Sin With Me

Nicholas Kakavas

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SIN WITH ME

By

NICHOLAS KAKAVAS

Under the Direction of Christina A. West, MFA

ABSTRACT

For my thesis exhibition, *Sin With Me*, I have created a series of statues that physically manifest my sexual fantasies. These sculptures expose my erotic imaginings, bringing heightened visibility to issues surrounding the repression of queer love and gay sex. With states banning public school teachers from even discussing LGBTQ+ content, it is more important than ever to normalize homosexuality and make visible these taboos that persist in American society. I am doing my part to challenge these attitudes. *Sin With Me* is a modern gay narrative built for everyone.
INDEX WORDS: Queer, Male nude, Male body politics, Masculinity, Eroticism, Sexuality, LGBTQ+, Muscle, Identity, Non-Ideal, Male body, Ceramics, Sculpture, Clay, Gay
SIN WITH ME

by

NICHOLAS KAKAVAS

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

Master of Fine Arts

in the College of the Arts

Georgia State University

2022
SIN WITH ME

by

NICHOLAS KAKAVAS

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DEDICATION

I did this all on my own and no one believed in me. I am the wind beneath my wings.

Just Kidding! I would not be the person I am today if I had not been raised by the one and only, Patricia Kakavas. You taught me what being brave in the face of fear truly means. I will always admire how much love for life and compassion for others you always had. I hope that I have made you proud of the person I have become.

This body of work would have never been possible had it not been for the support of Wesley Harvey and Christina A. West. You both have pushed me to be a better artist, teacher and probably human being. Even though, at times, I may have not acted that way. I know now how much I needed the encouragement to question the assumptions I made about what I could and could not do. I will always have you both in the back of my head reminding me that I can do anything when I tell myself I cannot.
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I owe so much to the people that have been a part of my life over the past three years. I do not know what I would have done had it not been for the friendship I was lucky enough to have over the last two years with my studio mate Emily Albee. I know I can be a lot and I truly could not have done this had it not been for your encouragement. I would also like to thank Hanna Newman and Mackenzie Bayne for the hours of talking things out we did over the years.

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Lastly, I could never forget to thank the incomparable Mark Burns. You showed me what it means to live honestly, and always reminds me “Don’t forget, I discovered you.”
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1 INTRODUCTION

My obsession with the male body began when I was a teen. I was raised by the black plastic box in our living room. It was always there for me when my parents were working their nine-to-five jobs. Television was an escape from the reality of my school and home life. It was also a mentor, teaching me how I was supposed to look, act, feel, eat, and smell. I looked forward to the commercials, filled with shiny, perfectly built men whose lives centered around being sexy and smelling like the colognes they advertised for. I was a gay obese fifteen-year-old: I carried about 250 pounds on a five foot, five inch frame. Yet I yearned to be like the men in the TV commercials. Beyond commercials, shows like X-Men, Queer Eye for the Straight Guy, and Queer as Folk portrayed gay men as clean-cut, muscular visions of perfection. All of these portrayals shaped the standards for what I thought a gay man should be like and made me place unattainable expectations on myself at a young age.

When I was 14, I devoted a section of my bedroom wall to my desires and fantasies. I took my dad’s discarded magazines, titles like Men’s Health and other fitness magazines, cut out all the pictures of half-naked men, and obsessively collaged them onto my wall. I hid this fleshy “shrine to buffness” behind a 1970s tapestry I had found in the attic. The shrine was my secret, a place to visualize my fantasies of who I could be someday. I whiled away many hours “worshipping” at my shrine; I laid in bed and daydreamed about a future that was only in my imagination. That time was filled with hope that eventually I’d escape the hell of being a teenager. Appreciating those images of toned, tanned men with their bulging crotches and chiseled abs made me believe that if I went to the gym, I,
too, would find a boyfriend and make lots of money. The shrine did not last, though. One
day when I forgot to conceal it behind the tapestry, my dad went into my room and my
secret was exposed. When I returned home from school that day, he greeted me with a
face that told me he was angry as all hell. “What are you, gay?!?” exploded from his
mouth with a tone of pure disgust, marking the first time my father ever acknowledged
my sexuality. His question was not a conversation starter or a polite question, it was an
accusation. His face held the pain of his realization: I was not like him. The feeling of
being different than my father was confirmed. I was Other.

