presence in felines.  

Barbash specifically points out the associations of felines with divinity as tied to their nocturnal nature and the quality of their eyes. In *Familiars nightlight*, the cats are aligned with the

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nocturnal, providing light in darkness, and their eyes are open vacuous holes. In this case, their entire bodies glow as if they are divine apparitions.

The small sculpture has a dual function as it both haunts and protects the room. This form is associated with childhood notions of the fear of the dark. For a child, the purpose of a nightlight is to cut through the darkness of the night, show them that monsters are (hopefully) not present, and that the coast is clear. In my exhibition, the nightlight signals that the creatures that go bump in the night are present in the room, and that you may need protection.

The nightlight serves as both a guide and a warning, and its presence is both comforting and threatening; even the cut-out image of the cats is both cute and creepy. Regarding the duality of cats, Barbash writes: “The behavior of both cats and lions is often qualified in contradictory terms: peaceful versus aggressive; protective versus destructive; gentle versus ferocious. Consequently, the Egyptians saw felines, more than any other family of animal, as possessing a duality—the sort of duality inherent to the Egyptian worldview.”¹⁷ This duality is explored throughout the exhibition as two contrasting elements or the literal inclusion of a pair.

The pair of cats huddle together, supporting one another for warmth and camaraderie. Yet, a pair of cats is more threatening than a rogue should they need to hunt or defend themselves. Unlike many of the other works in the exhibition, the pair of cats appear together in one form as a solidified, supportive relationship. The piece functions as a protective talisman for the space.

In my work, I include the symbol of the cat as a witch’s familiar. In witchcraft, a familiar is a demonic spirit that performs magical services for a witch and often takes the form of an

¹⁷ Barbash, Divine Felines: Cats of Ancient Egypt, 5.
animal, most commonly seen as a cat, bat, toad, spider, snake, crow, or owl. Historian Helen Parish points out that in 1604, the Act against Conjuration, Witchcraft, and dealing with evil and wicked spirits was issued in England, providing legislation for the persecution of anyone who worked with a familiar spirit. Parish clarifies that “the relationship between the person and the familiar was, in law, evidence of witchcraft itself.” The familiars in my exhibition therefore are evidence of the magic concepts found within my exhibition, referring once again back to the figure of the witch as a symbol of queer persecution.

Familiars often take the form of the animals depicted in Francisco Goya’s etching The sleep of reason produces monsters (c. 1799) (Figure 7). Film historian Barry Keith Grant writes about the timelessness of monsters in cultural myths in his book Monster Cinema. In metaphorically speaking of the creation of monsters, he refers to Francisco Goya’s etching and writes:

In Goya’s image, a man writing or drawing at his desk has fallen asleep and is being besieged by a horde of winged creatures that seem like hybrids of several predatory animals, including owls, cats, and bats (“the creatures of the night,” as Bela Lugosi’s Dracula famously rhapsodizes). Because there is a cat at the feet of the sleeping figure, and the monsters seem to be emanating from the cat, the image might be interpreted to suggest that the sleeping figure represents the artist, whose imagination has the ability to transform the commonplace and domestic into the strange and frightening.

Here, the large cat sits behind the sleeper, eyes wide open. Grant suggests that Goya’s cat is connected to the artist’s mind, almost acting as a stand-in while the man sleeps as a symbol of the commonplace and domestic.

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20 Ibid.
Likewise, a nightlight is a familiar household item, and my piece is intentionally placed at the entrance to the show as a stoic presence, cycling through colors in a controlled rhythm. It is both the first and last thing you see as you enter and leave the space. As a circular experience, the piece opens and closes the exhibition, welcomes and bids farewell to the viewer in a room ultimately filled with monstrosities created from my mind.

5.2 Sisters not twins (Talisman for self-care)

Two sculptures of bats hang across the room from one another, connected by a strand of large beads (Figure 19). They are suspended from the ceiling at opposite ends, distant but...
connected. The title is *Sisters not twins (Talisman for self-care)*, and the title refers to familial relationship dynamics. The two bats themselves are similar, but not identical. The forms were cut by a CNC router out of foam. The surfaces were finished with coats of paint, resin, and glitter.

