Absurd Vessel

Michael Jess Tolley

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ABSTRACT

Absurd Vessel is a series of multimedia paintings using themes of science fiction to explore the cognitive estrangement of mind and body through devotional imagery. These paintings provide a playful space in which earnest existential topics are expressed through so-called gay filth and deviancy and reoriented as rites of personal salvation. In this body of work, I research the various ways queer artists and writers come to terms with their spirituality while existing on the theological fringes. I extend this endeavor to cosmic cycles of death and rebirth in order to express a type of extrao-science fiction, where full comprehension is just beyond reach. This ineffability parallels my former Christian beliefs’ inability to conceive of the exaltation of a queer body.

INDEX WORDS: Painting, Queer, Speculative realism, Masculinity
ABSURD VESSEL

by

MICHAEL TOLLEY

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

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ABSURD VESSEL

By

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DEDICATION

To my loving and supportive husband, Robert.
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I would like to thank my committee: Craig Drennen, Craig Dongoski, Timothy Flowers, and Wesley Harvey. Your insight and unique perspectives will continue to resonate with me as I continue my journey as an artist. I’d also like to thank my wonderful editor: Nhedda Ahmed with being so generous with her time and feedback.
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1 INTRODUCTION

My first experience with painting was looking through Spectrum 9 (Figure 1), a fantasy and science fiction publication that annually recognized the work of illustrators. Seeing this work set me on a mission to hone my skills so that I could match the artists that inspired me. I was 18 when I started painting, and my dream career was to be a science fiction illustrator. Phil Hale (Figure 2) was a painter of major influence on me; his works were influenced by the styles of John Singer Sargent (Figure 3) and Rick Berry (Figure 4), artists from whom I also took inspiration. During art history survey courses, the styles of the Baroque period made the most significant impact on my formal development as a painter. In my first semester of graduate school, I took a course in Baroque art history. I researched the various forms of Baroque excess and explored how that “extra-ness” might connect 17th-century artworks to contemporary ones. I began developing a visual language of erotic sensualism and expressions of opulent and grotesque excess. Why these qualities were important to my studio practice did not become apparent until my second year of graduate school.

Before I begin a painting, I create a preliminary drawing that is similar in scale to the final image. I start these drawings by sweeping large gestural lines across the paper. These dynamic actions imbue the paper with a charge of energy and lay out the composition for representational images. When I’m drawing, all references are fair game. I collect images from art books, magazines, Instagram, and random snapshots of daily activities. In this stage of my process, I have the opportunity to take formal risks by rendering any image no matter how arbitrary it may seem in relation to others in the composition. While generously adding imagery, I do not shy away from erasing fully developed areas and drawing over them again. Eventually, the drawing achieves a balance both formally and conceptually. While I strive for a harmonious
balance of visual elements, I also maintain a strong dynamism. Although the drawing is provisional to the painting, it has a greater sense of immediacy.

In the next phase of the drawing, I render figural shapes from the sea of gestural marks and images. The bodily elements are either directly taken from image references or are fictional/imagined. The image is successful when it balances the opposing forces of fragmentation and unity. This sense of ambiguity is central to my work, but I didn’t understand its full impact until I painted *Triumph* (Figure 5) during the summer of my second year of graduate school.

That summer, I was playing around in Photoshop, making collages out of dried paint skins I had shaved off my palettes. I embellished these skins with sequins, pearls, paper clips, and Mardi Gras beads. I would then take images of these forms and manipulate them in Photoshop by adding other source images. In the background of the collage for *Triumph*, I incorporated an image of the fresco *Triumph in the Name of Jesus* (Figure 6) by Giovanni Battista Gaulli. This work is a ceiling fresco heavily adorned with golden ornamentation. In the center of the composition, a large oval reveals a painted glimpse of the heavens; around this portal, angels cavort on clouds, twisting and overlapping as they luxuriate in bright white divine light. At the lower end of the fresco, demons writhe as they fall into Damnation.

The fresco’s narrative of good and evil is of less interest to me than its portrait-like qualities, luscious colors, and lively composition. As I layered my digitized paint skins over the image of Gaulli’s work, I noticed that the particular paint skin I used included a golden bracelet engraved with the name *Michael*. This moment was serendipitous: I started thinking about my name and my body as figures of transcendent imagery. By merging Gaulli’s Baroque architecture and my bedazzled studio scraps, I had created an exploration of opulence, excess, and trash. I use
these extravagant collages as the primordial muck for my current body of work, which is centered around themes of opulence and sexual excess.

In *Absurd Vessel*, I create a series of multimedia paintings using themes of science fiction to explore the cognitive estrangement of mind and body through devotional imagery. These paintings provide a playful space in which earnest existential topics are expressed through so-called gay filth and deviancy and reoriented as rites of personal salvation. In this body of work, I research the various ways queer artists and writers come to terms with their spirituality while existing on the theological fringes. I extend this endeavor to cosmic cycles of death and rebirth in order to express a type of extro-science fiction where scientific understanding cannot be applied for full comprehension.\(^1\) This ineffability parallels my former Christian beliefs’ inability to conceive of the exaltation of a queer body.