It has taken me a long time to be proud of my body and identity as a gay man. For most
of my life, I’ve felt intense, daily pressure to hide myself and behave in socially
acceptable ways in order to blend in with everyone else. This pressure is exhausting. I
have finally arrived at a point in my life where I have learned how important it is to show
myself through my art. In sharing my experiences, I am helping break the harmful cycle
of shame and oppression others might be feeling. I do not want anyone else to grow up in
a world in which it’s a liability and a sin to be true to oneself. It is time to break that
cycle.
2 BLAME THE GREEKS

The Greeks perfected the nude in order that man might feel like a god, and in a sense this is still its function, for although we no longer suppose that God is like a beautiful man, we still feel close to divinity in those flashes of self-identification when, through our own bodies, we are aware of a universal order. -Kenneth Clark

I have never felt like a god in my body. I come from a family of athletes: my dad played baseball in college and my brother excelled at any sport he tried. My family held a lot of expectations about how my body should look, but growing up, these ideas were something I simply accepted as normal. It wasn’t until decades later that I realized how much those family expectations contributed to the skewed perspectives I held with regarding the male body. Western culture still idealizes the male form in a godly manner, something clearly held over from the ancient Greeks. We are bombarded with idealized images of male bodies in magazines, television, and social media. I’ve lost track of how many dancing half-naked cowboys and muscled gay jocks pop up on my Instagram feed daily. As an adult, I can distance myself from these images. I know how hard these men have had to work to look the way they do and I realize (now) that they weren’t just lucky to be born looking that way. As a teenager I viewed these images as representations of masculinity perfected. These were fulfilled men, the modern version of those heroic nudes of antiquity, the gods in the myths and fantasies I dreamt up. Only in recent years have we seen non-ideal male bodies in popular media, but even these portrayals typically use plus-sized men as a “Before” in a before-and-after or as the butt of a joke.
The beauty standards tied to the idealized nude male have their roots in the classical world, where rulers placed larger-than-life statues in public spaces to demonstrate to the masses what a god or hero should be like. These divine figures, with their perfectly proportioned god-bods, conveyed stories and lessons to the public at a time when most people were not literate. Art was, basically, an ancient form of advertising. These early models of perfection had proportions that were just as skewed and unrealistic as the Photoshopped imagery we are bombarded with in the contemporary world, but instead of shirtless men on a screen the Greeks proudly displayed fully nude marble figures in the streets. In the 7th century BC, male figurative sculptures commonly featured broad, oversized shoulders on impossibly narrow-hipped frames with chiseled abs; all of these
attributes clearly express ancient Greek society’s preferences for the ideal male physique. And so, Western beauty standards for the male body were born.

Figure 2.2 The Farnese Hercules, copy of The Weary Hercules by Lysippos, 3rd century B.C.

The muscular men we see in advertisements today are the descendants of all those Greek male nude sculptures. As Sarah Grogan lays out in her book Body Image, the nude male body continued to be a major theme in art up until the 1850’s, when a shift towards eroticizing the female body became the norm.1 For the next 100 years, male bodies were not commonly eroticized in art unless gay men were the intended audience. There are a few exceptions, such as the Nazi propaganda photographs from the 1936 Olympic

Games, in which muscular athletes were portrayed as the ideal for the youth of Germany. In the 1950s, the birth of the Hollywood heartthrob also helped normalize the male body’s sexualization. Images of hunky actors like Rock Hudson and James Dean, often in various stages of undress, featured prominently in films and magazines for women (and, secretly, men) to ogle. The art of the 1980s re-sexualized the male body in perhaps the most publicly noticeable way, with openly gay artists like Robert Mapplethorpe and others taking the male form as their muse.

My body does not fit into the mold of the ideal. From an early age, I was known as the “fat kid”—a psychologically damaging label that was forced upon me and which, I assumed, was part of my permanent identity. I have vivid memories of being called “fat ass” or “faggot” at school, and at home my family scrutinized my eating habits, asking if I thought I had eaten enough whenever I went for second helpings at dinner. My art has always been affected by those psychological wounds, but as I have grown into a more confident person, my work has changed. My earlier work was very focused on dealing with my painful past experiences, but the current body of work is more nuanced; it’s affected by my past, but it speaks more broadly to issues that affect everyone, like the repression of LGBTQ+ sexuality and the rigidity of Western male beauty standards.