The bats are a second set of witch’s familiars, holding space above and around the viewer, bookending the gallery space. The entrance and exit of the space is being guarded by the cats lower to the ground, and the bats hang from the ceiling at the back and front of the room as another pair of Goya’s nocturnal monsters. The beads are strung across the ceiling with three slopes, creating arches. The lights in the gallery cast duplicate shadows of the beads throughout, multiplying their presence and creating an atmospheric canopy throughout the gallery.

The shapes of the bats were taken directly from decorative Halloween lights that belonged to one of my best friends (Figure 8). The bats hung in our shared studio space ten years ago, and the symbol of the bat came to represent our collaborative work together. We were so

![Decorative Halloween bats, 2019](image)

*Figure 8. Decorative Halloween bats, 2019 (Digital photograph by Nathaniel D. Mondragon.)*
close that we were often mistaken for siblings. We now live in separate cities, though the deep bond remains. I have had many close relationships of this nature with women, whereas I do not have the same history with men.

In *Sisters not twins (Talisman for self-care)*, I reflect on my codependent relationships with women. The original decorative bats appeared in pairs, and their bodies tapered into tails that joined together at a centralized hole that allowed them to be threaded onto lights. In the sculpture, I have separated them at the tail and hung them across the room, connected by a strand of altered beads. The beads were commercially fabricated for Mardi Gras or Gay Pride, and their form references Catholic prayer and ritual. Like an oversized Catholic rosary, the bats serve a talismanic purpose—a reminder that I need to take care of myself.

The piece illustrates a codependent bond that is stretched across a room. At odds with this notion of codependency is an assertion of self-care and self-reliance. The bats are flat and have two distinct sides. On one side, the sculptures have lumpy, cartoonish renderings of bat-faces made of built-up latex and acrylic paint. On the other side, the bats wear Korean face sheet masks. The Korean face sheet mask is an item used for skin-care. The cotton sheet is soaked in serums and skin products, and when worn, the products are absorbed into the face. Attending to personal hygiene often requires a shift of focus from our fast-paced lifestyles, and it can be aligned with notions of self-care. As the bats slowly spin at opposite ends of the room, they pull the viewer’s attention, hypnotizing him or her into a slower mental space—a state better suited for introspection and self-care.

During the exhibition, I did a series of performances, activating the objects in the space. For the first performance, I did a skin-care routine with the bats. I started by giving myself a facial massage with a jade roller, which is a jade tool used in spas. I followed this up by applying
a Korean face sheet mask to my face. I laid down underneath the bat closest to the doorway and allowed my skin to soak in the face serum. The bat was installed just high enough from the ground that when I laid underneath it, I could barely touch the edge of the bat’s face when I reached up. The suspended bat spun slowly above my head as I laid there. I occasionally would reach up and touch the bat’s head, interrupting or reactivating the bat’s rotation (Figure 22). I removed the sheet mask from my face and placed it on the floor directly under the bat. I smoothed it out on the floor with the jade roller and left it there as a residue from the performance. For these moments, time seemed to slow down as I fell into a meditative state. I used this act as a warm-up for subsequent performances on the following days, allowing myself to get familiar with the space and ease my way into the upcoming actions with the other works.

Installed near the bat at the front of the gallery lies a soft-sculptural figure on a bed (Figure 18). Like Dr. Frankenstein (or even Dr. Frank-N-Furter), I constructed a man.

5.3 "I am making a man…"

I made a man over the course a year. I collected screenshots from gay and bisexual social networking apps Grindr and Scruff. In these digital spaces, “real people” play out archetypes for the purposes of attracting potential mates. Users identify themselves by providing a profile picture, which is primarily utilized as an opportunity to display prominent features, such as nice smiles, beards, chest hair, and muscle definition. The photographs are often “selfies” shot in gym locker rooms, a location where the subjects can play up homoerotic airs. In using these apps, users are able to “shop” for a mate based on physical characteristics, such as race, height, weight, hair color, eye color, body type, sexual preference, relationship status, etc. Additionally, users can affiliate themselves with different “tribes” or communities, which represent LGBTQIA archetypal niches. Tribes and communities include: Bear, Clean-cut, Daddy, Discreet, Geek,
Jock, Leather, Otter, Poz, Rugged, Transgender, Twink, Muscle, Guy Next Door, College, Military, Queer, Chub, Chaser, Bisexual, Drag. Users can filter through profiles by selecting traits or community affiliations to target their desired type.