Figure 1. *Spectrum 9: the best in contemporary fantastic art*, 2002. Cover art.
http://spectrumfantasticart.com/books.php
Figure 2. Phil Hale. *Johnny Bad Hair*, 2002. Oil on canvas. http://philhalestudio.com
Figure 4. Rick Berry. Illustration. http://rickberrystudio.com
Figure 5. Michael Tolley. *Triumph*, 2019, digital image.
2 COMING OUT AND BELONGING

When making drawings largely comprised of loosely curated images, I constantly ask myself how the images I choose relate to my body: do they allude to the transcendental, metamorphic, or the erotic? While I explore the earnest notions of spirituality and religious exile, I balance these weighty considerations with lighthearted gay deviant play. In Donald Morton’s essay “Birth of the Cyberqueer,” the cyberqueer promotes desire as a free agent, diminishing the focus on necessity. Desire in ludic postmodernity flourishes in ambiguous spaces. My experiences with sexual deviancy, driven initially by uninhibited desire, were my passport to spiritual tranquility and freedom from strict adherence to doctrine. Despite these gains, I still experience the natural longing to be accepted, to belong. These conflicting forces—ecstatic deviancy versus comfortably “fitting in”—manifest in a near-constant state of anxiety.

Elspeth Probyn describes the need for belonging as queer in itself. The places one wishes to belong, and the criteria for fitting in are usually arbitrary and capricious; these unwritten rules fall outside normal expectations—i.e., they are queer. Navigating multiple social spheres is challenging for everyone; it is monumentally difficult for an introvert such as myself.

My search for belonging has heavily focused on spirituality. Being an out gay man living in a conservative community most of my life has impacted this desire to belong. My parents are devout Christians; my father is a pastor, so even among my close family I am considered an abomination against God. Being attracted to men was unacceptable, and the notion of fluid gender expression was inconceivable. Gay sexuality was something to be condemned, as was displaying or performing any feminine characteristics.

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3 Elspeth Probyn, Outside Belongings (Routledge, 2015), 5-9.
Early in life, I absorbed ideas about spirituality from both Christian and Native American teachings. These two spiritual traditions are like oil and water: Christianity focuses on shedding the mortal coil for our heavenly reward; Native American beliefs, on the other hand, hold as sacred a deep connection to this world. To further complicate things, I am an atheist, yet I retain this desire for spiritual belonging. Being spiritually untethered, I felt off-kilter and immensely lonely. Probyn shifts this dynamic from a negative to a positive one by suggesting that the desire for belonging can provide the energy required for navigating complex social systems. By not fitting in, I am free to explore, sample, and hybridize spiritual beliefs of all shapes, sizes, and flavors. I am free to pursue all the possible theories of how and where the body and mind interact. Christian theology, Native American spiritualism, Zen Buddhism, and science fiction stories all come into Absurd Vessel as a cacophony of spiritual nourishment.

Mark Doty’s poem Homo will not Inherit is another piece of inspiration. Doty wrote the poem after he came across a sign that read, “Homo will not Inherit,” meaning that a homosexual cannot inherit the kingdom of God. In his poem, Doty expresses that the homosexual does not require Christianity and in order to attain spiritual transcendence; it can be found in the very act of gay sex. Doty claims the fringes of society as his kingdom; in this space and with its accompanying erotic pleasures, he finds his spiritual reward.

21 HOMO WILL NOT INHERIT. Repent & be saved.

22 I’ll tell you what I’ll inherit: the margins

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4 Probyn, Outside Belongings, 11.
3 EXCESS OF DESCRIPTION

Visually complex images laden with symbols and iconography require us to pause and revel in all the details. In this moment, time slows. The image’s narrative is suspended as the viewer submerges into the work, absorbing with all the senses, contemplating all the signs and signals. However, this excess of visuality is a double-edged sword; although it can lead to deeper viewer engagement, some viewers might dismiss the visually excessive work as too overwhelming. Speaking in the context of literature, Mieke Bal states that excessive description creates a temporal arrest in the story. Although Bal refers to literary theory, a similar effect occurs in painting. David Salle’s *After Michelangelo* and Cecily Brown’s *Combing the Hair* are both visually excessive works that function in this manner.