When I look back at the art I made during my undergraduate years, it’s obvious that I was using my art to process and deal with past traumas. At that time, I was obsessed with how I looked and how I was perceived by others. These insecurities played out in the work I was making: all of it conveys themes of the ideal male body, my expectations for how my
body should look, and how much I loathed my body. These pieces are visual judgements I passed on myself. In retrospect, it’s hard to believe I was showing such emotionally raw work in a public setting. Part of me that feels embarrassed by the vulnerability on display, but I feel an equal measure of pride for how unapologetically honest these pieces are. As I have become more comfortable in my own body, my work has changed too in how I use my proportions as a reference for the sizing of my pieces and not just imagery of myself.

Figure 2.3 Untitled wall, 2017, mural

Figure 2.4 It's Just Numbers, 2016, screen-print
I am not trying to represent the ideal anymore. The statues in *Sin With Me* bear the burdens of art history on their shiny glazed backs, but instead of perpetuating the ideal male body, they represent a modern vision of the male body. These bodies are what I want to see, not what society deems correct or beautiful. Although the sculptures are not identical to me, they are all inspired by my body. I use images of myself in establishing the poses for my sculptures; the body proportions are also based on my dimensions. During the building process, there comes a point at which I can hear myself judging the bodies I’m making; are they too fat? Too short? Too tall? Are their bodies “correct”? Over time, however, my attitude has evolved toward these internalized rules of proportion. If I made my statues based upon the same rigid parameters of idealized male beauty, then I would be playing into and perpetuating the same rules I am trying to break away from and disrupt.
3 TRUTH OR DARE

Before coming to Atlanta for graduate school I had been living in Missoula, Montana for almost 13 years. I had only gone into two gay bars in my life, each time while I was on vacation. The only time I associated with other gay men was when I hooked up with someone I found using Craigslist or Grindr. Moving to a big city from a rural town completely changed the way I approached, viewed, and embraced my sexuality. It took four days to drive across the country, and I knew I was getting close to Atlanta because as I approached the city the gay hook-up apps on my phone started alerting me with much greater frequency. There are three apps I commonly use: Scruff is a dating platform, Growlr is for bears and their admirers, and Grindr is for casual sex. (In my twenties, many young gay men used Craigslist personal ads to find willing sexual partners, but conservative legislators banned that practice in 2018.) The sex I have is NSA (no strings attached). I meet men through an app, we exchange photos and describe what we want. We meet up and we have sex. These interactions are purely physical, almost primal, without conversation and without getting to know the other person. I feel more secure in these situations; there are fewer expectations than there would be on a date, when I have to talk, get to know someone, and let them get to know me. The only thing that matters in these encounters is how our bodies communicate. I describe these methods of lust-fulfillment to give context to Sin With Me, because many of the pieces in this series are inspired by my sexual desires and urges.

If people think I’m some kind of degenerate gay horn-dog artist, I will point out that art history is littered with sexually graphic imagery. People have been using clay to make
sexual objects that featured fertility imagery since the Neolithic era, some 15,000 years ago. There are thousands of examples from this time period of ceramic nude female figures with exaggerated anatomy like oversized hips, breasts and vulvas. The people that made these figures enlarged female features to emphasize fertility. I am using a similar approach in my work: exaggerating certain parts of the body, like the uncircumcised penis, to convey meaning. In my case, however, I’m enlarging the male anatomy to suggest themes of primal desire and the absurdity of importance we place in society on the proportions of the penis.

Figure 3.1 Neolithic Venus figurine called "Red hair goddess", terracotta, Starčevo culture, around 6300 - 5500 BC

The Moche people of Peru celebrated sexuality even as they honored their dead. Paul Mathieu states that Moche funerary vessels commonly featured a wide variety of sexually explicit imagery, such as people performing oral sex, couples kissing, male genitalia, figures engaged in various heterosexual sexual positions, erotic animal scenes, and even, occasionally, people engaged in homosexual acts. The point here is that these pots and their sexual imagery weren’t just about making babies or being totems for female fertility; these vessels depict the Moche’s peoples’ sexual desires.