From my collection of screenshots, I have created a composite image of an idealized man (Figure 9). I isolated body parts and facial features into individual images using Photoshop and rearranged the pieces into a composite image. Eyes found from one user’s profile are paired with the eyebrows of another, while the nose is taken from another and placed above someone else’s beard, and so on. Through selecting individual parts from various people, I am pushing the

![Composite Image](image)

*Figure 9. Nathaniel D. Mondragon, *My hideous progeny (digital composite),* 2017, jpeg file.*
purpose of the app to the next level of specificity, where I am shopping for the perfect nose, the
nicest pair of lips, a pair of warm eyes, a strong chest with the right amount of hair, muscular
arms, and defined abs. These pieces have been pulled together digitally and printed on faux
suede, where the composite image has been realized in a fake skin, emphasizing touch.
Something digital has become tangible.

I used the faux suede fabric to make a 5-foot-tall pillow. The image comprises the front
side of the pillow, a body in a long central panel, with two arms stitched in at the side as separate
cylindrical shapes. The pillow is backed with a duotone chiffon. With its flat printed front, the
body pillow emphasizes outward appearance. The form of the body pillow is laid out on a bed
covered in various chiffons and silks, the colors of which echo the color palette of the body
pillow’s image. The body pillow serves as a surrogate for a mate, asserting my desire for
intimacy beyond the screen.

Made from different men’s body parts, the composite is reminiscent of both Dr.
Frankenstein’s monster and classical representations of the human figure. In 1962, Andy Warhol
experimented with the idea of the composite image. He made a series of collages of the facial
components of female movie stars. Warhol cut out various facial features in horizontal strips and
arranged them together to form a composite image of an idealized beauty. Several examples of
the composites show the work at varying stages with the strips taped onto paper or traced into a
new drawing. Warhol includes the initials of the movie stars represented (Figure 10). For
instance, in one composite, Warhol includes “the hair and forehead of G.G. (Greta Garbo), the
eyes of J.C. (Joan Crawford), and the nose of M.D. (Marlene Dietrich), and the lips and chin of
S.L. (Sophia Loren).”22 Relating the idea to Greek mythology, Blake Gopnik writes: “Warhol is

22 Taro Nettleton, “White-on-White: The Overbearing Whiteness of Warhol Being,” Art Journal 62, no. 1
playing on an ancient idea. The Greek painter Zeuxis, faced with having to depict Helen of Troy, is said to have chosen bits and pieces from all the most gorgeous maidens in town…” Warhol’s composites and my sculpture are both in dialogue with this ancient tradition in depicting an idealized form from chosen pieces.

Regarding the racial composition of Warhol’s composites, Taro Nettleton writes: “...Warhol recognized the complexity of the function whiteness served within the public sphere and particularly in the utopian world of Hollywood cinema, as both a requirement for inclusion

Figure 10. Andy Warhol, Female Movie Star Composite (detail), ca. 1962, ink, photographs, and tape on paper. Courtesy of the Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh, PA, a museum of the Carnegie Institute.

and an impossible ideal.” The racial makeup of my body pillow is white, which reflects the desirability and hegemonic presence of white men found on the dating apps. It is common to browse user profiles and come across statements such as “No Asians” or “No blacks.” It is important to point out that it is unlikely or rare to come across the phrase “No whites” in user profiles. This points to a general sense of discrimination against minorities on these apps.