Cecily Brown’s *Combing the Hair* (Figure 7) is a subversive painting. At first glance, it is a gestural abstract painting of fleshy browns and pinks with slashes of blue evenly punctuating the composition. A deeper investigation of the title reveals that Brown has appropriated it from works by Edgar Degas bearing similar names. As we look more deeply at the painting, subtle figural shapes become apparent. As one shape is discovered, so is another, and a sea of bodily elements begin to appear. As soon as we identify these figures, they collapse back into the picture plane. Cecily Brown’s paintings, especially her recent work, are notable for their complex subject matter rendered in loosely defined images, like the figures in *Combing the Hair*. Brown describes herself as a magpie, building and adorning her compositions with innumerable eclectic references. Sometimes the works’ titles offer clues to her initial inspiration for an image, but on the whole, they are enigmatic without fuller explication from Brown. Each

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painting’s narrative is crucial for the artist’s process, but for the viewer, knowing the full story adds little to the experience. This enigmatic quality functions exactly as it is supposed to: it enchants and entices the viewer with the pleasure of looking.

Visual excessiveness can also be measured by degrees of realism. Where Brown’s abstracted bodies are only vaguely comprehensible, David Salle meticulously paints highly symbolic objects in an entirely realistic manner. *After Michelangelo* (Figure 8), is a series of three paintings created in response to the frescoes in the Sistine Chapel.⁹ I will focus specifically on the portion of the triptych titled *The Flood*. This painting’s composition is divided into two unequally sized sections. The larger section, on the left, is three-quarters of the composition, while the smaller section on the right is the remaining quarter. In the background of the larger section we see a high key value rendering of Michelangelo’s *The Flood*. In the foreground, realistically painted objects float over the background image, almost as if they have been dropped in digitally via Photoshop. These floating objects all relate to water or floods in some way: we see a tipping glass of water, a life preserver, a lighthouse, an umbrella, giant water droplets, and *The Great Wave off Kanagawa* by Hokusai. The smaller right section of the painting contains another reference to digital image manipulation. Here, Salle has painted a woman’s portrait after it has been subjected to a digital warping effect; her face spirals, whirlpool-like, towards the center of the composition, where we see the image of a rock spashing into the water.

Where Brown combines paintings from the past with her sensibility of gestural excess, Salle combines contemporary images with those of the past. Both processes overwhelm the eyes

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and allow for a moment where analytic thought is suspended. All that can be achieved when this occurs is to simply be suspended in the experience without the temporal flow of the narrative. Along with the excess of description, there are shifts in perspective, which also generates a suspension in time. Salle oscillates between signs of the past and present, while Brown does so through rendering representational forms and abstract marks simultaneously. Disruption of time through multiple perspectives in a single instance will be discussed further in the next section.
In Brian Willems’ *Speculative Realism and Science Fiction*, the author bridges Graham Harrison’s notion of speculative realism with the literary genre of science fiction. Speculative realism breaks away from human-centered philosophy and identifies the potential autonomy of objects. I interpret this idea of objects having their own agency to mean that the ineffable can be manifested or observed through non-human actors. In my work, human spirituality is signified not by human bodies, but rather by objects.

According to Willems, in the novel *American Gods*, author Neil Gaiman uses the effect of double vision as a means of representing different transformations in a single instance. The result of this double vision is a slow down or paralysis of time that obscures perception. Willems asserts that double vision causes the following effects to occur: 1) cognitive disruption, 2) visual

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perception that is non-human, 3) multiplicity of some kind, ideally literal images, 4) a sense of paralysis.\textsuperscript{11}

David Altmejd’s works deal with life and death cycles and fit within Willems’ definition of double vision and its effects. \textit{Healers} (Figure 9) is an installation of anthropomorphic figures arranged to appear as if they are performing sexual acts on each other. This orgiastic scene represents the healing power of intimate contact. The figures are made of foam and plaster casts of legs and torsos, but the chest cavities, heads, and faces are composed of layers of hands cast from the same materials. Although the figures are made of human body parts, they are not easily read as human characters: the bodies are either incomplete or amalgamations of tactile organs. These forms are figural as opposed to figurative, therefore narratological disruption takes place, which in turn creates ambiguity.\textsuperscript{12} Because the figures are stationary, they are literally paused; their physical stillness contradicts the wildly gestural, ecstatic composition of the figures’ sexual congress. The sexual pleasure implied in this work is tinged with a bit of violence. For example, one figure kneels to perform oral sex on another figure who is standing. The standing figure has hands extending from its torso; these hands rip in half the head of the kneeling figure, while the standing one’s penis also penetrates the kneeler’s head.

\textit{Healers} is a work of pure intensity where intersubjective spiritualistic play is occurring. The composition of figural elements implicitly nods to classical, devotional imagery, but unlike classical imagery, these bodies are unrecognizable; they are objects, not subjects. Altmejd has removed critical elements of individual identification, which disrupts our ability to form a clear narrative. Are these human figures, captured mid-orgy? We’re not entirely sure. Willems describes speculative realism as a room in which all the usual items and furnishings are laid

\textsuperscript{11} Willems, \textit{Speculative Realism and Science Fiction}, 61.
out… but the room itself is absent.\textsuperscript{13} In \textit{Healers}, we see the figures’ orgiastic gestures, but we do not see any direct indication of pleasure; the pleasure is only hinted at ambiguously by the placement of hands throughout the piece. These hands create a sense of overwhelming tactility which we can connect with memories of our own pleasurable experiences—or not.