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2 Mathieu, Paul. The Art of the Future: 14 essays on ceramics.
Many of the sculptures in this series reveal my sexual desires and, relatedly, the life I live behind closed doors. Having grown up with social media, I am very conscious of who I am privately and how that identity sometimes differs from the carefully curated version of myself I broadcast publicly. But my sexual desires are just as much a part of my identity as the socially-acceptable persona I post online. By exploring my fantasies, I unpack the shame I feel about myself and my desires as a homosexual man. Why does sexuality have to be kept a secret when everything else we do is recorded, curated, and disseminated on social media?

Gilbert and George’s 1994 installation “The Naked Shit Pictures” touches on some of these themes. In this work, the artists place a nude male body next to a clothed male body to question the arbitrary line we draw between our public selves and the private identities we assume. When talking about this body of work Gilbert and George stated, “We are human beings, dressed up in suits or not, full of complexities, of differences. We are naked, we are full of shit--that is what we are trying to show. It is a kind existence, the realism of existence. That we are here.”

This term “realism of existence” resonates with me, it suggests that there’s honesty to be found inside of the ego. Our human bodies make us all the same. No matter how we portray ourselves in public, we all shit behind closed doors.

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One of the first pieces I built for this thesis body of work was a seven-foot-tall purple devil. He is nude, like all the figures I make, and was the catalyst for the entire series of
works in this exhibition. I wanted to make a piece inspired by my adolescent feelings of sexual shame and the impact those feelings have on my adult self. Who, I thought, could be happier in their own skin and prouder of their sinful acts than the devil himself? He shamelessly holds his cock out for all to see and stands there confident in his nakedness. I wish I could be more like the devil and how unapologetic, I assume, he would be.

Even as I outgrow my long-held feelings of shame over my sexuality and evolve into a more self-assured gay man, I still confront barriers to the free expression of my thoughts and experiences. As I have explored my sexuality through sculpture over the last two years, I have been told that my figures made people “uncomfortable,” and that my work was “hard to look at” on multiple occasions. I have received apologies for not featuring my work in the school’s promotional materials because I depict too much male penis. I started making male nudes to break free from societal norms and standards surrounding male beauty and gay sexuality. Over the last five months these sculptures have come to symbolize my self-liberation from the “respectability politics” that pervade academia and the art world. We all have sex. Sex is part of human nature. It’s high time we stop shaming ourselves and each other and talk about sex more openly for the betterment of everyone’s mental and physical health.
4 WHY CLAY?

Everyone is searching for that sense of eternity. It's something about touching the clay and there's my thumbprint. I have now recorded my existence in the mud and I can fire it and it's gonna last forever- Robert Arneson

My sculptures are a part of the long and varied history of clay as a material for story telling. The sole function my work holds is to act as a record keeper for my experiences. Instead of writing things down, I like to build things up. The Greeks applied imagery to their vessels as a way of portraying stories of valor and sexual desires. Outside the lens of pottery though, most ceramic figurative work was not done until the modern era when identity politics became a major theme in contemporary art. One contemporary ceramic artist who has had an immense impact on the trajectory of my work is Mark Burns.