A prominent feature of the dating app Scruff is called the Global Grid (Figure 11), which is visible on the first screen when accessing the app. The Global Grid provides users with a

![Figure 11. Screenshots of Scruff's Global Grid, 2019, png files.](image)

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snapshot of online global users at that moment and is divided into four views: Online Now, New Members, Most Woof’d (Last Hour), Most Woof’d (New Members). Users can tap the “Woof” button on others’ profiles, which serves as a sort of online cat call and indicates interest. In the Global Grid, one can view the online users who have received the most “Woofs.” While collecting screenshots for the digital composite, I frequented this section to collect various body parts and review what many users found most appealing. As the process went on and I saw photo after photo of hairy muscled white men, I found myself internalizing these standards and the results of the body pillow reflect these hegemonic standards of homosexual desirability.

Many scholars have put forth that at the core of the Frankenstein story is a homosexual relationship between men. Mair Rigby writes about this recurring theme in the many iterations of Frankenstein in his essay “‘Do you share my madness?’: Frankenstein’s queer Gothic”:

Frankenstein’s film and theatre progeny have continued to put the language of homosexual deviance into play, presenting audiences with numerous paranoid, secretive, effeminate, unhealthy, nervous, death-obsessed, insane Franksteins who repeatedly abandon their families and neglect their women in favour of “monsters.” Benshoff finds the “core idea—that of a mad male homosexual science giving birth to a monster … to a greater or lesser degree in almost every filmic adaptation.”  

My sculpture follows this core idea. Instead of depicting the monster as hideous as in most adaptations of the story, I have focused on creating a facade illustrating homosexual desirability.

The body pillow serves a talismanic function concentrated toward drawing in intimacy with a male partner. In the context of the exhibition, my body acts as a counterpart to the body pillow, completing the set of two. When the piece was first completed, I slept with it in my own

25 Mair Rigby, “‘Do you share my madness?’” in Queering the Gothic, 45.
bed, charging it through seven nights of spooning. The body pillow is further charged with subsequent live performances (Figure 12).

During the run of the exhibition, I performed live with the body pillow, lying with it in various poses (Figure 23). At first, I was fully dressed and laid with it tenderly. In the second half of the performance, I stripped down to my underwear and put on a pair of altered satin gloves with long acrylic nails. Through wearing these gloves, I embodied the role of the witch, which served to heighten the body pillow’s talismanic function. I squeezed and released it to the rhythm of my own breath, animating him as my breath became his. Through this act, I imbued the object with an animus. At times, I was behind him, his image facing outward. My arms, gloved hands, and legs wrapped around his body, collaging into his. I climbed on top and pushed my hands down into him with my weight, asserting control over his talismanic form. At the end of the performance, I laid directly on top of him with my head against his chest, and we rested

Figure 12. Nathaniel D. Mondragon, My hideous progeny (body pillow), 2018, digital collage printed on faux suede, fabric, polyester fiber fill, memory foam, wood frame, seven nights of spooning, 22" x 63" x 37".
together.

5.4 Frankenstein monster mask in drag

In several works in the gallery, I rely heavily on the myth of Frankenstein. However, I am not exclusively drawing from Shelley’s complex novel or James Whale’s 1931 classic film adaptation, in which Boris Karloff bore the iconic monster make-up by Jack Pierce. Instead, I am updating and expanding on the myth. Since the original publication of Shelley’s novel in 1818, the story has taken so many forms that it ceases to operate as one text. In his book *The Gothic Sublime*, theorist Vijay Mishra writes:

*Frankenstein* cannot be read as a single, unified text. … *Frankenstein* (and the Gothic generally) must be read as a “process” inextricably linked to other, not necessarily novelistic, semiotic systems. Mel Brooks’ film spoof *Young Frankenstein* (1974) may be taken as an example of this process of expansion and rewriting, since its target texts (for purposes of parody) are the multiplicity of texts inspired by the original.26

Mishra goes on to list a number of renditions of the story, including editions of Shelley’s novel, as well as numerous cinematic and theatrical adaptations. This body of work continues with this tradition of expansion and rewriting, but now relies on the technologies of the internet and social media for its source material.