A similar disruption occurs in David Altmejd’s sculpture \textit{Sarah Altmejd} (Figure 10). Viewed from behind, we see a woman’s neck and head. Her long brown hair is tied back into a low ponytail. From the front, the woman’s face is missing; Altmejd has hollowed it out and replaced the usual facial features with blue and violet crystals. This disruption, instead of connoting sexual ecstasy as seen in \textit{Healers}, connotes the spiritual transcendence of death. Crystals are geological phenomena that take centuries, even millennia, to form; they exist outside our perception of time. By replacing the woman’s face with crystals, Altmejd hints at his subject’s physical death and decay and her resulting spiritual afterlife. Again, Altmejd has built ambiguity into his work, allowing us to interpret it according to our own worldview. We could perceive this piece as eerie and mournful: a decaying human head, rendered in an uncannily fleshy texture with long natural hair, signifies the passing of a loved one. Or we can perceive the piece as reverent and hopeful: out of the woman’s death and decay, something ethereally beautiful grows. References to geological forms of growth and decay are a conversation about the spirit through physical manifestations. Altmejd makes no specific claims about life and afterlife, but rather provides an object of contemplation which we can use to meditate on our own ideas about death, transcendence, and spirituality.

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{13} Willems, \textit{Speculative Realism and Science Fiction}, 63.
\end{flushright}
Figure 9. David Altmejd. *The Healers*, 2008. Wood, foam, plaster, burlap, metal wire, paint
Installed dimensions 239 x 367 x 367cm work dimensions 206 x 326 x 326 plinth dimensions 33 x 367 x 367cm.
https://www.saatchigallery.com/artists/artpages/david_altmejd_healers.htm

5 TRANSFORMATION AND MUTATION

Like images of spiritual devotion, science fiction illustration must visually articulate complex, otherworldly imagined spaces. A successful image renders comprehensible something that is completely alien. In depicting gay eroticism, I seek a similar goal; these images both bewilder and arouse by conflating estrangement, desire, and horror—all common reactions to
witnessing deviant sexual play. My visual influences come not only from science fiction illustration, but also from Japanese science fiction anime. The anime series *Neon Genesis: Evangelion* (Figure 11) by Hideaki Anno merges spirituality with technological fantasy. In this series, a technologically advanced society is perpetually threatened by a mysterious alien race called the Angels. Every time the Angels attack, they grow increasingly more bizarre and celestial with powers that range from brute force to psychic abilities. When these attacks occur, young heroes face the enemy in gigantic suits that are part machine and part organic material. Every victory is bittersweet, as the protagonists suffer great sacrifices in order to win.

A critical moment in the series occurs in the final movie, *End of Evangelion*. In the fictional world of Evangelion, a person’s spirit resides in the body as physical matter contained within a barrier called an AT-field. According to Evangelion’s ancient history/mythology, there were ancient aliens living on the planet who belonged to the race of Angels. As the series reaches its climactic end, it is revealed these ancient beings are both the creators of humans and also humanity’s prisoners. An agent of the aliens successfully infiltrates a holding facility and frees his kin, which sets forth the event of all the aliens removing themselves from the planet.14 When the ancient Angels depart Earth, the AT-field of every person left on the planet collapses and their bodies explode into a primordial orange goo. As each character faced death, they hallucinated that which they most desired. These prologue scenes are visually operatic, a somewhat dark vision of spiritual release that suggests greater ambivalence towards the afterlife than the rosy picture of death and transcendence common throughout classical stories and Western religious texts.

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14 Hideaki Anno, Hideaki, *Evangelion: The End of Evangelion* (1997; Tokyo, Japan: Gainex Production, 1999), DVD.
Another type of spiritual transformation in science fiction happens when bodies mutate or undergo modification and cybernetic enhancement. This notion of transformation via increased body mass fascinates me. One gay sexual fantasy features hyperbolic displays of dominance among physically massive men. Whether a particular fantasy involves wrestling or moving heavy objects, the men get bigger and stronger, defying their natural limits. In order to attain this body in the real world, some men go to extreme measures, including resistance training, hormonal manipulation, synthetic fluid injection, and implants—transformative processes similar to those seen in some science fiction stories. There is a point at which the pursuit of physical health turns into mental and physical illness.