I met Mark Burns when I was a sophomore in college. He gave an artist lecture for the ceramic department at the University of Montana. My professor at the time, Julia Galloway, pulled me aside after class and asked if I wanted to go to lunch with Mark and the graduate students. Over lunch, Mark told stories about living in New York in the 1980s, and about the leather bars in San Francisco. He knew everyone in the ceramic world and told stories of a gay man who had lived a life that made me yearn for those same experiences. I was in awe of him after that lunch and for the first time, I could imagine myself having a place in the ceramic world. He made work about his life and the broader gay experience during a time when being out meant career death. He is part of a lineage of queer artists that made it possible for me to show my work without fear of being invalidated.
When I started focusing on hand building sculptures, I knew I wanted to go big. I have always been attracted to large scale art and I wanted my pieces to have a sense of importance and grandeur that only large pieces can convey. My work has frequently been compared with that of Viola Frey, an artist whose work I have admired for many years. I use a building technique similar to hers and she, too, stylizes the human figure in a unique way. Frey’s art is often referred to as anthropological because it is so embedded with references to popular culture that her pieces function as physical records of the places and the times in which she lived. Her work also commented upon the world she lived in and the hierarchy of male and female roles in society. Large-scale ceramic figures with bright and colorful layering of glazes acted as three-dimensional canvases for Frey to express her views on society. She often used the imagery of a suited man of the eighties and nineties juxtaposed with women who wore the housewife ensemble of a tight-waisted dress and heels. In this way, Frey used clothing to signify the gendered roles we are assigned by patriarchal society. By talking about gender roles in her work, Frey was also critiquing the “boys club” masculine mentality that is still entrenched in the ceramic field.

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“The Decline and Fall of Western Civilization” from 1992 is an example of Frey’s use of large-scale figures with enlarged household objects, gendered dress and the use of bold, energetic colors. I also use bright colors in my work to make the pieces seem accessible and approachable for viewers, in the hope that they will engage with, not be scared away by, the adult content in my work. Frey was an artist recording the world around her, creating physical objects that tell the story of a particular time in American history. My work serves a similar autobiographical function, but for a different segment of the US population: the homosexual man.

So, to answer the question posed at the beginning of this section, why clay?, I have two main reasons for choosing clay as my medium: first, ceramics have long been used to portray narratives and convey information, which is something I hope to achieve in my work. Second, the ceramics community is a place in which I feel welcome, both artistically and personally.
5 THE EXHIBITION

Since September I have been using my sexuality as the inspiration for my studio practice. I have always been referencing this eroticism, but in this series I am being more straightforward than I have ever been before. There are many facets to my sexual identity: fantasy, domination, penile worship, and physical contact. I grew up feeling so much shame towards my sexuality and, consequently, my identity as a gay man. These past three years of graduate school have been a time of exploring and questioning all the parts of my identity, not only as an artist, but as a healthy human adult has been a hard but rewarding process.

Figure 5.1 Sin With Me installed.
Only after making this body of work did I realize how important it was for more than just me. The United States is undergoing massive political changes; censorship is on the rise, as is the oppression of LGBTQ+ people by Christian right-wing groups. There are currently 15 states in which Republican lawmakers are trying to pass bills that will restrict how public schoolteachers can discuss gender identity and sexual orientation. Florida just passed the “Don’t Say Gay” bill, which makes it illegal for teachers to discuss LGBTQ+ topics and gives parents the power to sue the school if they believe a teacher has broken the law. It is absolutely petrifying that in 2022 we are still being told that homosexuality is wrong. The best way I can think of to fight this trend is to be as loud as I can. To make and display art publicly that normalizes homosexuality in our society.

I held my show at an off-campus gallery located within an arts community center—the first time I have displayed this body of work outside the academic setting. I had no idea that the community center staff would have such negative reactions to my work. Before I had even moved my pieces from campus over to the gallery, the center’s coordinator whispered in a disgusted tone, “So, will this show look like your website?” When I responded that yes, it would, I was told that “the center was going to need to put up signs and keep the door locked during business hours.” My show was to be put under lock and key. Once I started bringing pieces over to the building I had even more difficult interactions with the artists and staff. Installing this show was one of the most uncomfortable, anxiety-inducing situations I have had to deal with as an artist. Even after the installation was complete and the show opened, it was never advertised on social
media by the organization, a basic courtesy that has been extended to all the artists who have shown their work there.

Although I initially regretted doing my thesis show off-campus, the homophobic attitudes I confronted became the exact reason why it was so necessary to show this work outside the academic bubble of safety. This work needs to be put in front of people, to show them an experience that challenges them to step outside of their heteronormativity. The reaction I received at the community arts center was what inspired me to write the artist statement posted in the exhibit.