A pair of additional sculptures are installed in the back of the gallery (Figure 15). The two sculptures are 64” x 48” latex masks. One lays on the ground, while the other hangs from a plaster cast of my hand and pools on the ground. Physically, both sculptures are in the form of an enlarged Frankenstein monster Halloween mask and are cast from the same mold. The mask hanging from the wall highlights the raw material: green-tinted latex (Figure 17). The surface is made up of hundreds of brush marks, as if the form was whipped up by the strokes of a brush.

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and the mask is the resulting pile of paint. The surface, however, is a cast one, being pulled from a mold, referencing the industrial process of commercial Halloween mask making. However, the oversized scale and visible hand of the artist are at odds with the reference to the commercial, bringing the object into the realm of the metaphorical and symbolic. This inability to classify the mask as something that is purely handmade or purely commercial frustrates this binary, creating a tension in the work. Similarly, the image of the monster is childish and grotesque, making the viewer question whether the monster is funny or dangerous.

The viewer can move around the mask on the floor and examine it from above. On the substrate of the recumbent mask, I have painted drag make-up, putting the iconic Frankenstein monster in female drag (Figure 16). In this piece, I am using drag make-up as a visual device to queer the object. In the empty eye sockets, I have inserted a pair of altered black gloves with long black acrylic nails. The fingers of the black gloves point diagonally outwards, mimicking false lashes. The two masks are installed close to one another to allow the viewer to look back and forth between the two. It is evident that the masks come from the same mold, but the surface handling of the two is different. The contrast between the raw green mask as a blank slate and the make-up of the drag mask is striking and pronounced. As a pair, they represent the appearance of a gender binary—masculine and feminine. Through drag, the Frankenstein monster receives his female companion.

Drag make-up is a form of stylized feminine glamour, borrowing heavily from the looks of Old Hollywood divas and contemporary female pop stars. From our contemporary perspective, we associate glamour with Hollywood and fashion magazines. However, according to film theorist Brigitte Weingart, the etymology of the word *glamour* points to its connection to magic:
...there is hardly any text about glamour that doesn’t start with the concession that it is a phenomenon which is not fully explicable… Of course, this denial of explicability is due to the fact that glamour is a notion that stems from the realm of magic and witchcraft, the realm of unexplainable occurrences that deal in wonder rather than explicability. In the discourse of magic, “glamour” refers to a spell, an enchantment, and, more specifically, to strategies of optical deception. As one writer put it in 1721, cited by the OED in its entry on “glamour”: “When devils, wizards or jugglers deceive the sight, they are said to cast glamour o’er the eyes of the spectator.”

In my work, glamour is a transformational visual device. Like make-up, glamour tricks the eye, thus casting an optical spell. Glamour appears in the form of glitter, iridescent colors, or reflective sheens on the surfaces of my paintings and objects. The hypnotic effects can often only be viewed in person and require the viewers to shift their perspective to see how light plays on the surface of the work. My work often rewards the experiential or live viewing of a piece.

Drag make-up refers to a duality inherent in performance, where the drag performer takes on a new persona. Drag performers fulfill a specific role in the LGBTQIA community, providing entertainment at bars, events, and now on the reality TV show RuPaul’s Drag Race. In these spaces, drag queens are elevated as the centers of attention through performance, achieving a godlike blending of gender as they channel impossible pop cultural ideals of beauty and glamour. Similarly, the customs surrounding Halloween allow virtually anyone to indulge in another persona, limited only to an individual’s creativity or pocketbook. This large mask takes these two performative spaces and layers them on top of each other. A Halloween mask receives drag make-up, and becomes a layering of masquerading identities. Frankenstein’s monster, renounced for his hideousness, is given a drag make-over, relying on the glamour of make-up to trick us into thinking he is beautiful. Two Othered symbols (the monster and the homosexual icon of the drag queen) conflate into one super Other.