Computer animation can combine these hyper-masculine fantasy bodies with computer graphic pornography (Figure 12). In these videos, uncanny, exaggerated male bodies flex their muscles and penetrate smaller figures with phalluses almost equivalent to the size of the smaller one’s body. This particular erotic expression is both fetishistic and morbid, and can be classified as Hentai, a Japanese word which describes bizarre and perverse sex acts. According to scholar M.A. McLelland, Hentai is the byproduct of a society marginalizing sexual fantasy.15

Unhinged bodily growth can be a sign of both abundance and destruction. The exaggerated, overly muscled male body is queer because it is unnatural. The desire for fantastical perfection extends beyond the body’s natural limits, tragically resulting in self-harm. In the world of sexual deviancy, body modification and rites of play usually carry a degree of risk. The adrenaline high achieved by facing such risks creates a transcendent feeling similar to religious ecstasy. Chemical processes in our brains don’t differentiate between the exhilaration of a

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bathhouse encounter and the exaltation of spiritual enlightenment. In the world of gay spirituality through deviant pleasures, excess in relation to the flesh is the most viable means of achieving this experience.


There are many techniques and tools artists have used throughout history in an attempt to illustrate the body’s exaltation. Mannerist and Baroque devotional imagery, in particular, functioned as a sublime surrender of the senses, intended to induce a state of exaltation in the viewer. These two periods of art were formative to my understanding of painting. From Mannerism, I learned how figures in dynamic poses could have a destabilizing effect on a composition; from the Baroque, I learned how to load my paintings with and emotional and visual excess. The Sjoerd van Tuinen essay “Mannerism, Baroque, and Modernism: Deleuze and the Essene of Art” explores how Mannerism is a movement distinct from the Baroque; the essay also explains how Mannerism affected the 20th-century Expressionist movement. Mannerist artists deviated from classical rendering techniques to demonstrate their prowess. This desire to

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show off results in the subjects of Mannerist paintings appearing in contorted poses with impossibly anatomically exaggerated features, frequently placed in precarious or dangerous settings. Mannerist works were a departure in the subject matter they depicted as well: artists of this time period shifted from painting religious narratives to painting expressions of spiritual excess. Tuinen argues that this sensibility can be found in modern and contemporary art (he specifically cites works by Francis Bacon). The Mannerist method of disrupting the natural body for the purpose of spiritual expression is similar to what we see in Altmejd’s *Healers*. The viewer cannot fully identify with the distorted, unnatural figures and therefore is free to focus on the abstract and emotive qualities they express.

In his analysis of El Greco’s *The Burial of Count Orgaz* (Figure 13), Deleuze describes how El Greco invented a method of depiction wherein both the celestial and terrestrial dimensions could be contained within a single image. This kind of devotional imagery was very common in Renaissance society; it is the insatiable desire for this kind of morbid-yet-spiritual imagery that I find compelling. Merging the living world with the afterlife is usually a sign of the apocalypse or the undoing of spiritual certainty.

Where Mannerist artists developed the excessively spiritual, Baroque artists articulated spiritualism by painting scenes of excessive naturalism. Caravaggio’s *Incredulity of Thomas* (Figure 14) is another example of a painting that depicts a “merging of the realms” (living world and the afterlife). In this scene, St. Thomas’s brow is deeply wrinkled in astonishment as Christ gently guides the apostle’s finger inside his master’s spear wound. I enjoy the transcendental morbidity of this painting, and how this gross physical experience is necessary for St. Thomas’ awakening. John Rupert Martin refers to the secularization of the transcendental as a major

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18 Ibid., 168.
19 Ibid., 171.
characteristic of Baroque art. This idea of the spiritual experience grounded in naturalistic (even disgusting) reality is one of Caravaggio’s frequent themes. In *the Resurrection of Lazarus* (Figure 15), no halo of light surrounds Christ’s head; in fact, he is nearly undiscernible from the crowd. The divine light that illuminates Lazarus comes from behind Christ. The stasis in which Lazarus is suspended is not represented by mythological creatures symbolizing life and death. Rather, life and death are subtly rendered: Lazarus’ left arm drops lifelessly down, his palm open toward a pile of bones that represent death. His right hand, signaling the only sign of life, is raised and opened toward Christ. This hand contrasts with the painting’s overall darkness, as the palm reflects the warm light emanating from behind the figure of Christ.

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Figure 14. Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio. *The Incredulity of Thomas (Doubting Thomas)*, 1602. Oil on canvas. 107 x 146 cm. Potsdam, Germany. https://www.artble.com/artists/caravaggio/paintings/doubting_thomas
The exhibition layout loosely resembles a chapel. There are urinal fountains at the entrance of the gallery and a series of images that lead to an altarpiece. The paintings in the show oscillate between depictions of distinct references and symbolic representations of gay deviancy and fetishism. Realistically painted objects contrast with semi-abstract shapes that are not easily identifiable. The two-dimensional works relate to the extro-scientific fiction genre, which presents a world that is similar to our own yet difficult to comprehend completely. Every image is a portrait of an alien entity engaged in some form of gay sexual play.