![Wall statement for the exhibition](image)

*Figure 5.2 The wall statement for the exhibition*

The people who attended the opening had a completely different reaction to my work. It was an overwhelming success of an art opening. Attendance was much higher than I have ever had and I received a lot of positive feedback that eased the pain caused by the prior week’s interactions. Many visitors, especially people younger than myself, made comments about how necessary my work felt to them, and how valuable they found the frank and open presentation of sexuality. These comments from younger viewers led me to wonder about who my audience is, and who it should be. Gen Z seems to be more
comfortable with my work and its subject matter, but is that what I want? Should I seek out older audiences, who perhaps need more provocation to expand their thinking around LGBTQ+ sexuality? These questions led me to broader considerations about whether I ought to place so much emphasis on viewer feedback: if I’m recording and presenting my experiences honestly and making myself vulnerable in the process, is it also my responsibility to teach, instruct, and please viewers?

In devising the show’s layout, I wanted the Devil, or “Sin With Me,” to be the first piece viewers encountered. I painted all the titles and artist statement by hand to enhance the idea that my own two hands had created this entire experience. In the same way that the clay records my touch, the writing on the wall needed to carry the imprint of my hand, not that of a computer. Details like the hand-painted wall text (red, to reference blood and also to stand out on the white walls) emphasize that this work is made by me and contains me, my personality, and my experiences.
I began this body of work by creating a devil, and he led me to making a cowboy. I was inspired by the uber-masculine archetypes commonly depicted in gay men’s sources of sexual fantasy: the construction worker, the cowboy, the football player, the football player’s coach, the cop, and all the other caricatures that show up in the gay porn I have watched since I was a teenager. Are these models of masculinity still masculine, though, when they are sucking another man’s dick? This question fascinates me. The other influence for this piece has to do with memories of my grandfather, who religiously watched cowboy films of the 1950s and 60s. I vividly recall the hours he spent sitting on his couch in his cowboy-themed room, drinking Jack Daniels and watching his favorite actor, John Wayne. I was never close to him as an adult, but I will always remember my grandfather for his love of cowboys. This seven-foot-tall piece, therefore, is entitled “John Wayne Is Dead.”
Figure 5.4 John Wayne Is Dead

This cowboy is proud of his body, showing off his naked physique and his erect, uncircumcised cock. All the works in this show have uncircumcised penises, which is less a nod to antiquity and more a truthful representation of my own anatomy. I discovered in my teens—mostly while changing in the gym locker room—that being uncircumcised in America was not the norm. At the time, my penis being different was merely another thing that made me feel like an outsider in the hell that was high school, but as I became sexually active, I found out that in the gay community, my uncut foreskin was highly sought after. I was a penis unicorn. Being uncut became a point of pride, like being an exclusive member of a club that a lot of men can never join. I don’t intend to
make political statements in my art for or against circumcision; my sole aim in depicting uncut genitalia is to make figures in my own image.

![Figure 5.5 Detail of figure](image)

I build my pieces by repetitively pinching the clay onto itself while constantly stepping back to see how the section I’m working on fits with the proportions of the rest of the figure. It is an additive process that I find extremely rewarding, as I watch something come to life in front of me that began as an image in my head. Rather than rubbing my pieces smooth and erasing the evidence of my process, I prefer to retain the raw texture that reveals how I made a piece. In this way, the sculptures function as record keepers for the time, energy and thought I put into them; they are visual reminders of my mental and emotional state at that time, like a photo album of where I’ve been.

In December 2021, I was lucky enough to go on a seven-day school sponsored trip to Rome. As I discussed in the first section of this paper, I have always had an affinity to the nude male sculptures of antiquity. I had never been to a city that had so much visual history, beauty, and naked bodies everywhere. No matter where I went, there were giant
statues of white stone carved into these ideal bodies. The sculptures—and the thousands of photos I took of them—significantly impacted this body of work and will serve as visual inspiration for many years to come, especially when I am making decisions regarding my figures and their poses. Out of all the amazing art I saw, I felt drawn most strongly to the random chunks and massive parts of broken sculptures that many galleries and museums relegated to the corners of their exhibition spaces. These chunks of the past seemed to be considered garbage, but I viewed them as signifiers for the giant sculpted bodies of which they had once been a part. These fragments inspired me to make my own large scale body fragment pieces that act as shorthand for an entire form.

Figure 5.6 Various fragments from Rome.