During the reception of the exhibition, I performed with the masks, embodying the soft sculptures. I removed the green mask from the cast of my hand and threw the mask into the center of the room. It made a thud as it hit the ground. I hung my jacket on the hand, and crawled underneath the mask. Inside, I pushed up against the monster’s forehead with my hands. In fits and starts, I would do a loose crab walk around the floor, and come to halt, letting my body drop limp. The sound of the latex was similar to that of a tire, a strange rubbery echoing in the room. I struggled for breath underneath the mask and I allowed myself to breathe heavily. I crab-walked into the center of the gallery, stopping and starting again and again, nearly exhausting myself, and then crab-walked back to the rear of the gallery. I removed the mask and let it drop into a pile near the plaster hand armature.

I sat behind the second mask, intentionally hiding half my body from the audience as I stripped my clothes off, down to a light skin-toned, men’s butt-lifting shapewear suit. I slipped under the mask and pushed my body directly under it, so my feet came below the mouth. I was now wearing a pair of black pointed sock boots. The image of the pointy shoes emerging from the mask was reminiscent of the Wicked Witch’s corpse resting underneath Dorothy Gail’s house. I placed my hands in the upper corners of the mask and sat up, lifting the mask from a steel armature underneath—the armature also had a set of cast hands, an echo of my body. Sitting up within the mask, I removed the black gloves from its eye sockets and slipped them on. I put my hands out of the eyes, now wearing the gloves, and I moved the fingers, animating the face’s lashes. I then stood up, and the mask, too large for my head alone, transformed into a floppy latex garment. I would move and hold a pose, and move and hold a pose. The mask would contort and transform into a new configuration with each pose. My body movements referenced fashion, and the facial features of the mask became a series of live sculptural images for the
audience. In those moments, I became a shapeshifter of identities (Figure 24). The masks, when activated as talismanic wearables, operate like drag make-up and allow me to transform—enabling me to embody and explore a strange, new identity.

Prior to the 1960s, sculpture was historically made with stable materials, like bronze, marble, plaster, and wood. At first glance, the latex masks look solid, and perhaps even old. When activated, the materiality comes alive. It is loose, unstable, flexible, unpredictable, and will deteriorate over time. This unfixed quality makes the objects open-ended and queer, as they frustrate ideas of stability and permanence.

5.5 Altarpiece panels

Two devotional paintings hang on the walls, echoing the framework of Gothic altarpieces. Like the abandoned castles and churches found in Gothic literature, these works serve as a supporting backdrop to the main sculptural elements of the exhibition (Figure 20).

The individual panels are narrow and vertically oriented, pointing upward. The exact dimensions of the panels are directly taken from my body, measuring 67 inches in height and 15 inches in width. The panels operate loosely as figural abstractions as a counterpoint to the representational nature of the other works in the exhibition. The panel dimensions are inspired by a 15th century altarpiece from Monopoli, Italy titled Virgin and Child with Saints Christopher, Augustine, Stephen, John the Baptist, Nicholas, and Sebastian that I saw while visiting the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (Figure 13). The altarpiece was being restored in their Conservation in Action gallery, which allows visitors to watch the process of museum conservators working on a piece in the museum’s collection. The museum had photographs and x-rays of one panel printed to scale, which were displayed in a row of four. The images were
Figure 13. Conservation in Action: Photographs and X-rays of Virgin and Child with Saints Christopher, Augustine, Stephen, John the Baptist, Nicholas, and Sebastian, early 15th century, tempura on panel. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

taken from the same panel, but the different photographic methods produced four distinctly different panels. Across the room, the actual altarpiece was installed.

Inspired by the x-ray images of this altarpiece, I have started a series of distinctly different panels. In these works, I aim to create an atmospheric space for magical practice, drawing on the tradition of Enochian magic where magicians communicate with angels.

In My hideous progeny, I include a pair of these panels, each stretched with sheer iridescent organza. They are hung side by side as two narrow verticals, mimicking the windows
of Gothic architecture. The first panel on the left is red orange and shines with a green iridescence. The second panel on the right has a shiny rainbow gradient and refers to the gay pride rainbow flag. The pieces are simple and minimalist, with no additional flourishment. These panels do not portray the figures of saints, but instead remain elusive as stand-ins for paintings. The pieces are open and airy, and the wood stretchers are visible through the sheer fabric. The viewer can mentally project into the surfaces of the panels, allowing a space for meditation.