There are many rituals in my daily life, but I am not a religious person. Yet, in the context of a Christian world, I seek a space in which homosexual exaltation could reside. It is in acts of queer deviancy that I find my spiritual release. I like to refer to Alan Watts’ definition of spirituality. He refers to it as “electric,” existing in the abstract, as opposed to the physical world. If electricity is spirit, then the body’s nerves are its physical counterpart. Therefore, I ask what gives me an “electrical charge?” The answer is pleasure and pain. Experiences that involve both sensations drive the content of my work. This body of work represents a satiation of my visual appetites and curiosities.

My paintings are influenced by my appreciation for science-fiction imagery and depictions of Christian mythology from the 17th century. Dynamic compositions, alien forms, and biological hybrids fill my visual repertoire. Within the exhibition, each image has a sense of movement. Most of the works in this exhibition contain figurative shapes that could be identified as queer, alien monstrosities. The forms are alluring and sensuous yet also threatening. This combination of qualities symbolizes my conception of my queer spirituality. Returning back to
the poem by Doty, religious ecstasy for the homosexual outlier is that which gives the greatest pleasure. This pleasure often involves a degree of pain and risk.

7.1 Blessed Urinals

There are two entrances on the left and right of the south wall of the gallery. Immediately past both entrances, a ceramic urinal (Figure 16) hangs on the wall at the height that would be appropriate for the average adult man. Inside each urinal is a pile of oysters covered in yellow-green phlegm. The urinals act as a holy water font in a church, which reminds parishioners of their baptism and commitment to God. But urinals aren’t holy; we commonly think of them as being vulgar and unsanitary. In this way, I disrupt the viewer’s perception of the gallery/chapel by associating the space with a men’s restroom, and, therefore, with “cruising,” or engaging in anonymous sexual encounters that involved sexual tension and awkward, subtle communication. Referring back to Doty’s poem, he correlates the bathhouse to the chapel and likens the bathroom stalls to the confessional booth.

Repulsion is another strong association here; we are reminded of all the bodily fluids that accumulate in a urinal. What remains in a urinal has a consistency similar to the inside of an oyster. Oysters are a culinary delicacy, and in gay filth culture, piss, spit, and phlegm are as well. By placing unnaturally green ceramic oysters in the urinals, I create a moment of queering. These are sacred offerings, gifts for men who indulge in this particular form of spiritual gay pleasure-seeking.
Figure 16. Michael Tolley. *Blessed Urinals*, 2020. ceramic stoneware. 25”x18”.
7.2 Paintings

The first painting, titled *Party Pumps* (Figure 17), hangs on the west wall of the gallery, near the entrance to the right of the urinal. The background is a slightly out-of-focus color field dense with dynamic shapes folding and tearing. Reds and pinks dominate. Some shapes approach recognizability, but dissipate back into the field. Against this backdrop, a large, penis pump floats in the middle of the canvas. The pump’s aperture is turned upward, facing the viewer. The rubber hose points down, receding into the black pump-handle.

This painting plays with both visual and symbolic excess. The penis pump signals excess here; these devices engorge the phallus beyond its natural, erect state, even to the point that makes intercourse difficult, if not impossible. The painting’s background is the site of visual excess in this piece. The layered, fragmented elements painted in visceral pinks and reds allude to mutilated flesh. These fleshy masses are an offering to the viewer. The pump promises physical and spiritual transformation, suggesting a level of sentience similar to the urinals. The pump is neither on the ground nor carrying out its intended function. It temptingly (or menacingly) floats with an open mouth that is eager to receive. Viewers can interpret this piece as celebratory and playful or grotesque and threatening.

Across from *Party Pumps* hangs another painting, titled *Gut Wrecker* (Figure 18). Here, an amorphous mass emerges from a black background as flecks of particles glisten in the light around it. Nerves also radiate from the darkness and cascade down and around the mass. In the lower area of the painting lays a pile of fatty, raw meat. On top of the meat rests a pile of ultramarine blue intestines, and around the intestines, an adornment of red lumps full of pearls and gems. A realistically painted serpentine 14” ceramic penis-shaped dildo floats at the center of the painting. The phrase “gut wrecking” means extremely deep anal penetration that brings
equally intense pleasure and pain. Similar to *Party Pumps*, this painting illustrates the dual excesses of pleasure and flesh.

Figure 17. Michael Tolley. *Party Pumps*, 2020. oil on canvas, ceramic stoneware. 3’x4’.
Figure 18. Michael Tolley. *Gut Wrecker*, 2020. oil on canvas, ceramic stoneware. 3’x4’.
7.3 Drawings

Three drawings hang on the left and right walls towards the back of the gallery. The drawings index the exhibition’s development. The drawings’ content shifted as I worked on the paintings and ceramic works. The drawings vary in mood from frenzied to calm. They are demi-entities to the altar-piece painting, being themselves, portraits of mutated creatures engaged in sexual play. In *D.P Wrestlers* (Figure 19), a pile of meat glitters with jewels while bodily elements wrestle on top of it. At the base of the figure, two fileted, erect penises simultaneously penetrate the fat of the meat. Double penetration is a heroic act, not for the faint of heart, and involving a great deal of risk and dexterity on the part of the bottom. Here, the duality I’m representing is that of the mind and body: in Zen Buddhist thought, attempting to separate the mind from the body results in paralysis, or in this case, impalement.