Figure 5.7 Glory Glory
“Glory Glory” is one of the pieces directly inspired by the chunks of sculptures I had seen in Rome. I wanted to make a body that was larger than anything I had done before, and to replicate the experience I had in Rome when I was overwhelmed by the sheer scale of a body five times my size. I had created large-scale figures with my stacked sculptures, but I wanted to make body parts that were truly colossal. The other influence behind this piece has to do with the Roman gay bath house scene. Although I didn’t have the time (or nerve) to visit a bath house while in Rome, I’m referencing bath house culture by creating a giant depiction of a glory hole.

I have never used a glory hole, but it remains a fantasy of something I have always wanted to experience. In a glory hole there is no personal identification, just two body parts connecting for the gratification of sexual need. The anonymity of the glory hole
fascinates me: you can imagine that almost anyone—gay or straight—is the other side, and the sexual interaction at the hole is so limited to just the essential body parts that it carries a certain sense of purity. It’s a solely physical transaction to satisfy sexual desire. I will continue to be amazed by glory holes and plan to explore them further in future work.

*Figure 5.9 The inspiration for Big Head*
“Big Head” is another piece that was directly inspired by the sculptures I saw in Rome. In many of the museums I visited, I saw giant carved heads that had been broken off of much larger figures but were now standalone art objects. I found many of these heads to be inspiring not only for their scale but also for their craftsmanship, their presence, and the feelings they evoked in me. When standing below these massive heads, I felt them looking down upon me as if I was am an ant. “Big Head” was the first piece I made after returning from the trip. Because I wanted this piece to be a singular object, not made in parts like my other large-scale sculptures, “Big Head” is only four feet tall—still much larger than life-size, but not as massive as the marble heads I saw in Rome. An image of my mouth is affixed to the sculpture’s face, symbolizing the piece’s imaginary function as a giant tool for fellatio.
The trip to Rome helped me realize that I didn’t want to create figures that adhered to idealized body types and Western beauty standards. Instead, I wanted to make figures that referenced the human body but carried greater potential for expressiveness. I saw so many sculptures of perfect male bodies in the museums, but I was constantly drawn to the imperfect pieces. When I returned to my studio, I repeated a mantra throughout each day, “This is my figure,” whenever I doubted whether what I was building looked correct. Reminding myself of my ultimate goal empowered me to enjoy my process more and not get hung up on trying to make an anatomically perfect figure. These figures are created by me, so they should look however I want.

There are 3 other pieces in this thesis show. Each piece references a sexual desire or fantasy I have explored or want to explore. In talking to viewers about these works, I am
gratified to know that my openness is having its desired effect: many people told me about their own “kinks” or fantasies after viewing my pieces, and I welcome the opening up of these lines of communication.

*Figure 5.12 I See You*

*Figure 5.13 Spit On Me*
Figure 5.14 Harder!
6 CONCLUSIONS

As I reflect on this show, I wonder whether I will ever make another body of work on this same subject matter. I wanted to make pieces that showed a part of myself that I typically keep hidden from others, to produce an honest record of the sexual thoughts that came to me organically over the last six months. Now that the work is complete, I debate who this show is for. It started out as a challenge I gave myself, after a faculty member told me that one of my sculptures with an erect penis made him uncomfortable. This confession made me want to create more sexually-forward, unapologetically gay art. Making this work within the safe bubble of graduate school hasn’t felt particularly controversial, but I wonder whether I’m ready to take on a career of making work that elicits such strong, negative reactions when shown in public.

Another part of my hesitation to making more of this work is that some part of me still feels shame over my identity. I’m not sure whether the positive reactions people had to seeing and experiencing my work was worth the anxiety brought on by negative reactions from people who were uncomfortable with the show. I will continue working with the human body as a source of inspiration, but whether my future work will be as sexually frank, when I am no longer in the “womb” of academia, is an internal debate I will continue to have with myself.

Making myself vulnerable and exposing my sexuality to public scrutiny is anxiety-inducing and feels overwhelming. Yet I also recognize that opening up these conversations is necessary if we want to disrupt society’s closed-mindedness and break the cycle of shame that caused me so much pain during my formative years. I hope that
going forward I can make the gay artists, who had to hide, proud of where I go with my practice.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