Above the panels, spellcasting no. 2 is installed. The cast plaster hand points downward at the viewer, and the two panels hang below, almost as if summoned by the power of the witch’s hand. The works on the wall are a magic altar in the queer space.

6 CONCLUSION

In My hideous progeny, I use the symbols of the witch, the cat, the bat, the drag queen, and the Frankenstein monster to explore notions surrounding the queer Other. The works in this exhibition can be viewed as individual pieces, but cohere to either explore variations on a theme, or provide support to each other. The answers are not all there, but I am hoping the viewer is left with a sense of mystery—that there is something amiss happening. This feeling is intended to elicit a queer response in the viewer and expose the “abnormality” found in portrayals of the queer Other as a monster. The Frankenstein monster masks are the central focus of the exhibition, where identity, surface, and substrate are explored through materiality and symbolism. In this work, I question the performativity of identity and propose that we wear identity on the surface, like a mask.

Through my work, I engage in a queer alternative magical practice. My objects contain the potential and the history of a performative act, operating alternately as cultural artifacts and functional talismanic objects. When not in use, my objects can be exhibited as the document of a
performance. This is a solution to the problem I experienced prior to graduate school, when I struggled with the ephemerality and time-based nature of performance art. I am no longer limited to a live performance or display of a photographic document to be included in an exhibition. Through objects and painting, I explore artmaking as a record of performative acts.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


APPENDICES

Appendix A: The Exhibition

Figure 14. Nathaniel D. Mondragon, My hideous progeny, 2019, installation view of MFA thesis exhibition, dimensions variable.
Figure 15. Nathaniel D. Mondragon, *My hideous progeny*, 2019, installation view of MFA thesis exhibition, dimensions variable.
Figure 16. Nathaniel D. Mondragon, *My hideous progeny (Frankenstein monster mask in drag)*, 2019, acrylic and glitter on cast latex, altered gloves with acrylic nails, steel armature with plaster casts of artist’s hands, resin, glitter, LED light, 22” x 63” x 48”.

Figure 17. Nathaniel D. Mondragon, *My hideous progeny (Frankenstein monster mask)*, 2019, cast latex, steel armature with plaster cast of artist’s hand, glitter, resin, LED light, 34” x 60” x 48”.
Figure 18. Nathaniel D. Mondragon, *Sisters not twins (Talisman for self-care)* and *My hideous progeny (body pillow)*, 2018-2019, foam, resin, glitter, fabric cut-out, beads, performance residue with Korean face mask; and digital collage printed on faux suede, polyester fiber fill, fabric, altered gloves with acrylic nails, nail polish, memory foam, wood frame, seven nights of spooning, 31” x 37” and 34” x 63” x 37”.
Figure 20. Nathaniel D. Mondragon, *spellcasting no. 2 diptych*, 2017-2019, plaster cast of artist’s hand, acrylic nails, nail polish, glitter, iridescent organza over wood stretchers, hand: 7.5" x 5" x 6.5" and paintings: 67" x 15" each.
Figure 21. Nathaniel D. Mondragon, *Familiars nightlight*, 2019, plexiglass, glitter, LED nightlight, 5.5" x 3".
Appendix B: The Performances

Figure 22. Nathaniel D. Mondragon, *Performance with Sisters not twins (Talisman for self-care)*, 2019, performance with foam, jade roller, Korean face sheet mask, breathing, 20 minutes.
Figure 23. Nathaniel D. Mondragon, *Performance with My hideous progeny (body pillow)*, 2019, performance with body pillow, altered gloves, fabric, memory foam, wood frame, rhythmic breathing, 40 minutes.
Figure 24. Nathaniel D. Mondragon, *Performance with My hideous progeny (Frankenstein monster mask in drag)*, 2019, performance with cast latex mask, pointed sock boots, men’s butt-lifting shapewear, altered gloves with acrylic nails, 20 minutes.