The next drawing, *Rosebud* (Figure 20), depicts a sentient rosebud with one large eye. Above the eye, we see a bottle being pushed by a hand. “Rosebud” is an endearing term for a prolapsed anus. In this image, the mutilated body part has taken on a life of its own. Nerves travel across the form towards the base where multiple legs and feet overlap each other. The excess of flesh is no longer contained and is bellowing outwards toward the viewer. The rosebud is a sign of a man’s ability to take on massive objects, whether it is a bottle, a bat, or a fist.

Nerve fibers are featured throughout the works in the exhibition and become the primary focus in the third drawing, *Exposed Nerves* (Figure 21). I deal with the chronic pain of fibromyalgia, specifically in the nerves that radiate through my legs. This drawing shows a leg with an erect penis turned upwards. On the left is a pelvis with nerves wrapping and radiating out towards the rest of the figure. Gestural lines illustrate images of mouths and teeth that are clamping down on the nerve fibers. The mouth biting itself is a literal form of self-harm and a
metaphor for the body betraying itself. Even though I no longer ascribe to Christian beliefs, I still carry subconsciously the idea that my homosexuality constitutes a betrayal of God and the natural order. Is my autoimmune disease a punishment for betraying a god in whom I no longer believe? I wonder, and frequently conflate these notions.

On the east wall of the gallery, the first drawing, titled Joy Riding (Figure 22), is another portrait. This drawing depicts a urinal with oysters in its bowl; the flush handle has transformed into handlebars. Two veiny phalluses fill the urinal’s drain hole. Each phallus extends from a pair of Fabergé eggs on the lower left and right sides of the image. The urinal is being jettisoned into the open sea with a cloud burst radiating from its center. Here, the oyster-urinal achieves its own sexual exaltation.

The next drawing, Party Bugs (Figure 23), depicts a pair of gay space fleas dripping pearls over a mutilated corpse. Nerves connect to the fleas and wrap around the pile of viscera and bones at the lower part of the image. Here I provide an alternate origin story for this queer entity: I suggest that these alien insects create reality by giving life to the humanoid body. It is equally plausible that these creatures are feeding on the body. When attempting to understand otherness, whether it concerning oneself or another, science-fiction usefully articulates uncertainty through forms that have a semblance of familiarity.21

The third drawing on the east wall titled Frosted Hole (Figure 24) features layers of gestural marks, gangly legs, and intestines wrapping around a frosted doughnut. Intestines allude to deep sexual penetration, with the frosted doughnut as the end result. In the upper section of the

image, erased-out marks depict jagged teeth and a large reptilian eye belonging to a phantom monster. This monstrous entity, combined with the sexual signifiers, continues to play with ideas of the queer body and the sexual encounter as potentially nefarious and alien.
Figure 19. Michael Tolley. *D.P Wrestlers*, 2020. charcoal on paper, 30”x 24”.
Figure 20. Michael Tolley. *Rosebud*, 2020. charcoal on paper, 30" x 24".
Figure 21. Michael Tolley. *Exposed Nerves*, 2020. charcoal on paper, 30"x 24".
Figure 22. Michael Tolley. *Joy Ride*, 2020. charcoal on paper, 30”x 24”.
Figure 23. Michael Tolley. *Party Bugs*, 2020. charcoal on paper, 30”x 24”.
Figure 24. Michael Tolley. *Frosted Holes*, 2020. charcoal on paper, 30”x 24”. 
7.4 Altarpiece

This procession of images and objects leads to an altarpiece installed on the back wall, titled *Excess in Ecstasy* (Figure 25). As with the paintings towards the entrance of the gallery, this painting has ceramic objects connected to it. However, these objects (Figure 26) have been expelled across the gallery floor. These forms include Fabergé butt plugs, a femur, pearls, doughnuts, and a pile of intestines. All the drawings, ceramic pieces, and smaller paintings inform the viewer’s reading of the final painting. Due to its size and placement, this painting constitutes the altarpiece of the exhibition/chapel.

The painting is dynamic with shapes on the left and right moving toward a central oculus. The space behind the figurative elements is black with yellow nerves and indiscriminate, colorful blobs appearing and receding into the darkness. The forms hurled out from the center of the canvas are painted in vibrant reds, pinks, greens, yellows, and blues. The eye can rest in the subtler flesh tones and warmer red and umber tones of piles of raw meat. Throughout the composition, pearls and gems nestle into the forms. Yellow nerves that emerge from the darkness wrap and penetrate the glut. Overall, the composition is symmetrical, with the visual weight of the forms evenly distributed on the right and left sides.

Fleshy masses, raw meat, pearls, and appendages radiate from the center of the left panel (Figure 27). In the upper left corner, a bent leg extends outward; its foot rests atop a flesh-toned ball. Above, three pink frosted doughnuts cascade downward. The third doughnut casts its shadow on an uncircumcised penis with a Prince Albert piercing connected to a large metal chain that extends outward to the left of the image. At the bottom of the panel, we see a pile of ultramarine drapery with a pile of intestines resting on top. Towards the right side of the panel, a skeleton slumps over with its pelvis up in the air and leaning into the central oculus.
The right panel (Figure 28) contains a figurative mass compositionally similar to the one on the left. Fleshy masses radiate outwards with phallic, worm-like forms docking with one another. Red and blue gems gleam as they rest upon the pile. In the middle of the panel, a leg extends out, the bottom of the foot facing the viewer. The anus attached to the leg is penetrated by a blue hose adorned with golden jeweled bracelets. Another tube-like form enters from the left, also penetrating the anus. This hose is coated with pink frosting and sprinkles like the doughnuts in the left panel. An erect penis extends from the leg’s body and meets another phallic form. Both of these double-penetrate another anus attached to a fleshy form whose only discernable body part is a navel. Towards the bottom of the panel, raw steaks cascade outwards together with a pull-top can of Daddy’s Mayo. These objects hover above another ultramarine colored pile of drapery, appropriated from the sculpture *St. Teresa in Ecstasy* by Gian Lorenzo Bernini (Figure 29).

This painting is the exhibition’s capstone; it manifests all the themes seen throughout the other pieces in the show: bodily transformation, otherness, excess of description, pleasure, pain, and more. The ceramic objects scattered across the space demonstrate the painting’s ability to shift perspective. The painting’s oculus references the computer Hal from *2001: A Space Odyssey*, suggesting that the queer monstrosity is a sentient alien being. It ominously and voyeuristically surveils all those who indulge in its pleasure sphere—a not wholly undesirable effect. The risk of getting caught is one of the most titillating forms of deviancy.

The drapery refers to the folds of St. Teresa’s robe, as sculpted by Bernini. John Martin refers to Baroque folds of drapery as having a character of their own.22 Therefore, in addition to referring to *St. Teresa in Ecstasy*, I am also using the Baroque concept of sentient drapery.

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Where the head of the saint would be located on the painting is covered by an outstretched leg with multiple accoutrements entering its anus. Although it may seem like I’m committing an overt gesture of sacrilege, I am more interested in drawing attention to St. Teresa’s orgasmically divine experience and equating it to homoerotic play. Following back up the exposed leg, an open pomegranate above the anus takes the place of the figure’s left buttock and has the appearance of a grotesque open wound.

Other features in the altarpiece are threatening and/or humorous indulgences, like a can of Daddy’s Mayo, which one assumes would have to be completely consumed after opening. Death, signified by bones and menacing clawed hands, serve as elements of discontinuity in the image. All these elements overwhelm the viewer’s logical reasoning. Abandoning rational thought, one is free to simply embrace the pleasure of this moment and experience spiritual release.
Figure 25. Michael Tolley. *Excess in Ecstasy*. 2020. oil on canvas, 9’x 6’.
Figure 26. ceramic stoneware. 2020.
Figure 27. Excess in Ecstasy (detail: panel 1).
Figure 28. *Excess in Ecstasy* (detail: panel 2).
7.5 Conclusion

This exhibition was to be installed in the Spring of 2020. Unfortunately, it was cancelled due to social gathering restrictions as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. The exhibition of *Absurd Vessel* relied heavily on the installation plan of the work being similar to a church. An installation plan is what I have proposed along with the work that would have been displayed in this document. This installation would feature works of paintings, drawings, and ceramic sculptures. All the mediums are arranged to inform and conflate the other. The suspension of clarity with the excess in its many forms gives way for the ineffable experience of the carnal spirituality of the gay deviant.

The absurd vessel is a queer entity that does not take itself too seriously. A threatening presence looms, but it quickly dissolves into playful hedonism and the pleasure of minor indulgences. The balance of potential danger and play is a feature of science fiction because it allows one to indulge into the unknown through familiar experiences. Camus claims that in Sisyphus’ eternal punishment when the prisoner of the gods walks back down the mountain to yet again retrieve the boulder, he pauses for a moment and finds humor in his experience. This moment, Camus asserts, is freedom as Sisyphus contemplates the eternal banality of his absurd existence. An arrested awareness of the absurd is critical for one to come to terms with it. Where Camus proposes indulging in the potential pleasures of ones’ absurd existence, the queer deviant transcends religious absurdity by taking pleasure in sin and reveling in being an abomination in the eyes of a Christian God.

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REFERENCES


